

Ph.D. Thesis – Simon Orpana; McMaster University – English and Cultural Studies

RADICAL GESTURES: SUBCULTURE, SYMPTOM AND SKATEBOARDING

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A Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfilment of the
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ABSTRACT

The numerous youth subcultures to emerge since the end of World War Two act as what I call “biopolitical cultural apparatuses” that help subjects navigate the discontinuity in values, labour, and material expectations between the Fordist and neoliberal formations. As such, subcultures play a socializing role, helping subjects adapt to an increasingly precarious and austere social sphere; but they also generate new forms of community, and new experiences of personal and collective agency that can contribute to significant social transformation. Responding to the contemporary body of “post-subcultural” studies, I combine Giorgio Agamben’s analysis of biopolitics and Slavoj Žižek’s treatment of the Lacanian symptom to frame a theory that can highlight the politically progressive elements of subculture, while at the same time acknowledging their complicity with elements of the cultural dominant.

Complementing Dick Hebdige’s theory of the incorporation processes to which subcultures are subjected, I offer *spatial-temporal incorporation* as a predominant way in which subcultural difference is recuperated by patriarchal and capitalist structures. At the same time, the heterotopic spaces subcultures produce enable new solidarities and friendships to develop, and can offer important experiences of alterity within the fluid and individualized regulative structures of late capitalism. I investigate these dynamics through a focus on skateboarding as a subculture that is particularly representative of the kinds of control structures faced by contemporary, Western subjects. My dissertation concludes with a detailed case study of the struggles of skateboarders to maintain and preserve an aging skateboard park in Beasley, a downtown neighbourhood of Hamilton, Ontario. Hamilton’s project to re-brand itself as a post-industrial “hub” for the “creative economy” places the skateboarders in the position of having to manage their (sub)cultural capital in a new way, as developers attempt to gentrify the neighbourhood.

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Introduction

Subculture and Subsumption

If it turned out, for instance, that every society, and particularly (for our purposes) the city, had an underground and repressed life, and hence an 'unconscious' of its own, there can be no doubt that interest in psychoanalysis, at present on the decline, would get a new lease on life.

Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (36)

Cynicism of the Intellect, Utopianism of the will!

Fredric Jameson, "A New Reading of *Capital*"

In the nineteen seventies, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham challenged what had been a prevalent view in both sociological and popular discourse that cast subcultures as forms of social deviance, arguing, instead, that the various youth cultures to emerge in Post-World War Two Britain constituted modes of working-class resistance to social domination. While the theses advanced by Dick Hebdige, Stuart Hall, John Clarke and others were subsequently challenged and revised by Birmingham researchers such as Angela McRobbie for their masculine bias, they concurred in promoting a class and race-centred politics at the heart of these formations (McRobbie *Feminism*; "Settling"). In the nineteen nineties, critics like Sarah Thornton, influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, launched a series of challenges to the Birmingham thesis of subcultures as oblique forms of political resistance. Thornton's work on the eighties and nineties rave scene in Britain highlighted how hierarchies of taste and distinction structure subcultures internally in ways that offer more complex relationships to "mainstream" culture than the oppositional model deployed by the Birmingham research (*Club* ch.3). In emphasizing subculture's vexed relationship to the parent culture, and its lack of concern for

wider social, political and economic change, what came to be known as the “post-subculture” critique established a significant challenge to the model of subcultural incorporation advanced by the Birmingham school. These critiques have allowed some contemporary theorists to go so far as to assert, contrary to the claims of Hebdige et.al., that “in most cases there is no politics in subcultural ‘politics’” (Marchant 86).

In a contemporary political-economic culture characterized by dizzying vacillation between visions of a techno-capitalist utopia and apocalyptic total collapse, should we accept the depoliticized view as the final word on subculture? In doing so we may be ignoring vital areas of cultural production where truly alternative visions might find inchoate expression. It is my wager that a deeper understanding of subculture can help us understand the hopes and desires for social transformation that are foreclosed by the Manichean bind offered by the cultural dominant. At a time when biopolitical governance—the management of whole populations by a class of professional specialists—signals a widespread sense of reduced political agency, and when the dreams of middle class prosperity that buttressed social stability during the Fordist era are rapidly unravelling, we have seen both a revival of middle-class countercultural protest movements, as well as the persistence and even generalization of subcultural “deviance.” To celebrate the former at the expense of the latter reflects a class bias in favour of those who still have the time and means to “drop out,” as well as overlooking the degree to which the squeezed middle classes are perhaps increasingly turning toward subcultural belonging as *compensation* for the reduced sense of security and community they now experience. In this context, a

subculture such as skateboarding that broaches working and middle-class populations provides an ideal site to investigate the political potentials and compromises inherent in contemporary subcultural production.

Skateboarding as a site of inquiry highlights another seminal aspect of subculture: space. In the Birmingham school of the early seventies, Phil Cohen theorized subcultures as the attempt by youth to work out the contradictions of their parent culture spatially, transposing the tensions inherent in their domestic situations into a territorial register where they are “magically” resolved through subcultural ritual (57). Despite the compromised form subcultural “solutions” to social contradictions often take, given the work done by Foucault to establish essential links between biopolitical management, issues of territory and the reinforcing of the neoliberal state (*Security; The Birth*), subcultures might offer important alternative territorial projects where identity, belonging and agency can be explored in ways that might partially escape nationalist and capitalist imperatives. This desire to produce alternative spaces—what Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault call “heterotopias”¹—is central to subcultural production. Following Cohen’s lead, my dissertation will place an emphasis on the production of alternative spatialities and temporalities, while also investigating the ways in which subcultural innovations are co-opted by more mainstream interests. While I will briefly discuss other subcultures such as fixed-gear biking and hipster culture, skateboarding will be the primary subcultural example that I will turn

¹ In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre uses the term heterotopia to describe “contrasting places” (163), “prohibited” spaces (294), and “mutually repellent spaces” (in contrast to *isotopias*, or analogous spaces, and *utopias* or symbolic and imaginary spaces) (366). Foucault gives a more detailed and historical analysis that in many ways augments Lefebvre’s descriptions (Foucault “Of Other Spaces”).

to as a concrete practice to illustrate the theories and histories we will explore. This decision is largely due to familiarity. I have been a skateboarder for over twenty years, and my academic interest in subcultures grew out of this long involvement with skateboard culture. Reading through the growing body of academic literature of skateboarding, from Iain Borden and Michael Willard's celebration of skateboarding's alternative spatial politics to the more sceptical and critical appraisals of Sean Dinces, Becky Beal or Ocean Howell, I struggled to reconcile these various accounts with my own experiences. Skateboarding provided me with some of my first and formative experiences of belonging, freedom, creativity, and self-worth. At the same time, the skateboard subculture is entwined with a masculinist, commercialized and individualistic parent culture that has a vexed relation with (simultaneously refuting and reaffirming) the rebellious, anti-establishment rhetoric that first attracted me to the subculture. Faced by these contradictions, this dissertation will argue that in pursuing rigorous cultural and political critique we should resist the temptation to "throw the baby out with the bath water" and cynically reject subcultural resistance altogether. If we do so, we risk abandoning a central energy that informs subcultural formation and belonging: the hope and desire that the world could be different. At the same time, holding up subcultural innovation as an end in itself, one already synonymous with an anticipated, emancipatory future, risks ignoring the facility by which capitalism recuperates and profits from internally produced challenges and difference. What this dissertation aims for, then, is a dialectical approach that attempts to think both of these facts (of resistance and complicity) at the same time, hoping that the intellectual tensions thus produced will be

productive ones.

What often gets lost in visions and re-visions of the past is the *feeling* of what it was like to be there, at that moment—wherever and whenever it might have been—when suddenly anything seemed possible and one feels oneself on the threshold of a new experience of the world. What we might call, after Roland Barthes, a utopian *punctum* has the ability to radically alter the coordinates by which we orient ourselves in the world, and yet it is just this affect that proves most elusive to codification and symbolization when, in the aftermath, we attempt to rationalize what has happened (*Camera* 26-27). This intersubjective, affective, and often transformative encounter tends to get edited out of official accounts in a way that makes the cynical dismissals and reactive challenges—like those of the post-subculture critique—possible. And yet, subcultures’ menacing postures and veiled threats, the uneasiness and strangeness they sometimes generate, can still have an unsettling effect on the certainties and common sense ideas that police the given order. In the context of a hegemonic, near global capitalism, this fact alone should give us pause in rejecting the claims of subcultural politics as ineffectual posturing. At the same time, to take refuge in the fragmented group loyalties of the various “tribes” that characterize the postmodern scene is to fall short of the goal of social transformation that informed the youth-oriented countercultures and new social movements of the sixties, and whose disappointed hopes for a new society have been the inheritance of the subcultures of the seventies and eighties through to today. Can we have *both* a recognition of the utopian desire at the heart of subcultural production as well as a level-headed appraisal of the systemic and

structural forces that limit and compromise the way these desires manifest in the field of historical actuality? This dissertation asserts that we can, that in fact the only adequate account of subculture is one that simultaneously holds these seemingly contradictory positions in tension and conversation.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I argue that the post-subcultural challenges to the Birmingham model of subcultural studies largely overlook the qualitative shift in the capitalist mode of production that has occurred in the move from the Fordist welfare state to the current neoliberal regime of international finance capital. In the theories of postmodernity supplied by Fredric Jameson and David Harvey, the superseding of monopoly capitalism by the more nuanced, globalized networks of flexible accumulation provides the overarching structure for the fluid and fractured identities, the convoluted, globalized circuits of production, and the diversification of commoditized lifestyle franchises inherent in postmodern culture. Under this new form of capitalism, even a self-styled rebellious and “outsider” subculture like skateboarding can be made to turn a profit in ways that reinforce, rather than challenge or reject, the overarching structures of capital (Dinco; Heath and Potter 131-32). At the same time as contemporary subcultures help reinforce flexible accumulation, the rise of the biopolitical state as a form of social management by a cadre of specialized technicians has severely limited the avenues of social and political agency available to citizens, making subcultural modes of possibly ersatz resistance all the more appealing. However, simply discounting subcultures as always-already continuous with the cultural dominant overlooks the important work they do in

cultivating forms of alterity and belonging that might yet contribute to laying the groundwork for an emergent and truly different social, political and economic order. To this effect, subcultures provide an important site of struggle in which critical distance and difference can at least be imagined and experienced, if not fully embraced or extended to the larger society.

In arguing for the political relevance of subculture, I adopt, in the second chapter, a model of social transformation informed by the Lacanian-Marxian vision of Slavoj Žižek in which substantive change—both personally and socially—is overwhelmingly the *indirect* result of struggles often directed towards different or obscure objects. For reasons both psychological and structural, truly new social formations, while they might be imagined and anticipated, cannot be consciously aimed for or forced. Rather, they emerge as the unexpected result of a series of prolonged, difficult and organic struggles over heterogeneous sites. As part of this process of “long revolution,” (Williams *Long*) subcultures are composed of what Lacan called *sinthomes*: units of enjoyment that simultaneously register an underlying conflict or contradiction *and* protect the integrity of the subject in the face of this ongoing crisis. Thus, while sinthomic structures are inherently compromised forms, they are also the primary material we have to work with in the movement towards an unforeseen resolution of these underlying conflicts; to dismiss them is to risk losing a valuable tool in the struggle for social change. To further articulate the stakes of this struggle, I examine Agamben’s call for a common, “profane” culture that undoes the hierarchical separations effected by capitalism. I illustrate the role subcultures play in this process with brief examinations of fixed-gear bike culture, and Tim Sedo’s critique of

international skateboard tourism. Finally, to describe the ambivalent, sinthomic role subcultures play in both challenging and reproducing dominant social relations, I introduce Biopolitical Cultural Apparatuses (BCAs) as a supplement to Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses.

In Chapter Three I look at the rise of the extreme sports franchise in the nineteen nineties as an example of the incorporation of subcultural resistance. To understand the appeal of the sometimes life-threatening risks enacted in extreme sports, I couple Agamben's theory of *homo sacer* with Stephen Lyng's sociology of edgework, arguing that the individualization of risk under the regime of neoliberal finance capitalism supplies the conditions of possibility for the heroicizing of death and precariousness in action sports. I illustrate this theory via examination of the deaths of several high profile extreme sports athletes. Here we see the sinthomic logic of subculture at work as a site of compensation for, but also perpetuation of, the cultural dominant. Chapter Four introduces *temporal-spatial incorporation* as a supplement to Dick Hebdige's classical account of the ideological and commodity forms of subcultural incorporation. Despite the facility by which postmodern capitalism is able to divert subcultural innovation into channels that reinforce rather than refute cultural dominants, I argue that the experience of friendship made possible by subcultural formations is a key coordinate of political and social life. Subcultural spaces thus emerge, despite the workings of spatial-temporal incorporation, as heterotopic spaces where new friendships and alliances might emerge. Here again, I draw from Agamben. His theory of friendship as the foundation of the political allows us to inquire into the positive content structuring political engagement in the project of transforming bare life into

bearable life.

In Chapter Five I draw from my own adolescent experience as a skateboarder growing up in northern Ontario to illustrate how subcultural belonging supplied my first experiences of what collective engagement and agency, beyond the realm of privatized, individualized bourgeois culture, might actually look and feel like. Adapting Foucault's theory of the heterotopia allows us to see how subcultures can operate as a contact zone in which subjects are able to experience forms of agency and belonging that might otherwise be structurally inhibited. An interview conducted with one of my skateboarding peers reinforces the idea of subculture as a cultural apparatus that allows youth to navigate what I call *the zombie imaginary*, or the depoliticization inherent in biopolitical governance that projects political and economic issues onto disposable people. This apocalyptic structure of feeling provides a strand of continuity between the visions of social annihilation of the Cold War period and the current fascination with societal collapse, allowing us to situate skateboarding as a way of pushing back against the control structures that attempt to render biopolitical subjects docile.

The final chapter of this dissertation looks at the unique history of Beasley Skateboard Park in downtown Hamilton, Ontario. Hamilton's situation as a former centre of industrial production attempting to rebrand itself as a "post-industrial" city has focused attention on the Beasley skateboard culture as one of the cultural assets that might make downtown Hamilton attractive to the urban professional class that planners and investors hope to attract. At the same time, the scruffy, do-it-yourself ethos that characterizes the common culture of the skate park is

in conflict with a project to develop a neighbouring abandoned knitting mill into mixed-use commercial and living spaces. The tensions inherent in the skateboarders' position are indicative of the larger contradictions of post-industrial urban redevelopment in general, in which the attempt to extract profits from the cultural commons through monopoly rent undermines the unique qualities that made these areas appealing in the first place. The example of Beasley, drawn from my own experiences as a participant in the skateboard culture there, illustrates the struggles involved in recognizing and maintaining sites of common culture in the context of a capitalism that suffuses all aspects of private and public life with market logics.

This dissertation attempts to draw general conclusions and to frame new categories for understanding subculture, but it has emerged out of my own experiences and the personal trajectory my life has taken. As a middle-class white kid growing up in a relatively stable and affluent, North American urban environment, skateboarding subculture allowed me to access a wider world that transcended some of the hierarchies and controls of the society into which I was born. It gave me a sense of agency and identity that was collective—tied to a larger movement—as well as personal. And though the subcultural ideology of skateboarding often falls short of overtly political engagement, it was through my participation as an adult in Hamilton's skateboard community that I was able to take part in collective decision-making processes, neighbourhood politics, and collaborative urban governance in ways that reach beyond the circumscribed limits of subculture proper. In this project, I was aided by my return to graduate school, which gave me the time and resources to pursue volunteer engagements, and allowed me

to pursue studies that would inform and give authority to these projects. But my attempts to intervene, however modestly, in political and legislative structures would not have been possible were it not for my subcultural affiliations, and for the spirit of critique, autonomy and community support that these helped to instil from my teenage years, to today. To this extent, the incorporation of subculture (or the characterizing of subcultures as always-already part of the mainstream, and therefore not capable of being incorporated) that some critics have used to dismiss its political dimensions has been the very thing that allowed my skateboarding peers and me to take part in collective decision-making and shape these processes from within, a point that Kara-Jane Lombard makes in her reassessment of the cultural politics of incorporation in skateboarding (476, 486). Gone is the moment when one could theorize a subcultural exterior to the capitalism that has subsumed the globe (though this does not stop subjects from fantasizing such spaces). But subsumption has placed subcultural struggles as an *interiorized externality*, an “outside” that has been installed at the very heart of contemporary modes of exploitation and profiteering. As subcultural subjects grapple with the mounting contradictions that attend this positioning, it is my hope that the present study can help to make sense of this predicament, and chart a possible future path beyond it.

Chapter 1

Give Me Utopia or Give Me Death!: Periodizing Subculture and Subculture Theory

When its borders begin to be blurred, the bare life that dwelt there frees itself in the city and becomes both subject and object of the conflicts of the political order, the one place for both the organization of state power and emancipation from it.

Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (9)

My contention with the now prevalent post-subculture vision of an always-already depoliticized subcultural realm is that it fails to properly historicize, not just its object of study, but its own historical conditions of possibility. By properly periodizing subcultures *and the subcultural theories that attempt to decipher them* in the shift between two forms of capitalism, it is possible to recuperate the utopian impetus toward critique and transformation that the Birmingham theory attributes to subcultures, without ignoring the substantial ways in which contemporary capitalism excels at recuperating and profiting from these energies. Between the iterations of the Birmingham theory in the seventies and eighties, and the post-subculture theory of the nineties through to today, a substantial shift in the vision of what is deemed possible politically, socially and culturally has occurred. Paying attention to this shift will allow us to understand the Birmingham view of subcultures as a strategic intervention into the field of political possibility of the late seventies. At that time, before neoliberal restructuring had effectively discredited socialism as a viable alternative to capitalism, the political and economic situation still held the potential for the kind of revolutionary politics that Hebdige, Hall and others located in nascent form in the various youth subcultures of the day. By the mid-nineteen-

nineties, however, the political-economic strategies that coalesced into contemporary neoliberalism had significantly limited the field of political possibility, ideologically delegitimizing competing social projects.² Under postmodern capital, the idea of there being an “outside” to the dominant system has all but vanished. While this shift has its material, institutional reality in the formation of such legislative bodies as the IMF and World Bank, the G8 and G20 summits, my interest here is to track how the reduction of political alternatives under neoliberalism is registered culturally in the popular imagination. To illustrate this shift, towards the end of the chapter I will compare changes in the fantasy space of agency registered in a few popular sci-fi films from the seventies and nineties. Before presenting this material, I will first give an overview of theories regarding subculture as a means of highlighting the contentious question of the political dimensions of subculture. I will then supply a short treatment of the shift from a Fordist to Neoliberal social order as a key historical context for the emergence of the kinds of spectacular subcultures that interest us here. This shift allows us to understand a figure like the contemporary “hipster” as a symptom of the changing class dynamics, and structural challenges, faced by subcultural politics under “postmodern,” global capitalism.

² David Harvey gives a detailed account of the various strands of imperialist, anti-socialist projects that coalesced to form neoliberalism in the eighties and nineties (*Brief*). He cites the threat to economic elites posed by communist and socialist parties in both South America (Chile, Mexico, Argentina) and Europe (Italy, France, Spain, Sweden), as primary developments that Western capitalists reacted to in forming neoliberal ideologies and institutions (15-19).

An Overview of Theories about Subculture

In the sociological literature there have been three major rewritings of the understanding of subcultures. The Chicago School's theorizing of the forties and fifties developed out of sociological work from the twenties and thirties that specifically focused on gangs, criminality and delinquency. Attributing gangs and youth criminality to the alienating effects of rapid urbanization, as well as to histories of racism and discrimination, researchers such as Albert Cohen and Milton M. Gordon posited “deviant” youth cultures as attempts to seek social status and acceptance, within a limited circle of peers, and in the face of a threatening or hostile mainstream culture.³ A second major development came from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham University from the sixties through to the eighties. Attempting to recuperate subcultures from the stigma of criminality associated with them by the Chicago school, Birmingham researchers such as John Clarke, Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige characterized subcultural formations as the resistance of working-class youth to alienation and exploitation generated by modern, capitalist society. Combining contemporary French semiotic theory with Marxist sociology and politics, the Birmingham researchers interpreted the subcultural appropriation of features of the parent culture as coded—which is to say indirect or

³ See, for instance, Gordon's essay “The Concept of the Sub-Culture and its Application” (1947), and Cohen's “A General Theory of Subcultures” (1955), both of which are reprinted in Ken Gelder's *Subcultures: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, Vol.2. As Gelder points out, these early theorizations of subculture were influenced by “strain theory” which, following Durkheim's concept of *anomie*, presupposed a natural human inclination to conform to social norms. According to these theories, subcultures form when the pressure to attain material goals (particularly emphasized in the American context) causes subjects to attempt to reach these goals via “deviant” or socially illegitimate ways (Gelder “Introduction” 4). The Birmingham approach to subculture inverts this approach: instead of assuming American middle class propriety as the norm against which subcultures “deviate,” the Birmingham researchers saw working class subcultures as attempts to “win space” back from the dominant culture (Clarke et.al 145,161).

disguised—responses to the changes effecting working-class and racialized communities in post-World War Two British society (Hebdige, *Subculture* 80, Clarke et al.). In doing so, the CCCS articulated a model of cultural politics that has been influential in academic fields such as Cultural Studies and Media Studies, while also resonating with popular critical practices, from the DIY “culture jamming” of 'zine and post-punk culture to the critiques of commodity culture in magazines like *Adbusters*. Central to the Birmingham model is a sensitivity to the tension between resistance and incorporation. Subcultures are presented as existing in an antagonistic relationship to the parent culture; the terrain of subcultural formation is marked by the process by which the dominant classes, through commoditization and ideological manipulation, try to neutralize the threat posed by subcultural challenges.⁴ Much like Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony as an explanation for why the subordinated classes do not revolt in contemporary capitalist states, the theory of co-optation explains how the challenging aspects of a subculture are “gentrified” and made to conform to, and even reinforce, the dominant norms and structures that they initially challenge or reject.

A third major rewriting of subculture theory raises several provocative challenges to what has been described as the “heroic” model of the Birmingham school. Diverse research emerging in the late eighties and nineties argues that, far from being a discrete group in diametric opposition to a posited “mainstream,” subcultures are always-already intimately caught up in the same circuits of mediation, processes of commoditization and social hierarchies that determine

⁴ For the difference between these two forms of incorporation, see Hebdige *Subculture* 92-99.

the rest of society. Researchers such as Sarah Thornton and David Muggleton, for instance, have challenged the political resistance theories of the Birmingham school as being the romantic projections and Marxian dreams of the CCCS researchers themselves (Thornton 93-98; Muggleton 4-5). In place of the class resistance of the CCCS model, post-subculture theories offer insight into the internal structures, distinctions and contradictions of subcultures. In this view, rather than simply opposing society, subcultures produce their own ideologies which overlap with dominant social myths and structures in more complicit ways than are offered by Birmingham school's alleged binary system (in which subcultures are posited as existing “apart” from and against the larger society). Theorists like Oliver Marchart see the incorporation thesis as the problematic linchpin to the “heroic” oppositional model of subcultural resistance, the binary of opposition/incorporation working together to produce “the subcultural myth of temptation, treason and heroic resistance”—a myth that deploys a spurious opposition between authenticity and selling out to obscure the fact that subcultures are largely a-political (87). Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter reiterate this claim, arguing that what the subcultural rebellion/incorporation myth covers over is a depoliticized culture of taste and distinction that ultimately reinforces the competitive individualism and conspicuous consumption central to modern consumer capitalism (149-158). Offering an alternative to what they characterize as an illusory (sub-and/or-counter)cultural politics of dissent-through-style, these authors propose political engagement at the “macro” level of organized, structural and legislative change

(Marchart; Heath & Potter, 217-220).⁵

Post-subculture theory has supplied much-needed correctives to the early Birmingham model, acknowledging, for instance, the patriarchal gender biases that predominate in many youth cultures, or the co-dependent relationship between subcultures and the “mainstream” media and commodity culture (Thornton ch.4).⁶ But the tendency of these contemporary approaches to largely depoliticize subcultures has not gone unchallenged. Ken Gelder points out that the post-subculture position, in reducing subcultures to mere lifestyle and atomized individuality, overlooks key notions of community and group formation that have played an important role in the sociological understanding of subcultures (13-14). Against the characterizations of critics like Heath and Potter, Gelder cites Victor Turner's work into the way countercultures of the sixties provided an “anti-structure” to the dominant orders of society, arguing that the scope of subcultural identities is not exhausted by acts of individualized consumption and hierarchies of taste: rather, subcultures offer “site[s] of unmediated contact

⁵ In an ideological manner, these writers take a partial truth—in the case of Heath and Potter, the idea that “One simple change in the tax code would do more to curb advertising than all of the culture jamming in the world” (220)—and present it as a complete critique. These arguments ignore the way in which one’s political horizon limits what is deemed possible: in this case, the omission of systemic, revolutionary change in favour of legislative adjustments allows Heath and Potter to cast cultural politics as an impediment to substantive change while overlooking the fact that it is just such cultural spheres that preserve a revolutionary trajectory of societal transformation (however compromised this vision might prove). In refutation of Heath and Potter, it is a central Marxian tenant that the artificial division between the legislative State and the “private” realm of civil society works to reproduce exploitation and injustice (Arthur 10-12).

⁶ Early critique of the male bias in both subcultures and subcultural theory was initiated from within the Birmingham school by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber (McRobbie “Settling”; McRobbie & Garber “Girls”). Critiques of gender bias have since been articulated in relation to subcultures such as skateboarding (Beal “Disqualifying”; “Alternative”; Beal and Weidman), goth (Brill), punk rock (Reddington; Piano; Gottleib and Wald).

between people at the edges of society, unregulated by it and free from its orderly gaze” (Gelder 10). Gelder's vision of social alterity resonates with the “utopian” element of (sub)culture identified by Jameson.⁷ Existing in liminal spaces and grey zones, literal “nowheres” from the point of view of the established social map, the utopian element of subculture is supported by Jameson's argument that fuelling the various tribes and factions of postmodern consumer culture is the desire for a sense of community that the atomizing forces of market capitalism ceaselessly works to dissolve and rationalize (*Reification* 144). The primary contradiction inherent in the capitalist system, that the fruits of a historically unprecedented level of social cooperation in production are appropriated by private individuals in the form of surplus value (Žižek, *Sublime* 53), ensures that all forms of social cohesion that do not support privatized profit interests must be submitted to reorganization by “the market.” In light of this subsumption of social relations by capital, we need to address the post-subcultural position’s metonymic fallacy that takes one element of subculture (the persistence within its strivings for alterity of hierarchies of taste and value that characterize consumer culture in general) as its defining trait. What I will call “subcultural production” emphasizes how forms of fringe and oppositional activity seek alternatives to capitalist relations, not merely at the level of consumption and all of the social relationships supported by commodity fetishism, but at the level of *productive* activity. Thus, in local enterprises of DIY appropriation, alternative social networking and micro acts of cultural bricolage, subcultural practices exhibit a utopian desire to challenge the dominant order at the

⁷ Jameson's concept of Utopia, introduced in “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture” retains the dual sense of both an immanent fantasy of collective social life and a transcendent critique of the social order that impedes this sense of collectivity (144). He further addresses the ambi-valent concept of Utopia in *Archaeologies of the Future* (198-202).

level of practical activity, a trajectory that extends to challenges levelled at institutions such as the family, church and school—those sites that Althusser famously characterized as the central locations in which the capitalist order reproduces itself through the generations (209-210). While formalized struggles over the structure of these institutions were central to the countercultural movements of the sixties and seventies, the subcultural movements that proliferated in the late seventies and eighties shifted the terrain away from these institutional enclosures to the streets, avenues, nightclubs, warehouses and other clandestine spaces of subcultural production. The production of social space, and of the community formations it enables, thus emerges as a central element of subcultural practice. That in the midst of this productive activity, subcultures can never completely free themselves of the dominant relations of society and thus exist in an uneasy and often delicate tension with them, does not completely undermine their subversive character and the struggle for autonomy and collectivity that they perform. As I will argue in Chapter 2, the very failure of subcultural production to offer lasting alternatives to the cultural dominant, far from signifying their lack of political content and the ultimately illusory nature of their claims to alterity, actually confirms their oppositional status in the long “war of manoeuvre” that constitutes the path towards a post-capitalist social structure.⁸ Even though transformation of the economic system is far from the agenda of a great deal of subcultural production, it is my wager

⁸ Antonio Gramsci posits a “war of manoeuvre” as the political struggle for hegemony engaged in at the level of representation, sentiment, culture and ideology. This “long ideological and political preparation” is the build-up to a “war of position” by which a particular group makes a distinctive political victory and solidifies their imprint on the social formation (194-201). This idea has informed the discipline of cultural studies and found resonance in a number of Marxist and post-Marxist authors, from Raymond William's *Long Revolution* to Edward Said's investigations into Orientalism (73), and is echoed in de Certeau's binary of *tactics* versus *strategies* (xix-xxii).

that social transformation is one of the lodestones secretly orienting subcultural production, structuring its inarticulate longings and deviant desires, and providing a portion of the revolutionary potential mixed in with its unsettling postures. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello forcefully demonstrate, due to the essentially a-moral and inhuman nature of the capitalist mode of production, the system must always *appropriate* the discourses and values it uses to “humanize” and sell itself as an ethical and desirable form of social organization. In doing so, capitalism selectively takes values and ideologies from its critics, adversaries, and competitors, adapting these elements in ways that neutralize much of their critical bite (27-30).⁹ In light of this historical evidence, the incorporation thesis of Hebdige, rather than being abandoned as some post-subculturalists would counsel, needs to be reconsidered and further articulated. To Hebdige's two historical articulations of subcultural incorporation (the commodity and ideological form), I thus add a new category called *spatial-temporal incorporation* (detailed in Chapter 4). In spatial-temporal incorporation, the “hands-off” approach of contemporary finance capital, in which subjects are interpellated as semi-autonomous producers of “content”

⁹ Capitalism “needs its enemies, people whom it outrages and who are opposed to it, to find the moral supports it lacks and to incorporate mechanisms of justice whose relevance it would otherwise have no reason to acknowledge” (Boltanski & Chiapello 27). Briefly consider the historical mutations of capitalist ideology: during its mercantile phase, capital clothed itself in the Protestant language of asceticism and religious calling described by Max Weber (Weber 51-66). During the Keynesian period of the mid-Twentieth Century, capital adapted a bureaucratic form taken partially from institutions developed in the colonial era, but also from the hierarchical structures of state socialism. In the post-colonial, post-modern era, capital selectively adapted the critique of “technocracy” from the social movements of the sixties in producing the neoliberal focus on creativity and entrepreneurial individualism; and in our current regime of digital capitalism, the system has morphed again to adopt the tactical modalities of post-structuralism: multiplicity, messiness, de-centred networks, minute tactical interventions, as well as a pseudo-Habermasian vision of (simulated) community and collective cohesion.

that the capitalist profits from in a seemingly tangential way, is given theoretical articulation.

For now, it is enough to note that the characterization of subcultures as overlapping, at least in a performative and sometimes in a literal way, with an underclass whose activities attempt some form of escape from the labour cycle, making them “deviant” or “resistant” depending on one's political positioning, casts them as so many courageous and sometimes desperate attempts to seek refuge from the alienating effects of late consumer capitalism. This utopian, community-building aspect of subcultures, while giving expression to often oppositional, resistant and sometimes ugly, violent and discriminatory desires, is forced to conform to certain dominant social codes in order that it should be allowed to appear on the social map at all, thus contributing to the confusing mixture of defiance and complicity that has been registered by much of the critical literature on subcultures.

To be fair, post-subcultural analysis has not entirely dismissed the collective and social dimensions of fringe formations. Some research has pointed out that the attempt to reconstitute communities in the face of capitalist fragmentation, while not overtly political in the sense of demanding particular systemic change, *can* encourage and enable performative gestures, producing new forms of habit, affect and intersubjectivity that might run counter to dominant structures of state and economy. In such formations, as Toshiya Ueno points out, the politics of space are highlighted when, for instance, a Japanese open air dance party appropriates a historical site already coded with myths and meanings associated with nationalistic ideology

(112-13).¹⁰ Issues of performativity, habitus and space, of the often preconscious but material ways subjectivities are formed via habitual, practical activity, constitute an important post-subculture supplement to the acts of “semiotic guerrilla warfare” theorized by the Birmingham analysis of spectacular subcultures (as I discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3). But to mark the political dimensions of a subcultural formation as largely unconscious in their operation, as gestures of defiance that might remain “oblique” or obscure even to the subjects performing them, thus calling upon hermeneutic acts of cultural analysis to decipher their social meaning, is to return to the foundational work of Hebdige and the Birmingham school. Gelder argues that the post-subcultural critics are guilty of being inattentive to the history of subcultural theory that they are trying to critique, overlooking the Birmingham school's central ambivalence regarding the political potentialities of subcultures, as well as the fact that the emergence of spectacular subcultures signalled, for the CCCS researchers, not the authenticity of working class resistance, but its loss (13). Indeed, the Birmingham school's famous assertion that subcultures provide a merely illusory or “magical”—rather than politically substantive—solution to the contradictions inherent in the parent culture seems to be largely ignored in the post-subcultural literature, suggesting that some of the charges they level at earlier theories are directed toward a straw man (Cohen 57; Clarke 159).

This brief overview of the history of subcultural theory delivers us to a central dilemma regarding the nature of the relationship between subcultures and larger society: do subcultures

¹⁰ Ueno sees the international techno-rave scene, not simply as a reactive movement *against* dominant power structures, but as enabling positive acts of negotiation and communication, creating a “contact zone” between self and heterogeneous others that constitutes a form of resistance (103-4, 110-15).

have actual subversive potential, as vocal elements of subcultural theory and subcultural ideologies claim, or do purportedly alternative cultures merely reinforce and reproduce dominant value structures? Do they work to capture oppositional energies and redirect them toward reproducing relations of exploitation and discrimination, or do they offer a substantive challenge to the dominant culture, thereby contributing to the possibility of change? Are subcultures merely a coping strategy, a compromised way of living within the system as given, a way of deceiving ourselves as to the actual dimensions of our complicity in perpetuating forms of subjugation? Or is there something to be gained personally, politically and socially through the acts of dissent and difference that make subcultures seem, by turns, attractive and threatening, familiar and strange? In short, what are the political dimensions of subcultures, and what role do they play in furthering or challenging social norms in the age of advanced, global, patriarchal capitalist society?

Periodizing Subcultural Production

Answering these questions requires that we reconsider the historical shift in the latter half of the twentieth century from the Fordist era to a post-Fordist, neoliberal finance capitalism. Being attentive to both the cultural and economic dimensions of this shift will allow us to move beyond the deadlock between subcultures as proto-political and always/already co-opted. As is often the case with such antimonies, the solution is to be found not in embracing one side or the other, but in shifting registers to examine the historical conditions, contradictions and deadlocks

that manifest as these polarized positions. We should direct our attention to the larger ideological system that *includes the analysis of subcultures within its field*, and that concerns the very possibility for politics in our allegedly “post-political” age of biopolitical governance. The theoretical approaches to subcultures, I contend, have addressed issues crucial to the moment of capitalism to which they belong; they do so neither rightly nor wrongly in the objective sense, but rather occupy strategic positions within the struggles inherent to the ideological field of their given moment. The Birmingham theories, for instance, emerged in an *interregnum* period between the older, monopolistic phase of capitalistic development and its current global, postmodern iteration. At this moment it was politically astute and useful to present subcultural production as a coded form of resistance.¹¹ In the sixties and seventies, belief in an outside or alternatives to the capitalist system *was* part of the political topography. Reacting to the flowering, in the eighties and nineties, of predominantly American readings of mass culture as a site of resistance for the subjects who idiosyncratically consume it, the post-subcultural work emerges as the necessary critique of the populist theories, a bearer of the sobering news that in

¹¹ Even if the post-subcultural charges against the Birmingham school’s hypotheses as being unscientific and the projections of leftist-Marxian romanticism are granted a certain “historical” truth, this does not disqualify the political import of the CCCS intervention, and might even strengthen it. To provide a comparative example from film studies, Žižek cites Marc Vernet’s argument that the genre of *film noir* was originally a “false hypostasis,” a mis-reading of American culture by French critics: the social-critical dimension that these critics detected in the *noir* anti-heroes is thus a kind of theoretical projection that doesn’t reflect the actual content of the films in their original context. However, Žižek points out that the French critical reading, and its reification in the category of *noir*, had a recursive effect on subsequent American cinema, actually creating the space for the emergence of the critical perspective that the French critics mis-read in the original films (Žižek in Butler et.al. *Contingency* 242-9). Could not a similar argument be made for the Birmingham’s detection of political critique in the British subcultures of the seventies and eighties? Here, through the “misrecognizing Gaze” of the theorists “*a censored thought is allowed to be articulated*” revealing “a potential which is invisible to those who are directly engaged in it” (246-7, emphasis orig.).

contemporary consumer society our utopian desires for transformation are being calculated ahead of time as part of the profit-generating equation we would hope to challenge. One version of this post-subcultural position struggles for greater equity and enfranchisement *within* the given economic system, largely omitting Marxian critique's investment in an overarching transformation of the mode of production. An alternative version retains systemic change as a coordinate, but dismisses subcultural practices as a blind alley in this project. The vision of subculture offered here supplies a third option, one that holds systemic transformation as a central political category while recognizing subcultural production as one of the many kinds of struggle that might contribute to such an outcome. It is my wager that if our understanding of subculture is given a periodization proper to the new millennium, we might rescue the political potential that earlier theories detected in these myriad gestures of dissent without ignoring the inescapable complicity by which *all* subjects are caught within the overarching contradictions, the economic and power structures of the cultural dominant. This recuperation will be navigated, in Chapter 2, by drawing upon Slavoj Žižek's genealogy of the Lacanian concept of the symptom coupled with Agamben's theory of the friend. In the remainder of this chapter, I look at how a diminished sense of political possibility under contemporary, global capitalism is registered in the (sub)cultural sphere, first by examining the contemporary figure of the "hipster," then by looking at the space of alterity represented in several science fiction films.

Neoliberal Austerity and the Problem with Hipsters

If subcultures supply a form of oblique or covert resistance to the cultural dominant, then the ascendancy of capitalism in the last quarter of the twentieth century as a near global system is a key shift insofar as even those areas of private and community life that once enjoyed partial autonomy have become suffused and reorganized by market logics. Neoliberal capitalism's eclipsing of the Fordist social order has produced a rift whereby the co-ordinates used by an older generation no longer work to orient the life experiences of a younger contingent, an effect that has been redoubled for those youth coming of age at the turn of the millennium who have never experienced a mitigated capitalism, in the form of the Fordist welfare state, against which to compare the present situation. The period of European reconstruction and American ascendancy immediately following World War Two put emphasis on what Althusser calls the “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs) of family, church, school, factory, prison etc., as sites in which capitalist social relations are reproduced, and sometimes challenged (207-209). The shift that began in the seventies towards a post-Fordist, neoliberal capitalism, however, inaugurated a period of erosion of these state-supported structures. This last juncture, in what we could call an *interregnum* period between Fordism and neoliberalism, is precisely the moment of the proliferation of spectacular subcultures with the vertiginously multiplying “neo-tribes” of the seventies and eighties speaking to a need for community and agency that, for many subjects, was no longer supplied by the kinds of family, church and leisure organizations that structured social

cohesion in the earlier decades of the twentieth century.¹² With the dismantling of state-funded support structures that began to occur in the eighties under Reagan and Thatcher, people were thrown back upon their own, limited recourses to navigate an increasingly precarious society subjected to the often cruel uncertainties of a globalized marketplace. In this context, subcultural logics of dissent were intensified, while at the same time the cultural sphere began to play a more pronounced role as a socializing agent. With the neoliberal restructuring, and in many instances dismantling, of the ISAs of the Fordist era, the cultural sphere was intensified as a site of socialization in the reproduction of the labour force, putting new emphasis on what I will describe, in Chapter 2, as Biopolitical Cultural Apparatuses (BCAs), a category for which subcultures supply a central example. While subcultures offered an emergent formation under the paternalistic forms of biopolitical management of the Fordist period, they go on to play a more central role in the neoliberal decades. But even while subcultures played a compensatory or even resistant role under the initial phases of neoliberal restructuring, the increasingly flexible circuits of postmodern capital with its refinements in both surveillance and production/distribution networks proved capable of capitalizing upon these emergent subcultures, incorporating them and rationalizing them according to market logics or forcing

¹² French sociologist Michel Maffesoli used the term “tribes” to describe an ecstatic “solidarity derived from shared sentiment” in the new, popular and largely youth-based urban social formations (200-202). His book *The Time of the Tribes* (1996, originally published in French in 1988) provides a sympathetic example of the conservative canon struggling to come to terms with popular cultural movements, translating them in the process into a high-culture lexicon that all but guarantees that the subjects in question will never access or challenge these refined representations of themselves. He delivers a portrait of the new subcultures as a “barbaric” but vitalist energy that might reinvigorate and “re-enchant” a “moribund” society (209-210).

them into a fugitive existence whereby either tactical camouflage or cooptation become the price of their continued existence. These tensions lead to the paradoxical position expressed by Hebdige's formula *Hiding in the Light*, whereby the agency and aspirations of disenfranchised youth must take the form of “the power to discomfit,” a phrase Hebdige uses in association with the punk movement of the seventies and eighties, but which can be extended, with some important caveats, to the millennial figure of the hipster (*Hiding* 18). Separating punk from hipsterism is the gulf of the neoliberal restructuring, a significant effect of which has been the reduction of middle-class possibilities, delivering a new demographic of youth into the crisis terrain that couples a pervasive commodity culture with encroaching material debt and insecurity, and providing fertile ground for the kind of semiotic manoeuvring deployed by subcultural production. In this context I would argue that, despite—or in fact, because of—their seemingly apathetic demeanour, hipsters exhibits a similar desire to shock and unsettle as can be found in earlier subcultures, though the class dimension these strategies both register and conceal differs from that of the revolutionary rhetoric that punk deploys.¹³

The generations who have come of age since the nineteen sixties have had the dubious privilege of witnessing what Marx described as a passage from the partial to the total

¹³ Mark Grief provides a useful historicization of the term and identifies the ambiguous figure of the hipster as “that person, overlapping with the intentional dropout or the unintentionally declassed individual—the neo-bohemian, the vegan or bicyclist or skate punk, the would-be blue-collar or post-racial twenty something, the starving artist or graduate student—who in fact aligns himself both with rebel subculture and with the dominant class, and thus opens up a poisonous conduit between the two” (web). Grief’s disparaging portrait identifies the modern hipster as an appropriation of previous styles of cultural resistance, but evacuated of their politically resistant content.

subsumption of social relations under capital.¹⁴ The steady dissolution and restructuring of social relations effected by capital is surely a primary factor in the emergence of subcultural formations, as subjects scramble to reconstitute alternative forms of community in the ruins of a social sphere reeling under the pressures of neoliberal restructuring. These pressures are especially felt by youth, since the residual structures in which an older generation might still take refuge are often not available or appealing to younger subjects. This sense of abandonment is further exacerbated by the generational gap whereby parents mistake the struggles of their children as the same in kind to the ones they themselves once faced. Contemporary youth, for their part, are often hindered by their own form of a-historical presentism in which they feel that their parents' generation couldn't possibly understand the unique struggles and possibilities offered by the contemporary situation. Subcultures seem to offer a solution to this sense of generational discontinuity and isolation. But in the wake of postmodern capitalism's rapid tempo of "innovation" and change, the very forces that stimulate subcultural production as a *reaction* to this totalizing process can just as quickly infiltrate the subcultural sphere itself, almost guaranteeing the failure of their subversive projects ahead of time.¹⁵ Scrambling to stay one step ahead of the cycle of incorporation, subcultures accelerate their production of difference, leading

¹⁴ Marx, *Capital Vol.1*, 1019-1038. Hardt and Negri link this shift to the emergence of what they follow Deleuze in calling the "biopolitical societies of control" (*Empire* 22-27). Antonio Negri theorizes total subsumption as an overturning of the traditional relationship of time to space: "Space is temporalized, it becomes dynamic: it is a condition of the constitutive realization of time" (35). Despite the totalitarian dimensions of this subsumption, Negri also identifies in this shift the necessary conditions for social revolution.

¹⁵ For an illustration of how the commodity form of incorporation operates through the work of professional "cool hunters" who seek out new, subcultural innovations then sell them to designers and corporations, see Malcolm Gladwell's "The Coolhunt."

to a state of exhaustion that manifests in such contemporary figures as the hipster. In what appears to be a complete inversion of the Birmingham model of subcultural *resistance*, the *blasé*, image-conscious hipster adopts the last gesture of protest available, baldly embracing consumption and self-fashioning as if to say: “you critics of subculture are right. This mask of cool conformity *is* all there is, now leave us alone!” This is a stance that, at its most cynical, adopts the spectacular strategies of a classic postmodern subculture like punk, but evacuates this position of any pretence to revolutionary or utopian striving. In the place of punk’s rage and hostility, the hipster offers passive aggression cloaked in seemingly polite, docile submission. (The alternative stance of the “green” hipster invested in back-to-the-earth lifestyle politics offers a second type, whose blindness to the class privilege of such positions is effectively ridiculed in a television show like *Portlandia*.) In a paradoxical way, however, hipster cynicism provides a last modicum of personalized resistance: the ironic embracing of the mask *as if that is all there is* capitulates to the post-subcultural critique (of subcultures as merely individualistic conspicuous consumption) and in doing so allows subjects a somewhat cramped but comforting refuge from the logic of incorporation.¹⁶ If this refuge leaves subjects detached, uncommitted and politically neutralized, signifying a dramatic reduction of spaces of engaged citizenship and cultural autonomy, then it would seem that the post-subculturalists are right: the game was fixed from the start and vacuous hierarchies of taste and “authenticity” are the true aim of subcultural production. But we might also detect in the hipster's performance of detachment a subtle “give

¹⁶ For a more explicit challenge to the logic of subcultural incorporation, see *The Grey Sweatsuit Revolution* website which playfully brands its form of cultural politics as “history’s most comfortable revolution” [<http://www.thegreysweatsuitrevolution.com/>].

unto Caesar what is Caesar's" logic that allows her to function within the cycle of commoditization and incorporation that has accompanied subcultural production from its inception. If this very act of "opting out by giving in" frees up space for a sliver of personal and cultural autonomy, then hipsterism, rather than signalling the death of subcultures in general, still retains echoes of their yearning for agency.

Even while we recognize this feat of subcultural contortionism, we should mark the very weak and circumscribed forms the desire for difference is allowed to take under the kinds of pressures exerted by the current instrumentalizing of art and culture as vehicles for economic renewal. If one's parent generation was marked by acts of spectacular resistance marred by secret complicity with the system being rejected, then the hipster makes the logical next move of *rejecting rejection*. At one level, it is this perceived *lack* of a position behind the performances of hipsterdom that unsettles and constitutes their scandalous "power to discomfit." At a deeper level, the class aspirations that hide *behind* the hip performance of vacuity perhaps constitute the true political content of this position, as middle class subjects scramble for jobs and security that are increasingly elusive, without trying to *look* like they are scrambling. Chris Koentges addresses hipster culture in a rather unflattering characterization for the Canadian *Marketing* magazine: "You want to bask in the evidence of an amazing life—without having lived it...But no matter how low your jeans or high the hooker boots, you will never be able to collect the right baggage. That would destroy your potential" (Koentges). This characterization of the hipster as attempting to assemble the tokens of subcultural alterity without damaging one's job prospects

points out the difficult position occupied by subjects for whom class is deemphasized as a politically constructed principle of resistance. Fordist class positions were articulated, after decades of struggle, around industrial production and offered a relatively stable system in which (certain, mostly male) subjects could intervene and struggle for equity. Under neoliberalism, with its increasingly “immaterial” and decentred forms of production, class resistance has suffered a dissolution which, despite such provocative theories as Hardt and Negri’s articulation of the “multitude,” has yet to be reconstituted into clear coordinates by which the global subjects of capital might find the solidarity needed to challenge capitalist exploitation (*Multitude*).

The hipsters thus labour under the burden of a certain socio-political evisceration, exhibiting a contradictory mixture of aspiration and exhaustion, resistance and compromise. They are the inheritors of the ruins of the transformative projects that emerged spectacularly with the countercultures of the sixties, only to be undermined by a capitalism that proved readily capable of incorporating the desires for personal expression and “autonomy” (if not the crucial struggles for equality and social justice) that informed the upheavals of the final years of the Fordist era.¹⁷ The stigma of disgust that hipsters bear—a structure of feeling shared by hipsters themselves, who eschew using the name to self-identify—is symptomatic of the loss of coordinates for the total critique and transformation of society engaged in by the middle-class

¹⁷ Boltanski and Chiapello provide a useful analysis of this defeat when they describe how “the new spirit of capitalism” (basically, neoliberalism) was able to emerge out of the Fordist order by taking advantage of “the differential between the social critique and the artistic critique”—between the demands of the new social movements for justice and equality and the demands of the counterculture for a more “authentic,” creative and satisfying mode of living (503). They characterize this split as the division between critiques of *domination* versus *exploitation* (505).

counter cultures of the sixties and seventies. Put another way, hipsters signify the demotion of the counter-cultural struggles of the late twentieth century (which aimed at outright, global transformation of society) into a subcultural register of more discrete, tactical manoeuvring. By performing the *caricature* of subcultures delivered by the post-subculturalist arguments, the hipsters have positioned themselves as a vexing presence on the social map, becoming focal points for collective guilt over our failure to continue imagining utopian alternatives to capitalism. Rather than casting hipsters as the death of subcultural politics, they are the very adoption of subcultural tactics by subjects formerly insulated from the need for such measures—the becoming-subcultural of the (eroding) middle class.¹⁸ Lacking the historical sense of solidarity that formed in the working class under industrial capitalism, however, the subcultural politics of middle-class hipsterism is largely aimed at individualistic striving and social mobility, rather than collective dissent. It is thus the content, rather than the form, of the hipster subculture that distinguishes them from previous subcultures: hipsterdom emerges as a symptom, as a compromised way to navigate a cultural-political impasse, and as a way of salvaging what I will go on to call, in Chapter 4, “bearable life” from the spectres of a radically reduced “bare life” (Agamben *Homo* 1-12) that proliferate under the current regime of unmitigated capitalism.

¹⁸ Of course, the counter-cultural spirit of global critique is by no means dead, as recent movements such as Occupy and other anti-capitalist protests demonstrate.

Is Global Capitalism the Only Game in Town?: The Collapse of Cold War Ideology and the Rise of the Body Politic

The post-subculture dismissal of the Birmingham work as ideological, not grounded in ethnographic research, or simply wrong overlooks the fact that the steady infiltration of the social sphere by the logic of capital has delivered us, in the nineties and the new millennium, to a very different moment than even the seventies or eighties in terms of the possibilities available for political change and critique. Instead of rejecting this or that model, we should see the divide between the Birmingham and the post-subcultural theories as indicative of a tipping point when the total subsumption of social relations under capital starts to become registered as a lived reality. If we accept the thesis, advanced by Fredric Jameson, David Harvey and others, that postmodern, global capital constitutes a qualitative shift from the earlier mercantile and monopolistic phases of production,¹⁹ then the subcultural theories of the Birmingham school from the seventies and eighties, when this shift was still underway, make sense as ideologies of resistance or *counter-ideologies* in their own right. In the period of the Birmingham school's subcultural theorizing, before the collapse of “actually existing socialism” in the nineties, a geographical space of difference was still available as a kind of scaffolding for the political imaginary.

The collapse of this space of political difference has rendered the ideologies under which we now live largely invisible, as neoliberal values and “structures of feeling” are universalized to

¹⁹ Harvey *Condition* (147); Jameson *Postmodernism* (35-37).

an extent that gives birth to the myth of our living in a “post-ideological” world.²⁰ Although both capitalism and socialism are biopolitical in the sense that they attempt to address the lives of people at the level of whole populations, the Cold War tension between these systems as two possible ways to deliver on the promises of modernity kept alive a space for critique (on both sides of the divide), and a belief in the possibility for progressive change at the level of political structures. The dissolution of this binary in the nineties has produced a single global system, the biopolitical dimensions of which can only be challenged from within. The dissolution of twentieth-century articulations of collectivist politics has opened new possibilities for the politicization of identity and the body, but at the cost of eclipsing more global, systemic critique.²¹ If the biopolitical paradigm of contemporary capitalism has inscribed social and economic power structures at the level of the body itself, this politicization of the corporeal has yet to be articulated at a sufficiently collective level to reconstitute a class politics—one that could challenge the system as a whole—out of the various identity positions that characterize the current leftist-political landscape. Contemporary, heterogeneous identity politics thus emerge as

²⁰ A project of revisiting Marxist thought in the wake of the collapse of “actually existing socialism” has been undertaken by diverse authors including Derrida, Badiou, and Žižek. Emphasizing the plurality of Marxist approaches to critique, and challenging teleological models of historical progression, this growing body of work draws from Marxian ideas to create supple and open-ended forms of leftist critique that address the impasse of the current, global moment of capital. For example, see Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx* (1994), the essays collected in *The Idea of Communism* (2010), and Boris Groys’ *The Communist Postscript* (2009).

²¹ Although postmodern identity politics does struggle to change society as a whole, making it more equitable, just and tolerant, it does so from a position that largely omits questions regarding the historical constants of capitalism (such as the continual expansion and privatization of wealth). This is a point that Žižek provocatively makes when he argues that, while “Postmodern politics definitely has the great merit that it 'repoliticizes' a series of domains previously considered 'apolitical' or 'private'; the fact remains, however, that it does *not* in fact repoliticize capitalism, because *the very notion and form of the 'political' within which it operates is grounded in the 'depoliticization' of the economy.* (Žižek in Butler et.al. *Contingency* 98, italics orig.)

very much akin to subcultures: as symptomatic of our moment of global capital, and as the necessary components—what I will go on to describe as the *sinthomic* building blocks—that must be recognized and furthered, but also orchestrated into an overarching revolutionary trajectory.²²

The contemporary dismissal of systemic critique as “ideological,” and the shift towards a more immediately experienced body politic found some of its early articulations in the American countercultural youth movements of the late sixties. The first systematic articulation of the counterculture movement, Theodore Roszak's *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1968), describes how middle-class youth of the time attempted to strike out “beyond ideology to the level of consciousness, seeking to transform our deepest sense of the self, the other, the environment” (49). Raised in a period of unprecedented material affluence in post-war America (largely due to America's infrastructures remaining intact in comparison with a devastated Europe), the younger generation took advantage of this windfall to challenge the very technocratic-industrial society that produced their position of relative freedom from necessity.

²² I am not trying to argue that important categories for emancipatory struggle, like race, gender and ability, are “less political” than class struggle. These categories are integrally related to the reproduction of inequality and exploitation under capitalism. I follow Žižek, however, in identifying class as the privileged site, within the series of emancipatory struggles, “that provides the horizon of the series as such” (Žižek in Butler et.al. *Contingency* 98). Žižek's argument is that by casting class as merely one category among others, systemic critique of capitalism disappears as a political goal, while the inclusion of class within identity categories often becomes a tokenistic addendum. We should, rather, acknowledge the formally empty category of class antagonism as the structuring principle of the political as such, as the general form by which all particular emancipatory struggles proceed. Reconstituting the centrality of class might paradoxically require an abandonment of the hitherto historically articulated concepts of the “working class,” as the German value-critique school has done (Trenkle). In recognizing the racialized and gendered forms of historically devalued subjectivities necessary for Capitalism's reproduction, Roswitha Scholz's theory of “value disassociation” provides important groundwork for linking the reproduction of capitalism to racism and patriarchy (Scholz).

Disenchanted by the conformism, patriarchy, racism and injustice of the existing socialist/Marxist movements, American youth turned away from such categories as class, party, nation and toward the personal transformation of consciousness as a route to larger social change. In rejecting “the lethal culture of their elders” however, and in emphasizing the shift of individual consciousness over systemic restructuring, the counterculture largely ignored issues of political economy, mistaking the particular cultural forms that capitalism took under the Fordist/monopolist stage (hierarchical, technocratic corporate structures, for instance), for the capitalist system itself (Roszak 48). Because the largely middle-class youth of the counterculture used their new position of relative security to critique, not the contradictions of the economic system that made that affluence possible, but the forms of life under which the techno-industrial society ripened, the fundamental structures of capitalist accumulation went unchallenged, and the counterculture ended up supplying the templates by which an emergent, biopolitical capitalism focusing on lifestyle, “creativity” and personalized consumption could flourish. Under the modes of co-optation refined by postmodern capital, the corporeal turn risks being reduced to a symptom of the de-politicization inherent in our context of advanced, biopolitical capitalism: politics has literally become *incorporated*, reduced, as Jameson succinctly states, to the immediate lived reality of bodies in the present moment (“End” 712-16). Will it be possible to reconstitute a form of collective, emancipatory and anti-capitalist struggle that yet does justice to the nuanced forms of embodied resistance that proliferate under the corporeal turn, one that links these struggles to larger (not just Marxist, but post-colonial and feminist) historical narratives of

social change? This is perhaps one of the most crucial questions currently facing leftist political theory and practice.

Forever Young: The Shift to Biopolitical Governance as Illustrated by a few Sci-fi Films

Because science fiction is an apocalyptic genre, imaginatively “destroying” the world as we know it and redrawing it in altered form, it offers a privileged site for investigating what Christopher Breu describes as the workings of cultural fantasy.²³ Comparing two science fiction films, one from the end of the Fordist and one from the neoliberal era, will illustrate the cultural and political shift away from critical visions of social totality and towards a corporeal presentism. This change is registered in the fantasy space of collective agency depicted in the two films. In the 1976 British-American sci-fi film *Logan's Run*, society is enclosed by a sealed dome, the various plazas, apartments and pleasure centres of which resemble one large shopping mall (many of the city scenes of the film were actually shot in a mall in Dallas, Texas). Life in this seemingly idyllic society of youthful hedonism has just one catch: everyone has a “lifeclock” implanted in the palm of their hand that marks their age. When a person reaches thirty, they are required to undergo a “renewal” ceremony that is supposed to return them to a state of infancy, but which actually kills them. Some people, known as runners, attempt to escape this fate, seeking a mythical place beyond the city, called “Sanctuary,” where the power of the lifeclocks and the computer that manages them does not hold sway. In the course of trying to find and

²³ Breu identifies cultural fantasy as a privileged site of investigation for the way it allows for a combining of “psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity and materialist theories of culture and political economy” (16).

destroy Sanctuary, Logan, a “Sandman” (a police officer whose job is to hunt down and kill runners), and his consort Jessica succeed in getting outside the city-dome, where they eventually encounter a single old man living in the ruins of the White House with a clutter of cats. The discovery that there is a habitable, outside world leads the heroes to return to the domed city in an attempt to liberate the rest of the citizenry, a mission which is ultimately successful. The final scene of the film shows the sun-blinded masses emerging from the dome to confront, on the steps of a fountain or reservoir, the first aged man they have ever seen.

With its elaboration of the Platonic myth of the cave, *Logan's Run* nicely illustrates the fantasy space that structured popular thought toward the end of the Fordist era. The same year that Foucault gave his seminal lecture on biopolitics at the Collège de France,²⁴ and just three years before the publication of Dick Hebdige's influential book on subcultural resistance, *Logan's Run* offers a society where actual *political* decisions—decisions about the constitution of society itself, distribution of wealth, environmental concerns, the organization of the productive forces, and so on— have been relegated to a computational form of biopolitical management. Like the prisoners in Plato's cave, the citizens in the film are held in thrall by fleeting sensations, symbolically registered by the sequence of flashing colours associated with the central computer, a motif that is echoed in the succession of colours that appear in the crystal “lifeclock” embedded in each citizen's hand.²⁵ The film astutely illustrates the Birmingham thesis that in modern

²⁴ Foucault's lecture from 17 March 1976 is printed in *Society Must Be Defended*, pp. 239-265.

²⁵ The Platonic myth further inspires the fourteen episode television show based on the film. The show reveals a patriarchal council of elders—men who live natural life spans and see to running the biopolitical City of Domes.

society, subcultural formations comprise the distorted remnants of a truly politicized citizenry. Early in the film, Logan is dispatched by the central computer to apprehend a runner who has sought refuge in a desolate, slum area of the city called “Cathedral.” This otherwise uninhabited part of the city is home to dangerous gangs of youth called “cubs,” one member of which has had his lifeclock change to red, signalling his summons to “renewal.” By failing to present himself at the fatal ceremony, this aged cub becomes a fugitive, and Logan’s quarry. At the same time, because of his now advanced age, the outlaw risks being rejected by his youthful companions as well as the larger society. Logan succeeds in killing the runner, and discovers on his corpse a pendant, shaped like an ancient Egyptian Ankh, that we later learn is a symbol for the mythical Sanctuary beyond the dome. The discovery of the pendant sets Logan on his journey to the outside world where he encounters various antagonists and challenges, including a mad food-processing robot called Box who tries to freeze him in ice, and one of his former Sandman colleagues, who tries to track and kill him.

Symbolically linked by the Ankh pendant to the space of difference beyond the domed city, the youth gangs of the cubs thus appear within the film as the first instance of dissent to the order as given, a sign that all is not right within the seemingly ideal society depicted. If we were to read the cubs in terms of the Birmingham formula, the subculture supplies a pathological expression, within the biopolitical closure of the policed social order, of an actual, unrealized political culture—one based on choices between alternatives which the citizenry themselves have

Like the caste of Guardians in Plato's *Republic*, these elderly men want to induct Logan and his colleague Francis (Sandmen, members of the “Warrior” caste) as future leaders.

a role in constituting and navigating. The cubs are thus located half way between the docile, accepting citizenry and the fully politicized rebel faction who have constructed a kind of underground railway out of the city. The 1967 novel by William F. Nolan and George Clayton Johnson on which the film is based provides further information about the history of the city, augmenting the theme of youthful dissent. We are told in the prologue to the novel that the biopolitical order of the domed city has its origins in a youth revolution that developed out of the social movements of the sixties. The prologue charts a steady increase in population leading up to the year 2000, when a critical mass is reached and old age appears to have been eradicated (the ultimate age permitted in the novel is even younger than in the film: a mere 21 years) (n.p.). The hedonistic youth culture of both the novel and film thus provides an early critique of the same consumption-oriented and individualistic society later treated by post-subculture theories: subjects spend their time engaging in hedonistic pleasures, consuming narcotics and whimsically modifying themselves via fashion and plastic surgery. The hedonistic population of the city reveals the countercultural dissent of youth become mainstream, a population caught in a net of their own making, supplying a vision much akin to the portraits of commoditized rebellion found in some of the post-subculture critiques: in attempting to overthrow the “repressive” society of the past, the counterculture and their heirs have only succeeded in building a better mousetrap for themselves. The key point this film illustrates for our purposes, however, is that it optimistically presents an alternative to the antinomies (dissent and incorporation) of the biopolitical order: there *is* an “outside” to the domed city, even if this exterior space is depicted in the film as a

nostalgic return to some kind of patriarchal republicanism in the form of the dawdling Peter Ustinov and his company of cats.

Contrast this vision of alterity to the Wachowski brothers' *Matrix* series of films. Here the polarities presented in *Logan's Run* are reversed: in place of the rugged, authentic wilderness that Logan discovers outside the city, a world where nature has reclaimed civilization and humanity is offered a new frontier for the rebuilding of society, the heroes of the *Matrix* are confronted with drastically reduced spaces in which to manoeuvre. Having escaped from the virtual reality prison of the modern, everyday world, Neo and his allies inhabit a devastated wasteland ruled by mechanical spiders who keep their human victims cocooned and unconscious while feeding off their vital energies. The liberated, human remnants of this cataclysm live a Spartan, tribal life in the underground city of Zion and are themselves presented as a kind of subculture in the primal rave scene from the third film. We can imagine the underground rebels of Zion as the direct descendants of the cubs of *Logan's Run*, while the paralyzed human victims of the *Matrix*'s machines are akin to those hapless runners from *Logan's Run* who escape the domed city only to be captured and frozen by the demented robot Box in the tunnels leading to the outside world. The reduction of people to mere food in both *Logan's Run* and the *Matrix* (where humans are kept as energy batteries, fuelling the machines) supplies a recurring nightmare fantasy of biopolitical governance. The theme finds clear expression in the seventies sic-fi film *Soylent Green*, discussed below, and also contributes to the visceral horror of the zombie film genre. Following the formula adapted by Giorgio Agamben from Foucault's work

on biopolitics, when “bare life” (consuming, expelling, reproducing) becomes the primary object at the heart of political governance, the lines of demarcation that once kept the human and animal worlds conceptually distinct collapses, producing a surplus of anxiety regarding the status of the human political subject that seems to manifest itself in a proliferation of fantasies regarding cannibalism and the reduction of humans to cattle.²⁶ The biopolitical tautology of the species that eats itself supplies an anthropomorphic allegory for the “total system,” that inescapable and usually dystopian configuration made possible by modern technological advances (from which there is no place to hide) and geographical limits (there is nowhere left to go). What makes the more recent *Matrix* films different from the biopolitical dystopias of the seventies is the eclipsing of actual spaces of resistance, a process that Jameson describes as the near total colonization of nature and the unconscious by the logic of capital (*Postmodernism* 36). We can see how, in the two decades separating *Logan's Run* from *The Matrix*, the spatial possibilities presented as alternatives to the biopolitical order in the former have disappeared from the latter film. In the *Matrix*, the unconscious is literally equated with the world of everyday, contemporary, urbanized reality; subjects wake from this dream only to confront a devastated planet fully colonized by the technological horde. The possibilities for escape offered the protagonists of the *Matrix* are the Nebuchadnezzar ship navigating the narrow tunnels beneath the machine-infested surface of the planet, and the already mentioned “oceanic”

²⁶ To name just a few films that register this anxiety over cannibalism, the rise of nuclear technologies (another “master signifier” of the biopolitical imaginary), and the “animalization” of humans see, *I Am Legend* (the 1954 novel by Richard Matheson, and the three subsequent cinematic versions), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), *The Crazies* (both the 1973 and the 2010 versions) and just about any recent zombie film.

experience of communion registered in the rave scene in the caverns of the underground city of Zion: two claustrophobic fantasy representations of the shrinking spaces for resistance that subjects experience in the actual biopolitical order.

We must add to these two sites of resistance the Matrix itself—the illusory, computer generated fantasy of everyday life that becomes, for subjects like Neo who have realized its digital, insubstantial nature, a realm they can navigate with super-human agency. Neo's messianic abilities within the “virtual” world of everyday life can be distilled into the film's main ideological thesis: that when actual, physical social spaces have been subsumed by an inhuman logic, the digital world of the Internet supplies a utopian virtual space where subjects can experience *jouissance*, a kind of pleasure in the very site of their subjugation and discomfort. In the fantasy world supplied by the film, the digital realm of postmodern, multiple identities at play becomes conflated with the “real” world of social, material existence, the two realms rendering each other “hyperreal.” But the recasting of everyday life according to the destabilizing logic of the Internet covers over the fundamental *asymmetry* of this process: the seeming freedom from economically dictated hierarchies provided by the internet recasts the “real” world in its own image, thus obscuring the fundamental inequalities that structure each separate realm (the real and digital) in their materiality. The *Matrix* films register this disavowal with their reduction to near bare life of the resistant, human remnant. At the same time, they offer a utopian vision of the role the Internet (symbolized by the “virtual reality” of everyday life) might play in both maintaining and contesting the structures that perpetuate humanity's

subjugation to the inhuman machines. In order to re-politicize this fantastical allegory, it is necessary to translate the disguised, nightmare content back into the economic coordinates that structures it: the mechanical regime being biopolitical capitalism itself. In this reading, the transformation of humans into food for the biopolitical machines gives expression to the way modern capital extracts surplus value from the everyday organic and cultural functioning of people, under the rubric of “immaterial labour.” At the same time, it is precisely in this context of destabilized class coordinates—the same context that structures the uncomfortable compromises of hipster culture—that the political fantasy supplied by *The Matrix* is reprivatized in the messianic figure of Neo, who provides a template for the various positions of compromised agency and ersatz community offered by the Internet.

The classic film *Soylent Green* is perhaps more solidly pessimistic and critical on this last point. Here the sympathetic Book character, finally tiring of the daily struggle for survival in the overcrowded, desperately inhuman conditions of the city, trades the remainder of his life for twenty minutes of bliss before he dies in the state-run “intake facility.” These facilities provide a function similar to that of the “ethical suicide parlours” Kurt Vonnegut satirically sketches as a future solution to overcrowding (“Welcome”). After a short, ritualized euthanasia process, human bodies are transmitted via a series of conveyor belts and garbage trucks to a factory where they are unceremoniously turned into the food substance called Soylent Green. As Book gently drifts into oblivion, he is treated to classical music and National Geographic style images of a pristine, natural world on a wall-sized video screen in front of him. The film’s closing titles then

roll, poignantly continuing these same nature images in letterbox, as if to say that “in the very near future, when people are eating other people just to survive, the only escape from this hell will be digital postcard images of a nature which, if it even still exists, will no longer be accessible to the majority of humans.” Despite the two decades that separate the two films, we can imagine an almost seamless continuity between the end of *Soylent Green* and the world of the *Matrix*: instead of being ground up into food for other humans, we can imagine Book's unconscious body being turned into a living battery for the Matrix, while his mind becomes imprisoned in the simulated “matrix” reality, the predecessor of which we witness in the hyperreal landscapes of *Soylent Green*'s closing credits.

Both *Logan's Run* and *Soylent Green* are from what I have been describing as the *interregnum* period between the Fordist and neoliberal eras. In the former, the biopolitical society still offered fantasies of escape and an “outside,” while the postmodern, neoliberal order that followed largely closed down such spaces. Corresponding to what Marx called the real subsumption of social relations under capital, our current moment is thus characterized by what I have described as “free market claustrophobia” (“The Law”), or a shrinking sense of political and social possibility that corresponds to the infiltration of market logics into previously sheltered areas of social life. This structure of feeling is expressed in and symptomatically managed by cultural fantasies like the *Matrix* films, but it is also registered in subcultural production, where contemporary formations from hipsters to skateboarders take refuge in the corporeal (think, for instance, of the rise in popularity of tattoos in the last decade). Far from

being merely reactive stances, however, these formations might yet hold the keys to emergent forms of agency and even social transformation. The next chapter assembles some theoretical tools that can help us appreciate this potential.

Chapter 2

Necessary Failures: Subculture as Symptom

It seems to me that the latent function of subculture is this: to express and resolve, albeit 'magically', the contradictions which remain hidden or unresolved in the parent culture.

Phil Cohen, *Rethinking the Youth Question* (57 emphasis original)

This is the symptom: an element which causes a great deal of trouble, but its absence would mean even greater trouble: total catastrophe.

Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (85)

Combining a Lacanian treatment of the symptom with the process of what Agamben calls “profanation” will allow us to recuperate some of the transformative potential of subcultures. Before undertaking this work later in the chapter, I want to emphasize the role played by subcultures in bridging the generational gap produced by the shift from Fordism to neoliberalism. Identifying subcultures as “Biopolitical Cultural Apparatuses” allows us to register the way in which these formations, despite their sometimes radical rhetoric, work to socialize subjects into the individualized, entrepreneurial modes of subjectivity demanded by contemporary market societies. Only by confronting subcultures’ complicity in, or cooptation by, the cultural dominant can we move on to frame a theory that can recognize the desire for potentially alternative modes of sociality informing subcultural production.

In Love with the System: Bridging the Generation Gap while Reproducing the Labour Force

If we accept the thesis that capital is pressing up against a certain global limit and must thus turn “inward,” intensifying its colonization of First-World bodies alongside (though often in

different ways from) the colonial subjects who came under its sway in the mercantile phase of development, and if this movement produces a certain sense of claustrophobia symptomatically expressed in films like those examined in the last chapter, then subcultural production has developed into one of the strategies by which subjects attempt to navigate this contradictory situation. Hebdige's contested thesis regarding incorporation appears in this model as one of the means by which postmodern capital pushes the commodity form into new fissures of the social fabric, wresting profit from a subcultural production that starts to appear as merely an outsourced form of research and development for the fashion and accessory industry. But subcultural dissent, appropriation, and reinvention play another important role beyond conveniently supplying new trends for commoditization, and this has to do with the crucial issue of how to reproduce a labour force in a period of hastened technological and social change.

Writing in the wake of the Paris student uprisings in 1968, Louis Althusser coined the term Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) to designate those cultural and institutional structures such as family, church, school and media that play a crucial role in reproducing the social relations necessary to a given mode of production. Althusser posited the ISAs as an answer to the question of how capitalism reproduces the labour force, arguing in a Gramscian vein that cultural institutions play a decisive role in producing the kinds of docile, productive bodies needed for capitalist relations of exploitation (Althusser 209). Often overlooked in discussions of Althusser's theory is the manner in which ISAs, rather than being exclusively sites of domination and control, are actually *sites of contestation* where the continuity of social relations has the

potential to be *disrupted* as well as perpetuated. Toward the end of the essay in which he introduces the idea of ISAs, Althusser asserts that

the ISAs are not the realization of ideology in general, nor even the conflict-free realization of the ideology of the ruling class...It is by the installation of the ISAs in which this ideology is realized and realizes itself that it becomes the ruling ideology. But this installation is not achieved all by itself; on the contrary, *it is the stake in a very bitter and continuous class struggle*: first against the former ruling classes and their positions in the old and new ISAs, then against the exploited class. (221 emphasis added)

Strongly echoing a Gramscian vision of sustained struggle for position within the cultural and political realm, Althusser's formulation reveals the emergent ruling class contender to be engaged on two fronts: it must establish its ascendancy over an older ruling class (and the ISAs associated with them) *and* impress its dominance on the new constellation of the subordinate class (whose ranks might now be joined by certain factions of the supplanted rulers, should the emergent class prove successful).²⁷ As in Gramsci's vision, the realms of culture, philosophy, law and education that were relegated to a merely superstructural status in earlier Marxism, in Althusser, given a much more central role as the fields of contestation over which political battles are fought. Althusser justifies this shift in emphasis in a footnote to his essay:

The class struggle is thus expressed and exercised in ideological forms, thus also in the ideological form of the ISAs. But the class struggle *extends far beyond* [emphasis orig.] these forms, and it is because it extends beyond them that *the struggle of the exploited*

²⁷ An aligning of the formerly ascendant class with the newly subjugated class helps explain the reliance of punk culture on signifiers gleaned from the old European aristocracy. The cultural genealogy that delivers such accoutrements as double-breasted blazers, ruffs and breeches into the punk culture of the seventies and eighties can be traced through early, proto-punk films and TV shows such as *Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *The Prisoner* television series (1967-68), as well as the magpie style of the various glam rock bands of the seventies. For a cinematic illustration of the aristocratic type joining ranks with the subculture, see Jack Nicholson's character from *Easy Rider* (1969). This being said, *Easy Rider's* George Hanson certainly constitutes a minority type within the elite class, and punk's adoption of aristocratic fashion is permeated with ironic mockery.

classes may also be exercised in the forms of the ISAs, and thus turn the weapons of ideology against the classes in power. (fn.8, p.221 emphasis added)

Having witnessed first hand the Parisian social uprisings of 1968, Althusser saw the struggle of students, workers, ethnic minorities and women to change the parameters of the educational institutions as a battle over lived forms of ideology that could have a redounding impact on the economic infrastructure itself. Due to the central role played by the ISAs in reproducing the relations of production, “the class struggles in the ISAs is only one aspect of a class struggle which goes beyond the ISAs” (221). At the moment of Althusser's writing, the new student and social movements we seen by many on the European left as the vanguards of a societal change that could possibly overthrow the capitalist system. As it turns out, struggles for the rights of racial minorities, youth and women did have a determinative effect that led to significantly improved situations for some of the subjects involved, but these victories were countered by a larger shift in the capitalist mode of production itself—the change to more flexible forms of exploitation and accumulation that, forty years later, has resulted in a major loss of the kinds of political and social spaces of democratic engagement that the generation of 1968 fought to secure. With the steady erosion, under neoliberal restructuring, of the ISAs as sites of political contestation, the political struggle has shifted to include the de-institutionalized terrain of culture—such venues as mass media and subculture— as new battlegrounds for the challenging

and reproducing of values.²⁸ But subcultures in particular, though often adopting positions of resistance, can also provide an important supplement to the ISAs as sites for the *reproduction* of capitalist relations under the more flexible modes of production and consumption offered in advanced consumer societies.

From Enclosure Strategies to the Societies of Control: Biopolitical Cultural Apparatuses

The ISAs designate sites of enclosure—institutional practices and spaces that have fixed spatial boundaries, usually within physical structures such as housing, school, church, hospital, factory, or workplace. The countercultural struggles of the sixties can be seen as so many revolts against these institutional enclosures, as attempts to make them more open, diverse and accommodating of human difference. If, however, the counterculture believed that the biopolitical technocracy Roszak names could be fought by individualized attempts to transcend institutional and social limits, then what Gilles Deleuze calls the modern “societies of control” operate by virtue of the very kinds of permissive, networked and open structures that the counterculture fought to establish (“Postscript”). Via a host of cultural technologies—what Agamben follows Foucault in naming “apparatuses” (*dispositifs*)—modern, biopolitical capitalism is able to address the call for a more permissive and (to adopt Herbert Marcuse's term) “libidinal” society while still keeping the fundamental structures of capitalist appropriation and

²⁸ The pedagogical role played by culture in the neoliberal regime has been a key focus of the work of Henry A. Giroux. See, for instance, *The Terror of Neoliberalism* (2004) pp. 110-15, and his book on film, *Breaking into the Movies: Film and the Culture of Politics* (2002) for two treatments of this theme from this author's prolific output.

exploitation intact.²⁹ The struggles that began at the level of Althusser's ISAs in such venues as higher education have migrated from institutional enclosures to the dis-enclosure of the larger cultural realm. Here, appliances like televisions, radios, and later, cell phones emerge as instruments of social control as important as the sequestering and disciplinary apparatuses of schools, prisons or factories. Subcultures also forcefully emerge at this juncture as focal points for dissenting energies, disrupting structures of family, school, work, religion, and offering alternative identifications that socialize individuals under a sign of difference. With the shift from a repressive model of technocratic society to the permissive societies of control, a top-down model of social domination illustrated by Althusser's ISAs, where the subject is given a modicum of freedom only so long as she immediately “gives it back” in support of the ruling order, is replaced by a bottom-up system, where the subject is allowed to indulge in antisocial and rebellious fantasies so long as these can be ultimately redirected toward secret complicity with the system as given.

If one tendency of the emergent societies of control is a shift in emphasis from state to market mechanisms in the reproduction of capitalist social relations, this does not mean that the older ISAs cease to function; they merely function differently, training subjects for different roles than before. To this end, schools are restructured to behave more like businesses rather than

²⁹ In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse's vision of the permissive society (138-143) calls for a new division of labour, and a shortening of the working day such that “[t]he body in its entirety would become an object of cathexis, a thing to be enjoyed—an instrument of pleasure” (184). Western biopolitical capitalism seems to have largely achieved this while maintaining global conditions of uneven development, deepening exploitation, and increased environmental devastation. The question posed by the contemporary context is whether we can preserve this vision of libidinous society while also addressing issues of social justice and environmental preservation. In other words: can we unite the critiques of *domination* and *exploitation* into a single vision of social transformation?

the privileged “space apart” where future political and business leaders might get a chance to “find their feet.” To this extent, students in the modern university with its higher enrolment and lower entrance standards are subject to a form of “bait and switch”: rather than extending the privilege that the university used to offer to a greater number of people, the institution is being restructured to remove its autonomous position altogether. If higher education no longer provides the same envelope of freedom from necessity it once offered, then the cultural/subcultural realm is one site to which people repair to find a space of relative freedom and agency. But these cultural apparatuses contain their own, hidden forms of coercion and rationality. For a “free” subject to consent to being subjugated, he or she must be made to feel the heroic victor in some capacity; old, repressive notions must be seen as overcome and defeated if social control is to be renewed and reinvigorated in service of postmodern capitalism. In the earlier Fordist model, the battle over social reproduction was fought in the territory of the state apparatuses themselves, with the May '68 movements for educational reform serving as the high water mark of these struggles. But at just this point, the terrain begins its shift to the cultural realm, to the struggle for greater enfranchisement and recognition on the part of oppressed factions and minorities, and by the various “tribes” of the subcultural proliferation. In subcultural formations—and here we might expand the category to include such groups as queer and other identitarian communities, whose inner dynamics reveal similar structures of negotiation with the parent culture—the ideology being challenged is that which supported the old “certainties” of the Fordist model: family, class, corporation, church are all overturned, yet the fundamental structure of capitalist

exploitation holds. What we witness, in effect, is the shift from the older enclosure structures that Deleuze followed Foucault in naming the “disciplinary societies” to the newer, more open, fluid and malleable structures of the “biopolitical societies of control.”³⁰ But if this is the case, and subcultures are integral to the transitioning between these two formations, then a new terminology is needed for describing how subcultures work ideologically to effect this inter-generational shift, and to perpetuate the values of capitalist production in the more volatile and uncertain terrain produced by neoliberalism.

I propose the term *Biopolitical Control Apparatuses* (BCAs) to designate the cultural formations that augment, and in some cases replace, the ISAs in our current era of transition to biopolitical capitalism. The BCA is a useful category because it allows us to theorize the continued relevance of ideology, even after ideology seems to have stopped functioning as such. Working organically “from below,” the BCA comprises the existentially lived social fabric of ideology in its most hegemonic form, where control is experienced as freedom and even “rebellion.” The BCAs supplement the ISAs (and also the repressive state mechanisms or RSAs, such as the police and armies), but the link between the two levels of state and market control are not explicit: politics becomes increasingly a matter of personal taste and choice (“voting with your wallet,” “green consumerism,” subcultural subversion through style, etc.), while the apparatuses of state power that support and structure the cultural field are relegated to a background position (from which camouflage they can operate all the more effectively, evading

³⁰ See Hardt and Negri, *Empire* 22-27; Deleuze “Postscript”.

scrutiny and contestation). However, just as Althusser saw the ISAs as a potential site of struggle and revolution, the BCAs also offer a venue that does more than perpetuate the cultural dominant while giving its subjects an invigorating but ultimately harmless “simulacra” experience of agency. BCAs also constitute the ground for political struggle, for a Gramscian “war of manoeuvre” that can lay the groundwork for substantial economic and political change (Gramsci 194-96).

Diabolical Logics: Apparatuses, Agamben and a Profane Spirit of Rebellion

The change in emphasis from the ISAs to the BCEs in the neoliberal era constitute a cultural shift regarding the dynamic between obedience and transgression. We could describe Althusser's model of the role played by agency within the ISAs according to a Biblical paradigm: just as Adam and Eve enjoy the freedom of the garden so long as they obey God's injunctions, under the ISAs free will is bestowed upon subjects only on the condition that it is immediately deployed towards its own negation, producing good, docile subjects. The role of agency within the BCAs, on the other hand, follows a more subversive and specifically Protestant and Miltonic model of Satanic rebellion. In William Blake's contra-textual reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the rebellious Satan is recognized as a Promethean and revolutionary figure who only appears evil from the vantage of the conservative forces of the given order that resist creative change. This trope of satanic rebellion is echoed in the various articulations made by cultural theorists of the subcultural figure, from the revolutionary students of May '68, to punk rockers appropriating

the dominant culture to their own ends, to the figure of the skateboarder challenging the status quo of private property and instrumentalized social space. Blake offers us a poetic model for championing the figures of progressive politics who are cast as “monstrous” by the conservative tendencies of the dominant order.³¹ But, as Blake points out in his opening Argument to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, these progressive characterizations continually risk being undermined by the conservative forces, a vision that turns incorporation/gentrification into a cosmological principle:

Once meek, and in a perilous path,
The just man kept his course along
The vale of death
Roses are planted where thorns grow,
And on the barren heath
Sing the honey bees.

Then the perilous path was planted,
And a river and spring on every tomb,
And on the bleached bones
Red clay brought forth;

Till the villain left the paths of ease,
To walk in perilous paths, and drive
The just man into barren climes. (179)

Blake here outlines the cycle of incorporation inherent in Milton’s theology: while the dissenting individual or group may heroically accept its subaltern position, choosing to “reign in Hell than serve in Heaven” (Milton 44, line 264), the subaltern, creative faction is continually

³¹ Here we have a mythopoetic anticipation of Nietzsche’s philosophy of “perspectivism,” a position that is often mistaken for sheer relativism.

pursued by the conservative order, which eventually appropriates its innovative energies as its own. This vision finds echoes in the Marxian assertion of the working class as the truly generative element of society, the element that the ruling order vampirically feeds upon to support itself. We can also see this principle at work in the contemporary context of the Western shift to an ideas-driven economy of “immaterial labour”: bureaucratic administrators now shamelessly co-opt the language of “creativity,” “innovation” and “culture,” while popular discourse champions the maverick “game changer” in such figures as Steve Jobs.

Blake detected the early origins of this championing of creativity in Milton’s Protestant theology, and re-articulated its logic in a way that supports a revolutionary, subaltern politics. In contrast, the Miltonic vision of Satanic rebellion that ultimately works, despite itself and through the mystery of Divine Grace, to reaffirm the dominant, divine order, provides a capitalist-theological myth, the secular equivalent of which is Adam Smith's doctrine of the *invisible hand*. In Smith's famous metaphor for what is depicted as the ultimately benevolent workings of a market system based solely on the pursuit of individual interest, each individual following his or her own selfish impulses nevertheless unintentionally contributes to the benefit of the whole society through the generation of a surplus of wealth that is thought to “trickle down” even to less ambitious or “successful” subjects (Smith IV.2.9). Through the work of eighteenth century ideologues like Smith, human greed, which for the first sixteen centuries of Christendom was one of the seven deadly sins, is revalued to become the engine at the heart of socio-economic prosperity and growth. The BCAs that I theorize as providing the cultural complement to the

ISAs thus trace their genealogy back to the Scottish enlightenment, where Protestant theology paved the way for an emergent capitalist ideology that found its lived experience in the emphasis on commerce and commodity fetishism as the primary structuring forces of social relations. Just as, in Protestant theology, the mystery of Divine Grace moving through the world makes good emerge out of the fallenness of human nature (the Calvinist doctrine that faith, not works, is the engine of salvation), so too in Smith's economic theory does the “invisible hand” allow for collective prosperity to magically emerge from each individual pursuing his own limited self-interest. In this transcription of religious into secular ideology, God becomes “the market” and Grace becomes the machinations of the “invisible hand,” while the Holy Spirit becomes something like greed itself.³² This theological-economic revolution provides us with an origin point for a better understanding of what Agamben follows Benjamin in describing as the religious dimensions of the “cult of capitalism” (*Profanities* 82-7).

So how are we to counter an infernal machine that would turn freedom into servitude and resistance into reaffirmation of the (only seemingly) broken totality? It is here that Agamben's project of delineating what he calls the “theological genealogy of economy” offers help (*What Is* 8). Agamben follows Benjamin's depiction of capitalism as a religious cult by arguing that capitalism in general—and particularly in its current, postmodern form—produces a

³² LiPuma and Lee point out that the French philosopher Jean Hyppolite was the first to discern the link between Smith's “invisible hand” and Hegel's cunning of reason as “a dialectic that opposes the aims that the individual sets up and the ends achieved.” (“Cultures” 198). Following Hegel, Marx's idea of commodity fetishism describes the means by which the “objective” or macro, “third person” vision of society is installed within a micro “first-person dialectical model of social totality” (ibid). This genealogy links the religious cult of capitalism with a vision of social totality grounded in “the market” and phenomenologically experienced at the level of commodity culture: under capitalism, commodities are experienced as our primary way of relating to a larger social collectivity.

schizophrenic separation between *being* and *acting*. For Agamben, this fissure between what we *are* and what we *do* has its Western roots in the Christian theological doctrine of the Trinity, but manifests in contemporary society in the disorienting and depoliticizing proliferation of apparatuses (*dispositifs*). Using the term in an even wider sense than Althusser or Foucault does, Agamben describes an apparatus as,

anything that has the ability to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confessions, factories, disciplines, juridical measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture, cigarettes, navigations, computers, cellular telephones and—why not—language itself, which is perhaps the most ancient of apparatuses—one in which thousands and thousands of years ago a primate inadvertently let himself be captured, probably without realizing the consequences he was about to face. (14)

The apparatus in Agamben's formulation thus encompasses all of civilization itself, with culture seen in a particularly adversarial way as locked in a “relentless fight” with “living beings,” the result of which ceaseless struggles are “subjects” themselves (*ibid.*)³³ Each apparatus produces an attendant subjectification, separating the living being from itself in the same way that the Trinitarian mystery introduces separation (between transcendent *being* and worldly *doing*) into the godhead. To Agamben's analysis, I would add that precisely this fact of separation is covered over by both the Trinitarian doctrine (God is “three in one”) and Smith's “invisible hand” (social

³³ We might note Agamben's use of the masculine pronoun here, evoking a mythic scene in which some distant *male* relative of homo sapiens first discovers *himself* entrapped in the web of representation and meaning—a gendered fantasy that evokes the Edenic drama of Genesis, and that constitutes language itself as somehow female, and a temptation.

fragmentation via the market is what actually ensures the integrity of the whole through competition and the generation of surplus). We are thus faced, in both the religious and economic realms, with a theological-ideological construction that simultaneously registers and conceals the unrepresentable Reality of class conflict.

However, the discourse of class is largely absent from Agamben's theological-genealogy of capitalism. Instead we have his doctrine of separation *within the subject*, a divide which is generalized and made to extend to the roots of Western culture in classical antiquity. To this extent, Agamben makes a move similar to that of Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where they break with a Marxian analysis linking cultural formations to the historical realities of political economy and instead diagnose the ills of modernity as the culmination of a tendency to domination already evident in the Homeric epics of ancient Greece (23-29 & “Excursus I”). While these moves could be critiqued for ignoring Jameson’s materialist imperative to “always historicize,” Agamben provides insight into the ways social hierarchy has been reinforced by foundational Western structures that run through the various historical modes of production as a common strategy, even while the specific form this tendency takes in particular historical periods might differ. When Agamben simultaneously argues that the camp is the “hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity” (*Homo* 123) and that the spatial exclusion that isolates bare life as the anchor of sovereign power has its roots in classical antiquity, he would seem to be making a de-historicizing move that rejects the specificity of capitalism as a unique mode of exploitation and domination. Indeed, Agamben's call for a form

of politics that *does not* reify itself via bare life has led many Marxian and post-Marxian authors (who would call, instead, for a definitive shift in economic forms) to reject his analysis as Messianic—that is to say, as depicting a totalizing system from which only the miraculous intervention of God can save us.³⁴ However, given the biopolitical atrocities enacted by the major historical examples of state socialism to appear in modernity, Marxian analysis might pay greater heed to Agamben's warning, and consider what a form of politics *not* grounded in the production of bare life might actually look like. To this end, one can trace a history of the transformation of political and economic systems while keeping the production of bare life (or more precisely, the *separation* between fully human and less-than-human life) a constant factor. What has changed in the shift from classical antiquity's use of slave labour, through the recess of the Middle ages (where bare life was both generalized and challenged via feudalism and Christianity), through to the rise of capitalism is not the fact of power's grounding itself via the production of a vulnerable Other—this has remained a constant; what has changed are the historical forms by which power produces and manages that exploited/dominated Other. Recall Marx's insight from Part One of *Capital* that the ancient Greeks never arrived at a generalized concept of the value of goods because they employed slave labour, and so naturalized a relation of inequality between the labour power of different kinds of humans (152). Slaves, as well as women and children in antiquity were something very close to a bare life that could be killed or

³⁴ For example of recent critiques of Agamben see Jameson (*Representing* 125); Hardt and Negri (*Commonwealth* 57-8); Rancière (*Aesthetics* 119-20).

exploited with impunity. In modern times, the commodity form both generalizes value (making disparate goods comparable to each other in an abstracted form) but also supplies the basis for an abstract human equality when labour itself becomes one commodity among many (ibid). In this situation, bare life as the subject/substance who/that can be disposed of with impunity is captured in the commodity form as the substance of labour power. In being so caught, however, the worker also enjoys certain protections: ideally, if not in actual practice, the employer buys the worker's labour for a certain time but cannot utilize it in a way that harms the labourer herself.³⁵ Viewed from the perspective of changes in a social formation's orientation toward bare life, the emergence of capitalism (where bare life, in the form of labour power, becomes one commodity amongst others) and the discourse of human rights (where all humans are equal on the basis of their mere birth) are parallel developments, each intrinsically linked to, and reinforcing the other. In this way, the very system that installs exploitation as a normalized aspect of social relations also guarantees a minimum of protection from this exploitation; bare life is protected, but only insofar as it is useful—that is, employable. Beyond this usefulness lies a bare life that plays its age-old role of anchoring the system in the figure of an excluded other, though, as we shall see in Chapter 3 and the example of extreme sports, this exceptional figure can appear in new disguises

³⁵ When describing how bare life, or *bios*, is captured by commodity culture in the form of abstract labour it is difficult to settle upon whether to use the personal or impersonal pronoun. This is because bare life is itself conceived of as somewhere between substance and subject: not fully human, it is nevertheless not *not* human either, an ambiguity that points towards the central problem that Agamben identifies when he examines the historically shifting point at which this division is made (*The Open*, ch.9). Marx's early articulation of alienation in the *Philosophic-Economic Manuscripts* touches upon this division, but his abandonment of the category in favour of "exploitation" in later works leaves exploration of what Agamben calls the "anthropological machine" (the mechanism dividing human from animal life) largely unexplored.

in the context of advanced capitalism.³⁶

The abolition of slavery and the generalization of the commodity form requires that governments utilize a different strategy for the isolation of a life that is thoroughly devoid of protection, a strategy Foucault identifies with the exclusionary practices of racism (*Society* 258-62). But the reconfiguration of capitalism via contemporary globalization has shifted the field again, relegating much physical labour to countries where workers, bereft of the protections fought for (and now steadily eroding) in Western production, are again reduced to an ultimately disposable subject. At the same time, the neoliberal-biopolitical structures of modern, Western societies have extended precariousness beyond the racialized subjects identified by Foucault to include a growing host of new candidates: the homeless, refugees, the unemployed, the sick, political dissidents, victims of environmental degradation, and so on. The economic revolution that has made this shift possible is described by LiPuma and Lee as the move from commodity production to risk management as the dominant vehicle for the production of surplus profits on a global scale (203-206). The global commoditization of risk through such mechanisms as derivatives and hedges has transformed the world economy into a kind of digital shell game that can manage and profit from the production of bare life. In Chapter Three we shall see how bare life, in the context of risk-oriented society, assume new and desirable forms that compensate for

³⁶ Contemporary globalization has rendered workers in the Global South akin to bare life by circumventing the protections struggled for by workers in the West. At the same time, Westerners are increasingly exposed to the threat of becoming bare life by the insecurity of work, mounting debt, the dismantling of socialized protections, and the degeneration of our shared environments. As I will argue in the next chapter, it is this increasing precariousness faced by Western subjects under neoliberal restructuring that makes co-opted forms of subcultural activity, such as extreme sports, appealing.

the way in which everyday life itself is increasingly rendered precarious through its being implicated in the circuits of risk management. Given this development, Agamben's call for a form of governance that does not ground itself in the production of bare life is now more pertinent than ever, and it is not a *deus ex machina* that will save us from this system (a position that Agamben does not assert, at any rate), but rather a deep critique and reformation of the economic and cultural fields. Far from offering a de-historicized, “Messianic” analysis of our current predicament, Agamben's work translates the lived reality of biopolitical exploitation and alienation into the formalized language of philosophy, providing a grammar for resistance within the realm of everyday, lived experience. It is at this phenomenological level, as well, that the BCAs operate, and it is here that Agamben's analysis is useful for constructing a theory of resistance that addresses both the cultural and economic registers.

Stubbornly Resistant: The Ungovernable Commons

According to Agamben, the separation (between being and action) in the human subject allows for breaking the immediate and reactive relationship to the environment exhibited by non-human animals, allowing for the possibility of linguistic communication and aesthetic relationships with the world, and for forms of governance that are based on consent rather than force (*What Is* 15-19). This work of separation is at the heart of the collection of institutions, practices and cultural objects that he calls “apparatuses.” However, Agamben points out that apparatuses, in producing semi-autonomous subjects as a form of governance, always

presuppose a prior *de-subjectification*, a dissolution of identity that allows for a new subject to be hailed or constituted. Agamben characterizes modern capitalism by two defining traits that he interprets as initiating a potentially disastrous trajectory. The first is an unprecedented proliferation of apparatuses so that “today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modelled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus”: here we have an equivalent of Marx's “total subsumption” of social relations under capital (15). Related to this, the second characteristic is an apparent breakdown of the process of re-subjectification itself whereby the initial phase of de-subjectification is *not* followed by the re-composition of a new subject “except in larval or, as it were, spectral form” (21). Rampant proliferation of apparatuses has delivered us to the postmodern condition (the same condition strategically embraced by hipster culture) in which we confront one another from behind a spectacular array of masks, any of which may be adopted or discarded at will, but none of which is assumed to reveal the “true” lineaments of a stable identity—a category which has seemed to disappear into the living dead state of Baudrillard's simulacra or Derrida's hauntology.³⁷ Hidden within this larval, spectral self—the representation of which presents a formal problem to which the popular figure of the undead zombie seems to offer one provocative solution—is an “elusive element” (similar, again, to Derrida's spectre or Scott Durham's “metamorphic powers of the false” [15]) that “seems to escape [governmentality's] grasp the more it docilely submits to it” (23). What Agamben enigmatically goes on to name “the Ungovernable” focuses all the hope to be found in his essay

³⁷ See, Baudrillard “The Precession of Simulacra” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, and Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* (10, 63, Ch.4).

for regeneration and escape from political, social and ecological catastrophe. However, the logic of resistance through concession, of carving out an illicit space of agency within an effectively totalizing structure, is the tactic by which I have characterized the apparent “selling out” of hipster culture. It also lies at the heart of a model of resistance advanced by Eric Cazdyn, for whom the state of being “already dead,” or left for dead by society before the fact of actual bodily death, paradoxically provides a space of freedom and agency that has the potential to swell into unexpectedly global conditions for change (*Already* 8-11). Indeed, the tactics of “semiotic guerrilla warfare” by which Hebdige characterized subcultural politics offers another iteration of this principle, whereby acts of political or social defiance masquerade as fashion, fad or (as in the case of hipsterism) frivolity.

This oblique form of political action delivers us to Agamben's call for “profanation” or returning to common use those elements that are made separate in the sacrificial processes effected by apparatuses (*What is* 17-19). Arguing “In Praise of Profanation,” Agamben develops his idea of capitalism as a perfection of the mechanism, initiated by religion, of separating people, ideas and things from common use and placing them in an inaccessible realm. Capitalism as a religion “realizes the pure form of separation” (81) where not even a residue of commonality or use value remains in goods touched by the commodity form.³⁸ Agamben follows Debord in seeing spectacular capitalism as a form of “separation perfected”—that is, of producing a form of

³⁸ Agamben presents a genealogy of the notion of consumption that traces it back to the thirteenth century disputes of the Roman Curia with the Franciscan order, where it was argued that use itself vanishes at the moment of its fulfillment in consumption, and so is actually an impossible attribute (82-3).

separation within and between subjects that is “absolutely unprofanable” (82).

A similar mechanism is at work in an industry-driven skateboarding tourism where Western skateboard companies searching out new terrains for video and magazine coverage form an instrumental and ultimately destructive relationship with the spaces upon which local skateboard scenes depend. As Tim Sedo points out in his analysis of Chinese skateboard culture, the quest for new spots by Western skateboarders, and especially by the popular skateboard magazines that often include “travel” sections featuring a team of professionals in distant locales,

has developed [into] an almost colonial relationship and writing style in which the American core looks to the Chinese periphery as a new land of abundant raw resources (spots), which can be utilized by travelling pros to advance their careers where it really matters—back in the American skateboard core. (275)

Sedo describes how the increased skateboard traffic that ensues when a spot becomes internationally popular is often detrimental to the local skateboard scene, as the spot quickly becomes “blown out” by over use: either it becomes too damaged to skate, or the increased usage draws the attention of authorities, who more tightly police the space. At the same time, the magazine and video coverage produced tends to focus on the American professionals and almost entirely ignores the local skate scene that it simultaneously undermines (273-75).³⁹ Skateboard tourism and media coverage make certain cities, like Barcelona, Japan or Shanghai *sacred* in Agamben’s special use of the term: it removes these spots from common use, appropriating the value that local skaters have invested in their terrains and damaging the community that formed

³⁹ Skateboard travel stories will often name one or two locals who act as guides, leading the Western skaters to the local spots. As often the sole representatives of the local skateboard scene to appear in these articles, these “native informants” reinforce Sedo’s colonial metaphor.

around them (while at the same time consolidating its own power through this abusive relationship). In a move that he describes as a “non-heroic” approach to the subculture, Sedo tries to counteract this sacralizing tendency in skateboard culture by deemphasizing the rebellious, countercultural position of skate culture—a position usually theorized in terms of spatial resistance—and focusing instead on “the relationships between community formation and the often organic sense of ownership it engenders” (261). Though other post-subcultural critiques of skateboard culture have focused upon media representations made by the skateboard industry (cf. Dinces 1515-28), there remains what we could call a *profane spirit* grounded in practical, local activity and just this “organic sense of ownership” that Sedo highlights in his description of the struggle faced by Chinese skateboarders. This common culture produced by the lived experience of skateboarders is often overlooked in critiques that highlight skateboarding’s complicity with postmodern commodity culture. The manner in which skateboarding as an embodied practice profanes those spaces made sacred by the cult of capital, supplying the foundation for a community of users who are linked by shared histories and experiences will supply a guiding principle for the case study of Beasley Skateboard Park in Hamilton, Ontario in Chapter 6.

Though Agamben's theory is centrally engaged with re-asserting common uses, absent are references to class formations, surplus value, the division of labour and other key coordinates of a Marxian politic for addressing exploitation. Instead, Agamben offers a sweeping genealogical account positing spectacular capitalism as the most recent (and possibly terminal)

movement in a theological history, the scope and urgency of which has been critiqued by recent theorists for being overly apocalyptic and disempowering.⁴⁰ But as an analytical tool for diagnosing the political and social dynamics at the level of lived experience, Agamben offers a nuanced, forcefully argued account of a historical moment that *is* characterized by a certain political paralysis and desubjectification. The proliferation of popular narratives of a dehumanizing, viral epidemic that brings about complete breakdown of the social order—the various, popular manifestations of what I call the “zombie imaginary”—are symptomatic of the pandemic desubjectification described by Agamben (Orpana “The Law,” and *supra* 182-86). Agamben’s political category of “ungovernability” is a defining characteristic of the zombie horde itself, which offers a form of abject, gnawing resistance to whatever of the bourgeois order remains intact long enough to provide the dramatic arc of these narratives. Thus, the solution Agamben offers to counter the mounting crisis of postmodernity, while it lacks the macrocosmic sweep and revolutionary fervour of a theory of the multitude, is yet compatible with collectivist politics. Agamben's analysis points toward concrete, practical measures that can be taken to effect “the profanation of the unprofanable,” a project that he defines as “the political task of the coming generation” (92). Specifically, his nuanced idea of *play* offers a form of political activity that is in keeping with some of the theories of subcultural production that we have examined so far, while also extending these tactics to a wider sphere than that delimited by the various subcultural constellations.

⁴⁰ For examples see, Jameson (*Representing* 125); Hardt and Negri (*Commonwealth* 57-8); Rancière (*Aesthetics* 119-20), Butler “Bodies.”

Adding to the poststructural critiques of Marx's idea of use value,⁴¹ Agamben argues that profanation does more than abolish the separation effected by the commodity fetish, thus restoring a form of original, “uncontaminated” use that purportedly existed prior to market distortions. “For to profane means not simply to abolish and erase separations *but to learn to put them to a new use, to play with them*” (*Profanation* 85-87 my emphasis). He goes on to describe how the “deactivation” of separation effected by play might be applied to the Marxian problematic of class itself:

The classless society is not a society that has abolished and lost all memory of class differences, but a society that has learned to deactivate the apparatuses of those differences in order to make a new use possible, in order to transform them into pure means. (87)

Here the spectre of the classless society makes a startling appearance, not as some Edenic paradise waiting for us at the end of history, but as an ongoing project that recognizes class differences only in order to “deactivate” them. Classless society, in this vision, is established in the very midst of the divisions that rend society, through playful practices that at least momentarily negate the laws of instrumental rationality governing modern life. While this carnivalesque disruption of hierarchies does not necessarily address the structural, economic inequalities of class, and might even help reinforce them by offering a “safety valve” for social tensions, it can also extend forms of privilege and agency to subjects who might otherwise have a lesser share of these social goods. This appropriation of social distinction by previously excluded subjects, in turn, has the potential to lead to improved material circumstances when

⁴¹ For further critique of Marx's use value see: Baudrillard, *Critique*, 131-142; Derrida, *Spectres*, 200-205.

these subjects forcibly assert their claim to a decent portion of our collective wealth.

We can see how subcultures can play an important role in this project. Defined by obscure codes and practices that interpellate subjects as belonging to this or that exclusionary group, subcultures mimic and exploit the ultimately arbitrary nature of class distinction. At the same time, despite the hierarchies that exist within and between subcultures, in the context of postmodern consumer society all subcultures are in a sense equal insofar as they are comprised of idiosyncratic and personal investments. A subculture is the collective expression of this or that particular “thing” that a given subject is “in to” and as such, the practices of “bronies” (men who collect My Little Pony toys), goths, skateboarders or libertarian swingers are equally “deviant” expressions of a *jouissance* that resides beyond critique in our permissive, liberal democratic context. Žižek illustrates a similar point when he describes the classless society of the communism-to-come as an arrangement in which each person would be free to pursue his or her own private variety of stupidity (*Marx Reloaded*). The problem with subcultural production is that, while it might anticipate a world in which true, idiotic freedom is equally distributed, the fact that subcultures exist within an overarching economic field that systematically attempts to re-colonize and rationalize these freedoms has the effect of continually threatening to undermine their functioning in this regard.

If profanation is the process by which collective culture and resources are removed from the forms of separation and exclusion that makes them “sacred,” then the playful appropriations and innovations of subcultures, though enacted within privatized, exclusionary circles of

“insiders,” nevertheless exhibit nascent forms of a coming communism, giving subjects crucial glimpses of what such a collective situation might be like. Agamben registers the postmodern cooptation of play and profanation by what I have called the BCAs when he states that “[i]n its extreme phase, capitalism is nothing but a gigantic apparatus for capturing pure means, that is, profanatory behaviours” (87). His two examples of this are advertising and pornography, where the playful celebration of pure means in language and sex respectively are “in turn separated into a special sphere” (88-92). The postmodern strategy of separation enthusiastically embraces the profane “pure means” that advocates of social revolution in the sixties and seventies, from Herbert Marcuse to Hugh Hefner, fought for under the banner of the “libidinous society.” But rather than denying play, the newly permissive control structures freeze or suspend play, blocking the final generalization of pure means into a new and more encompassing use (88). Agamben thus describes the very process of “control from below” that earlier theorists of subculture grappled with under the name of co-optation, and that the post-subculture critiques try to dismiss as the mistaken appropriation of political categories to describe “merely cultural” phenomena.⁴²

No Fixed Place: from Counterculture to Subcultures

If the counterculture of the sixties was a largely middle-class phenomenon seeking to reinvent society starting with individual consciousness, subcultures emerged as the “poor kid's

⁴² For a critique of the firm division between the political and cultural, see Butler “Merely Cultural.”

counterculture,” as the attempt by those without the means to “drop out” and wander Asia or Ashbury to seek more circumscribed and temporary refuges from the social tensions and disenfranchisements that beset them.⁴³ Hebdige argues as much in a footnote to *Subculture*, where he follows earlier Birmingham studies that characterized countercultures as offering explicitly political and ideological opposition to the dominant culture, as well as supplying alternative institutional structures, such as the underground press, open-universities, or co-operatives (148). In Hebdige's short aside, counterculture emerges as the more global concept, covering the entirety of one's life and social engagement, whereas subcultures are characterized as more exclusionary and compartmentalized, maintaining rigorous divisions between “work, family, school and leisure” (ibid).⁴⁴ Unlike the explicit opposition of the counterculture, the “muted” revolt of subcultures requires political decoding. They also signal the failure of the attempts at overall social transformation aimed at by the counterculture, insofar as society was only made anew for certain kinds of subjects. In the Birmingham formulation, then, subcultures are an attempt, on the part of youth of less advantage, to surreptitiously participate in the kind of re-imaginings of social realities that sixties counterculture more blatantly exercised. An essay by Phil Cohen in the early seventies provides much of the groundwork for the later Birmingham

⁴³ *Making the Scene*, Stuart Henderson's insightful and carefully documented history of the counterculture of Toronto's Yorkville in the sixties challenges the popular notion of the hippie movement as monolithically composed by white, middle-class youth. Henderson treats four “principle identity categories” as making up the Yorkville counterculture: hippies (white, middle-class youth), greasers (working-class and ethnic youth), bikers and “weekenders” (suburban tourists) (11-13).

⁴⁴ Hebdige's footnote condenses a more detailed analysis of counter culture from the introduction of *Resistance through Rituals* (Clarke et.al. “Subcultures” 172-83). Since Hebdige's writing, the increasing commoditization and popularity of subcultural formations has further blurred the distinctions between subcultures and family, work, school and leisure. The cross-generational appeal of many subcultures in the years since Hebdige's writing has also contributed to this blurring.

work into subcultures as forms of symbolic mediation of contradictions inherent in the parent culture. Cohen's observations grew out of community work he did with youth in East London in the sixties and seventies, the heyday of Post-World War Two British working class subcultures such as the mods, skinheads, and suedes. He links the rise of these formations as responses by young, working-class, white men to familial pressures caused by the gentrification of working class neighbourhoods, the proliferation of tenements, the diminishing relevance of inter-generational forms of male mentorship, and the eclipse of industrial production by the service industry (50-57). In the midst of the dissolution of working class forms of social cohesion, a shift precipitated at the level of social space by urban redevelopment, Cohen argues that subcultural subjects displace familial tensions into the conflicting relationships between the various subcultural formations. With an industrial work force that was suffering an "emasculatation" similar to that being experienced in the transitioning "post-industrial" economies of North America today, young, British working-class men were forced to navigate between the rapid ghettoization of their familial situations and a new "suburban working-class elite" based in the service sectors and embracing the new practices of the emerging consumer capitalism (55). The acts of cultural bricolage by which youth fashioned their subcultural production were so many attempts to navigate these contradictions, with the mods adopting an upwardly mobile identification with the emergent consumer culture while the skinheads embraced stereotyped expressions of the embattled, industrial working class (57-58). Unable to reconcile the contradictory drives to break away from the parent culture and maintain identification with it,

subculture constitutes a kind of *passage à l'act* in which subjects translate irresolvable social tensions into a sense of community grounded in physical territoriality (59; 60-62). Cohen's analysis doesn't anticipate the steady generalization, from the seventies to the present, of subcultural formations in the form of various fringe cultures, urban "tribes," and other lifestyle categorizations. This proliferation indicates that the kind of disenfranchisement attributed to working-class youth by the Birmingham researchers has now become more widespread. At the same time, those who still enjoy privilege have adopted subcultural formations of their own, disguising and "immunizing" their advantage via an ersatz solidarity with the less fortunate. This scrambling of the terrain of subcultural formation, however, does not invalidate the insights of the Birmingham research so much as indicate the degree to which the Fordist mode of social stratification between working and middle classes has eroded with the hegemonic rise of the "post industrial" neoliberal economic model. Unlike the baby boomers, a generation that could expect stable, gainful employment options right out of college or university (for men, at least), middle-class youth now face the prospect of part-time, precarious labour extending well into their twenties, thirties and beyond. The mortgage debt from one's first home that baby boomers could hope to accumulate has been transformed into massive student debt incurred from post-secondary education that brings no guarantee of delivering upgraded job prospects, let alone one's own house. In this context, subculture plays a compensatory role as young people seek status and acceptance through practices that augment their cultural capital and provide both a

creative outlet and sense of community.⁴⁵

Given the increasingly precarious situation of contemporary youth, an upscale accessory such as the fixed-gear bicycle, or “fixie,” can be read according to the semiotic models developed by Cohen and Hebdige. Fixies are custom-built bicycles designed for track riding but used in the streets. Like a track bike, they are stripped down of all superfluous adornments to deliver a light, fast, aerodynamic ride. They have only one gear, and no coasting capability, requiring riders to peddle continuously. Fixies in their “pure” form also have no hand breaks: riders must control their speed by employing a variety of back wheel skids, and by exerting resistance on the pedals with their legs. Touring the roads on such a device produces an enhanced feeling of “being in the moment.” Without the easy braking options of regular bikes, riders must be more attentive to the surrounding traffic, to the rhythm of stoplights and vehicular flow, and to their own speed and bodies. The skid-stop requires a certain finesse, and riders develop their own particular style and techniques, leaving behind serpentine black skid marks on the road as testimony to their ability. Fixie riding thus has all the major attributes associated with subcultural production: it is a circumscribed group united by insider knowledge and practice; it focuses on a fetishized object that can be “read” properly only by other members of the group; it engages in a practice that is viewed with a certain alarm by an uncomprehending “mainstream;”

⁴⁵ This vision of the contemporary generalization of subculture brings us full circle, in a way, to the early work of the Chicago school, which characterized subculture as a response by disadvantaged subjects to the barriers they experienced in pursuit of the American dream of success. However, we must also remain true to the Birmingham school’s work, and recognize that in pursuing these alternatives, subjects often develop unexpected forms of solidarity, agency and freedom that can form the foundation for more sweeping social transformation. My thesis of subculture as symptom, articulated later in this chapter, theorizes this emancipatory dimension of subculture.

it is a leisure activity that acts as a site of the subject's “true” social and libidinal investment, offering a refuge from alienating spheres such as work, home and school. Adapting Cohen’s thesis, fixie culture provides a *substitute spatialization* that resolve the tensions—the shrinking spaces of agency and security—produced in the parent culture.

Reading fixie culture semiotically and psychoanalytically (as the expression of a backgrounded “political unconscious” in the Jamesonian sense), we can see how the subculture is a fitting allegorical response to the current climate of austerity and disenfranchisement. The stripped-down aesthetic of both the bikes and the riders themselves registers and responds to the lean economic situation faced by the current generation. Fuelled by cappuccinos and energy drinks, fixie riders both perform and respond to the anxious structure of feeling produced by economic austerity. In an accelerated social climate characterized by a restless hustle to make ends meet, fixie riding meets and exceeds the call to perpetual motion of the economic Darwinism underpinning neoliberal society. There is no coasting nor idle drifting, no “free ride” on a fixie bike: riders must work continually to propel themselves through the car-crowded streets. Even going downhill on a fixie is an “uphill” battle, as the rider must work *against* the forward motion of the bike to prevent speeding out of control. The bikes are often expensive and customized. Built and fitted by individual riders to reflect a refined, personalized display of taste, they thus serve as a form of subcultural capital, the nuances of which are lost on the general public. But riding such a bike also confers a general sense of elitism, elevating the rider above other kinds of vehicular traffic. Within the semiotic field of distinction that constitutes the city

streets, fixie riding exists in contra-distinction to the kinds of bike touring engaged in by more established members of the professional class. Against the packs of riders decked out in colourful spandex and riding thousand dollar touring bikes (with all their mirrors, panniers, water bottle holders, electronic lights and gadgets), fixie riders signify superiority with a “less is more” attitude. I believe that it is in relation to this former group that the fixie subculture can best be understood. Lean, muscular and shark-like in his need to remain in constant motion, the fixie rider's spectacular performance calls out to the enfranchised, managerial class as if to say: “we've turned the necessity you have forced upon us into a virtue. We are now coming your way, and there is nothing holding us back.”

Here we can see at work a version of the antagonistic class dynamics that the Birmingham theorists detected in subcultural formation. Fixie riding is open to a wide variety of youth, requiring only that an individual save up enough money to secure or build his or her own bike. While these items are expensive, they still cost significantly less than a car. Riders will often volunteer or hang out at a local bike shop or co-op, picking up the skills and parts they need to build their own bikes for significantly less money that it would cost to buy one outright. Larger cities will often have coffee shops and other hang-outs that cater specifically to fixie and bike courier culture, fostering a social network in which lifestyle, paid work (as couriers or bike mechanics), volunteerism and even political activism (as in the “critical mass” events where a large group of bikers makes their presence known by collectively touring the streets) overlap. Regardless of one's starting position within the class dynamic, entering the fixie culture signifies

an aspiration toward upward mobility—toward mobility in general—as a refutation of the “fixed” place of disadvantage that the current socio-economic context provides as the default situation for a generation coming of age under late capitalism.

The potential to provide a meeting ground between youth of differing economic, social and ethnic groupings thus emerges as one of contemporary subcultures' politically engaging aspects, offering a site for the cultivation of new alliances, belongings and mobilities. In this function, subcultures offer the possibility for cultivating what Foucault calls heterotopias, or spaces of difference that exist in a conflicted and often contradictory relationship to the dominant culture, an important point about the production of subcultural space that will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 4 (Foucault “Of Other”). This bright point of the contemporary milieu aside, it is important to emphasize the compromised and unconscious aspects of subculture. If the sixties' counterculture constituted an outright call for social change that underestimated the pliability and adaptability of the capitalist machine, then subcultures are both the extension and dilution of this oppositional tendency: countercultural dissent grounded in corporeal and lifestyle politics is extended (in the sixties and seventies) beyond the middle class via subculture, which in turn grows (in the eighties and nineties) to subsume those remnants within the middle classes that still pursue alternative societal possibilities to the ones on offer. Recalling the caveat of the Birmingham researchers, such subcultural strategies offer only “magical” solutions to the social contradictions that instigate them (Cohen 57; Clarke 159). Much like Jameson's vision of literary production as a “socially symbolic act” that addresses real social contradictions via a

compensatory set of symbols, the social fissures and antagonisms that necessitate artistic and subcultural production are not directly solved by these practices.⁴⁶ At best, the practice or artefact allows subjects to imaginatively, temporarily project themselves into a different circumstance, a conceptual exercise that might lead to concrete gains over time, but which does not necessarily address underlying structures of inequality and disenfranchisement. The now common trope of the hippie become yuppie, or of today's cutting-edge subcultural statement of dissent providing fodder for tomorrow's hip advertising campaign for jeans or cars, registers a high degree of cynicism regarding the potentiality for cultural politics to result in any kind of lasting, systemic change.

The discourse of the failure of both the countercultural and subcultural projects is a dominant element of the current understanding of youth dissent, a fact that calls for reconsideration of the role this dissent plays in reproducing the social relations necessary in Western capitalist societies. From the spectacular emergence of the sixties counterculture to the present vision of an allegedly depoliticized array of subcultures, youth dissent signifies so many moments of breakage in the dominant system, illustrating a generational gap in which the ideological structures of an older generation are no longer adequate for maintaining the social relations necessary for capitalist hegemony. The countercultural moment of the sixties held the possibility of radically transforming society, an eventuality that did, indeed, come about, though

⁴⁶ Jameson outlines his theory of literature as a socially symbolic act in Chapter 1 of *The Political Unconscious*. In asserting how “the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction” Jameson supplies an iteration of the logic of the symptom that Žižek further refines in his theory of ideology, detailed in the next section (67).

not in the way that many of the participants themselves desired or anticipated. The failure of dominant ideology signified by the emergence of counter-and-subcultural movements, and then the failure of these movements themselves, offers insight into how the capitalist system navigates shifts in its own reproduction as it “jumps scale” in order to address the instabilities generated by its internal contradictions. With the shift from a monopolistic phase of nation-bound industrial production to a transnational phase accompanied by a much more pliable and precarious social sphere, the countercultures and subcultures that emerged during this transition provided crucial sites of contestation *and* adaptation. This view of subcultures seems to reinforce the post-subcultural critique and its scepticism regarding the oppositional political possibilities inherent in youth cultures of dissent. At the same time, however compromised the forms of agency and alterity offered by subcultures might be, they also comprise the closest thing that many subjects can know, within the hegemonic field of postmodern capital, of a free and “classless” social experience. As such, the very failure of these structures to produce stable or lasting alternatives to the cultural dominant cannot be held against them, and subcultural production might even be cast as one of the necessary preconditions to future and decisive social transformations.

From Symptom to Sinthome: Dress Rehearsals for Social Change

Returning to Žižek's groundbreaking interlacing of Marxist, Hegelian and Lacanian thought in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), one is struck by the usefulness of the logic of the Lacanian concept of symptom for understanding subcultural production and politics. Taking

seriously Lacan's aside that “Marx invented the symptom,” Žižek develops the parallels between commodity fetishism as a means of navigating the social contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production, and the Lacanian symptom as a form of misrecognition that allows us to arrive, by a necessarily circuitous and indirect route, at the truth about the impossible desire that constitutes us as subjects. To this end, Žižek supplies a useful summary of the concept of the symptom as it developed, over the course of Lacan's career, through three distinct stages:

1. *The talking cure.* In Lacan's initial iteration (early 1950s), the symptom is seen as an indicator of a breakdown in the circuit of communication. Addressed to a Big Other who occupies the position of “the subject assumed to know,” the symptom is here characterized as “the extension of communication by other means” and requires an act of interpretation on the part of that Other (Žižek 79). Proper interpretation on the part of the therapist (who, by transference, temporarily assumes this position of the Big Other) is supposed to dissolve the symptom: the circuit of communication being restored, the symptom *should* simply disappear. For the Birmingham theorists, subcultures assumed the role of a social symptom that corresponds to this stage of Lacanian thought: the shifting stratifications of class produce subcultural formations, the various attributes of which provide so many clues to be deciphered by the cultural researcher. However, the hope that subcultural subjects might, with the help of cultural theory, make a shift from oblique political gestures to a more direct, socially transformative course of action

remains unrealized (despite the post-subcultural call for a move to the “macro” level of political investment). So, too, for Lacan, who discovered that mere interpretation is not enough to break a subject's attachment to his or her symptom.

2. *The opposition between symptom and fantasy.* Lacan’s second approach to the impasse of the symptom shifts from the symbolic register to the imaginary realm of fantasy. While symptoms admit to interpretation and analysis, fantasy indicates “an inert construction which cannot be analysed, which resists interpretation” (Žižek 80). Crucial here is a shift in the characterization of The Other: while the symptom assumed a whole and self-consistent Other, a guarantor of the meaning of the subject's predicament, fantasy “implies a crossed-out, blocked, barred, non-whole, inconsistent Other—that is, it is filling out a void in the Other” (ibid). Here we move from a structuralist belief in “social totality” to a post-structuralist view of the ultimate incoherence and incompleteness of the *socius*: no ultimate “solution” is to be found to the social antagonisms that give rise to symptomatic formations like subcultures. Instead, we must “transverse the fantasy” and own up to the unpleasant and shameful identifications at work in the fantastical structure itself. This phase of Lacanian thought corresponds with the post-subcultural critique's “airing the dirty laundry” of subcultures: the uncomfortable revelation of their internal hierarchies, complicities, patriarchal tendencies, etc. Uniting these first two iterations is the idea that the symptom is something that can ultimately be dissolved, either through

the interpretive act or through disassociation (this latter position being roughly equivalent to Agamben's description of postmodern dis-identification). However, Lacan remained puzzled by patients who, after transversing their fantastical identifications, still tenaciously clung to their symptom.

3. *The sinthome*. In the last phase of Lacan's thought, the symptom is characterized not as something to be ultimately jettisoned, but as the necessary fiction guaranteeing the consistency of a subject's identity. In this iteration, the symptom comprises “an inert stain resisting communication and interpretation, a stain which cannot be included in the circuit of discourse, of social bond network, but is at the same time a positive condition of it” (Žižek 82). At the individual level, the symptom is both the expression of the individual's fundamental brokenness or lack of self-identity *and* the gesture that makes any sort of self-consistency or subjectivity possible. At the social level, the symptom is both the indicator of the ultimately incongruous, rent nature of the socius (a product of the unrepresentable antagonism at the core of any collectivity) *and* the very condition that makes any kind of functioning, coherent whole possible. The *sinthome* is thus “a certain signifying formation penetrated with enjoyment” (81).

Adopting Lacan's shifting theories regarding the symptom thus allows us to situate subcultures, not just as proto-political gestures in need of proper interpretation (roughly the Birmingham

position), nor even as fantasy constructions which one must “work through” and ultimately dis-identify with (the post-subcultural rejoinder). In a move that incorporates these two approaches without being exhausted by them, the sinthome allows us to identify subcultures as *vehicles of revolutionary desire that can only succeed through their very failure and impossibility*. A sinthomic reading reveals subculture as that problematic element that society cannot fully tolerate but which at the same time provides the very conditions for subjectivity, identity and community. Without the communitarian refuge offered by the various tribes and subcultures, postmodern capitalism would be intolerable—it would possibly cease to function (just as, for Marx, religion was the paradoxical formation that made social domination bearable, thus maintaining it)—and yet these group identifications, from punks to skateboarders to hipsters to the various “queer” cultures, share the characteristic of being problematic, intolerable, in need of some form of taming or “gentrification” from the point of view of the Big Other. As such, we might be tempted to follow some of the post-subculturalists and simply dismiss subcultures and their ilk as so many distractions from, dissipations of or dead-end attempts at social transformation. If the sinthome plays the role of guaranteeing a necessary minimum of social cohesion and “liveability,” and if the socius as given is irreparably flawed, why not simply dismantle those sinthomic elements that allow the system to continue its spasmodic, diseased advance? The problem is, eradicating the sinthome(s) would deliver us, not into a post-capitalist, reformed society, but to *complete and widespread de-subjectification*: as in the popular zombie films that act as limit markers to the bourgeois sinthome, the very fabric of the social bond itself

would be rent asunder.

This brings us to a fundamental point: the *sinthome*, though comprising an error—a merely “magical” or symbolic solution to “real” social contradictions, to reiterate the CCCS formulation—is yet the only vehicle capable of delivering us to an awareness of the social desire that constitutes the core of our being, but which is not accessible by any directly communicable “reason” or representation. That our desires for wholeness and community are rent by the divisive, largely arbitrary logic of hierarchical stratification is a fact captured in the Marxian category of class, a term that expresses the fundamental inequality that every society necessarily misrecognizes and naturalizes in the fictions that support the social imaginary. Subcultural desire seeks a refuge from this logic of stratification, producing its own sub-groups with different signifiers for inclusion and merit than those of the parent culture. Though subcultures utilize the same logic of distinction that they might hope to challenge, they do so in a playful way that at least creates friction with the parent culture, even if only because the consciously pursued, supplementary arbitrariness of subcultural inclusion has the power to point out the unconsciously reified, but just as arbitrary divisions and hierarchies of the parent culture.⁴⁷

Recalling the fundamental split between being and doing that characterizes the modern Western subject for Agamben, the Lacanian symptom allows us to reclaim the political potential of subcultures even in the midst of the flexible incorporation strategies of neoliberal capitalism. For those elements that have been “made sacred”—removed from common use—to be returned

⁴⁷ The logic of the double negative, where a naturalized social norm is revealed as historically constructed by the addition of a further level of artifice is the principle behind Roland Barthes’ idea of third order myth (*Mythologies* 135), and Derrida’s “hauntology” (63).

to the realm of “pure means” requires, not the complete dissolution of the lines of demarcation, but rather the overcoming through play of the power valences that predicate their stability on such hierarchies. This is to say, the performative, profaning acts that undermine the sacred identifications leave the categories erected by these identifications intact, while dissolving the reification that obscured the ultimately nameless and common *jouissance* running through and supporting them. Because of the split nature of the subject this procedure must address, such an operation cannot be approached directly. Instead, the left hand (of compromised subcultural resistance) must be protected, until an indeterminable but critical moment, from knowing what the right hand (of genuine revolutionary change) is doing. In subcultures, revolution is played at without directly confronting the overarching economic-political order, *and yet subjects might also steadily move towards such an outcome unbeknownst and despite themselves*. Žižek follows Jon Elster in describing this revolutionary kind of play as “states that are essentially by-products,” as outcomes that cannot be produced except as the unintended results of the pursuit of a seemingly radically different goal (Elster qtd. in Žižek *Sublime* 91-2). The failure of subcultures to escape the “cycle of incorporation” here emerges as a secondary concern beside the actual work they do to produce subjectivities that really might counteract the dehumanizing and alienating effects of capitalist organization, providing the foundations for future, systemic change.

Let us return to the example of skateboarding, the practice of which often appears as a corporeal performance of just the kind of “repetition compulsion” operating at the heart of

sinthomic logic. The answer to the question “how many skateboarders does it take to change a light bulb” is: *just one, but you have to give him fifty attempts*. Skaters spend countless hours trying to perfect their complicated moves. Time and again they fail and fall, until at a certain unpredictable point, a kind of body memory “clicks” and the skater unconsciously makes the micro adjustments necessary to place body and board exactly where they need to be in order to successfully roll away from a complicated, often seemingly impossible movement. What might seem to an uninitiated onlooker as an exercise in futility is experienced by the skater as a drive to perfect a difficult manoeuvre. While a skater might decide he needs to learn a certain trick because he sees another skater doing it, one of the “unintended” or background outcomes of all this subcultural labour is a subject habituated to time, space and the environment in a new kind of way. Instead of experiencing one’s surroundings as an alienating landscape designed to control and limit our activities within the narrow parameters of biopolitical, consumer society, the skater comes to see her world as a “massive cement playground of unlimited potential” as Craig Stecyk famously formulated (Izan). This is the revolutionary logic of the sinthome at work: a new consciousness and orientation emerges out of a practice whose initial aim might have just been to “be cool” or fit in with one’s peer group.

According to this same sinthomic logic, the radical shift in norms and even institutions that subcultural production might help effect is the product of a necessarily compromised navigation of the cultural dominant. In terms of gender, for instance, Becky Beal asserts that despite skate culture’s effort to frame a visions of masculinity that differ from the norms of

mainstream sports (rejecting authority, hierarchy, elite competition), skateboarding nevertheless perpetuates patriarchal hierarchies between men and women (“Alternative” 212-218). Emily Chivers Yochim further articulates this thesis, arguing in her book *Skate-Life: Re-Imagining White Masculinity* that skateboard culture offers alternative models of masculine identity that constitute “nascent critiques” of dominant masculinity while still ultimately preserving white male privilege.⁴⁸ In the economic realm, as Sean Dinces points out, skateboarding is intricately embedded within postmodern circuits of commodity production and fetishization, a structure that it actually reinforces rather than challenges (1514). This is reinforced by Kara-Jane Lombard’s observation that, despite the oppositional stance that the skateboard culture of the eighties and nineties often embraced, “contemporary skaters are not necessarily attracted to resistance” (476). Contemporary skate culture, much like that hipster culture, tends to adopt a more blasé attitude towards commercialization, though as I pointed out earlier, the very disavowal of oppositional cultural politics still exhibits a desire to manufacture scandal that has marked spectacular subcultures from at least the punk era onwards (*supra* 28-31). These writers provide strong evidence that, like most subcultures, skateboarding is rife with the hierarchies of distinction that

⁴⁸ Yochim’s idea of a “corresponding culture” defines a group organized around a particular lifestyle or activity that interacts with various levels of media,” selectively accepting or rejecting these media’s ideologies (*Skate-Life*, “Introduction” np). Her thesis that the critique skaters launch against mainstream society is against “masculinity and patriarchal norms” rather than capitalism usefully frames the manner in which contemporary skateboard culture responds to (and helps construct) shifting modes of masculinity (*ibid*). However, the further step of situating these changing gender norms within the larger socio-economic shift to a post-Fordist labour environment is key to understanding the forms of masculinity that skateboarding reinforces. Furthermore, while skaters might seem to be more concerned with visions of masculinity than critiques of capitalism, we should not lose sight of the manner in which their performed activity might challenge or reinforce the social norms germane to contemporary capitalist formations. A psychoanalytic approach that reads subcultures as symptoms highlights these nuances and discrepancies between what subjects might think they are doing, and the cultural and political work they actually perform.

Sarah Thornton foregrounds in her astute work on rave culture (98-105). The revolutionary stance adopted by skateboarders is thus characterized by a degree of “false consciousness,” of blindness on the part of its practitioners toward the extent to which their purportedly anti-establishment practice is saturated by the dominant power relations of contemporary society. These reactive, conservative elements are openly present and celebrated in the subculture and are absolutely deserving of criticism—requiring that subjects traverse their own fantasy of subcultural belonging.⁴⁹ They do not, however, exhaust the practice's revolutionary potential. Holding fast to a more “radical” trajectory for making the world anew, as compromised and contradictory as this desire must *necessarily* appear within the field of a globalized capitalism, might yet carry subjects past these reactivist attributes (hence the Lacanian/Blakean imperative to “*never give way on one's desire*”). The examination of skateboard culture in the last two chapters of this dissertation will argue that skateboarding might foster a potentially revolutionary agency “hiding in plain sight.” Skateboard subculture, along with the myriad other practices,

⁴⁹ As an example of the homophobic, masculinist, consumerist, racist and ageist tendencies of skate culture, the digital magazine *Jenkem* published a 2013 article that shamelessly *celebrates* the dirty laundry of skateboard culture. For example, the article champions the fact that there are no openly gay professional skateboarders, and that the expensive, fetishized shoes that skaters wear “are probably made by a little brown or yellow person in some shitty factory for pennies a day” (“10 Articles”). This stance is in keeping with the classic subcultural desire to scandalize identified by Hebdige and others; it is merely an iteration of this principle articulated from a conservative, reactive position. While the voicing of such views might tempt us to reject skateboard culture's progressive stance as mere posturing, the registration of these sentiments and values within skate culture is an opportunity to challenge them in the cultural sphere. The *Jenkem* article can even be read as a *reaction* to the challenging of these cultural norms that is already underway, and a symptom that these very issues are already on skater's minds and are pressing to appear on the subcultural radar. One might go so far as to say the *Jenkem*'s posturing is a defensive performance of the desire to open the very discussion that it pretends to be pre-emptively shutting down. The article symptomatically registers this reactive stance, for instance, in mentioning transgender skater Hillary Thompson, who in 2011 became the first trans skater to receive skate media attention, in an issue of *Kingshit* magazine (Nieratko).

scenes, and subcultural tribes, has the potential to transform society from within, all of these “micro” acts of cultural subordination and subterfuge comprising an ongoing pre-history to the unpredictable moment of transformation when a new and presently unimaginable social arrangement will radically alter the horizons of what is deemed possible. As such, the ultimate goal to which subcultures point *must* remain obscure for a certain time, if only because we can’t quite know what the terrain will look like until we get there. In this sense, the more a subculture is saturated with diversions, compromises, and seemingly missed opportunities, the better chance it has of effectively delivering us to that space that we could not fully imagine or produce for ourselves ahead of time. At the same time, without an arbitrary goal to which subjects can adhere (but which they repeatedly miss) our necessarily blind drive towards the future remains unstructured. This is why the subcultural posturing of resistance remains an essential political coordinate even it is revealed to be shot through with hypocritical tendencies and self-delusion: *playing* at alterity has the potential to produce the necessary preconditions for actual, substantive change. From the imaginary vantage point of a future, unrealized and egalitarian culture, the hierarchies and inequalities that saturate subcultural formations might appear like parasites being dragged along by the subculture's revolutionary trajectory. This utopian perspective is, indeed, what Lacan would call the *ego-ideal*, or the imaginary perspective one occupies to make oneself appear likeable to oneself. My point is that the foundation for the full emergence of this utopian moment is already present, in latent form, in skateboarding and other subcultures. A moment may come when, drained of their substantive content, the apparatuses of distinction that are

reproduced in subculture will lose their purchase. This can only materialize, however, if these movements find a way to foster an orientation towards global critique and transformation.⁵⁰

However, to simply celebrate the micro, tactical accomplishments of subcultures in their own right, to rest in the “corporate” phase of group identification and limited, identity-based agency, is similar to the shortfalls of postmodern, poststructural dilutions of cultural politics. If it is impossible to predict the cultural forms life might take in a post-capitalist, post-racial, and post-patriarchal world, if such a destination can only be the unpredictable end-product of an outlandish, globally conceived project, then the numerous “small gains” made by subcultural interventions, taken as ends in themselves, are doomed to failure. It is only when these particular projects of reform are approached as being so many skirmishes in a more comprehensive struggle against the oppressive socio-economic apparatus as a whole that such interventions become politically effective. To this extent, Oliver Marchart is correct when he identifies in subcultural production a disconnect between the cultural level of oblique “micro” politics and outright antagonistic position needed for change at the legislative or “macro” level of politics

⁵⁰ Such an orientation might not, and need not, be part of the subculture’s formative moment. For instance, when skateboard culture was (re)marketed as a subcultural, “renegade” and aggressively male practice in the early eighties, giving birth to “street skating” and then the “extreme sports” franchise that we know today, ideologues and future industry magnates like Stacey Peralta self-consciously appropriated a cultural rhetoric of rebellion and “taking back the streets” to market skate culture. In the eighties, the adjective “radical” became widely used to describe skateboard moves and fashions (as in the phrase “totally radical, dude!”). While the term probably migrated from surf to skate culture, it carries political overtones, in the sense of a “radical movement” or “radical politics.” Skate culture’s use of the term is thus a privatization and de-politicization, a co-opting of the oppositional, fully countercultural stance of “radical politics” to describe a commoditized, subcultural practice. At the same time, this cooptation has smuggled a vocabulary and structure of feeling from oppositional movements into subculture, providing a latent content that could still develop into a fully political, socially critical position. Fostering such a development is part of the work of articulation that cultural studies as a politically motivated discipline might help encourage.

(92-3). Marchart goes too far, however, when he relegates subcultures to the realm of the apolitical for their failure to confront larger legal and economic structures. This dismissal fails to adequately theorize subcultures in two important ways. First, as I argue in Chapter 1, it overlooks the historical specificity by which an advanced, global capitalism has superseded an older, monopolistic stage of only partial subsumption of social relations under capital. In the latter milieu, it was still possible to imagine that a consolidation of actually existing socialist countries might turn the tide of global capital and offer viable alternatives: the antagonistic, macro-level of the political field had a visible, geographically and institutionally inscribed presence. In such a context, the construction of subcultural formations as offering critique and resistance to the cultural dominant along class lines was already part of a larger cultural politics whose overarching goal was a move towards socialism. The success of neoliberalism in delegitimizing this project has changed the configuration of what is deemed possible, thus collapsing a great deal of what was previously explicit “macro” political struggle into the realm of cultural “wars of manoeuvre.” But even in its current, muted form, subculture remains as an important marker for the possibility of a different society as it was in the “classic” period of the sixties, seventies and eighties. This is the second way that critics like Marchart go wrong: by abandoning subculture as a political terrain, they overlook the important work these formations can still do in offering experiences of lived alterity to the current system. As compromised and contorted as these positions of defiance might be, they still supply subjects with a taste of the kind of agency, freedom and reconfiguration of the social that anticipates the dimensions of a larger

transformation. As sinthome, subcultures might be an “opiate” that allows subjects to continue to function within the decimated social sphere left to us by neoliberal restructuring, but they are also one of the few places that retain echoes of any kind of social cohesion whatsoever. In this utopian dimension subcultures might yet supply us with some of the blueprints needed to consider true alternatives to capitalism.

Chapter 3

Living On the Edge: Action Sports and the Privatization of Risk

This chapter examines the rise of the “extreme sports” culture industry as a symptom of the commoditization of risk that has become a hegemonic in our era of advanced, biopolitical capitalism. First emerging in the nineteen nineties to become, in the new millennium, an increasingly popular and accepted part of the sports and entertainment worlds, the construction and marketing of extreme sports illustrates how subcultural practices are incorporated into the mainstream by selectively highlighting certain aspects of subcultural production while backgrounding or suppressing others. In the case of extreme sports, a focus on the individual athlete eclipses the community-oriented elements that support these practices, while an emphasis on “extreme” difficulty and danger overshadows what might be more subversive subjective elements, such as the way these activities reorient one’s experiences of space and time, subjectivity and community. But if these subcultural practices lose something of their “alternative” orientation by their recontextualization in the mainstream, they also provide a template of subjectivity that, I argue, helps people navigate a world of increased precariousness and limited opportunities for political and social engagement. Through analysis of media representations of the deaths of high-profile athletes like Sarah Burke and Nic Zoricic, I suggest that extreme athletes occupy the position that Agamben describes as *homo sacer*—the expendable subject whose death constitutes neither a murder nor a sacrifice and whose exclusion from the socius works to ratify that order. In the pursuit of their sports, extreme athletes willingly

place themselves in the position of bare life, acting as the hidden support of sovereign structures that generalize and commoditize risk under the regime of finance capital. Taking a short detour through Don DeLillo's novel *White Noise* will illustrate the affective economy of this precarious position which, in its push towards death as its defining limit, acts as a symptom/sinthome of subjects' attempts to navigate the blocked political potentialities of our current social formation.

Putting the 'X' in Extreme

On January 19, 2012, Canadian freestyle skier Sarah Burke died in hospital from injuries sustained nine days before in an accident that occurred while she was training as part of a team of freeskiers for the U.S.-based Monster Energy drink company (Huus). Burke was the defending champion for women's half-pipe in the annual Winter X Games, and she was scheduled to compete in the 2014 Sochi Olympics, where half-pipe skiing made its debut as an Olympic sport. Burke's death was mourned in the Canadian press as a national tragedy, gaining wide coverage despite the story's having to contend with the passing of R&B legend Etta James, just a day after Burke's demise. But alongside the tone of public mourning, one of Canada's national newspapers cast Burke's death as part of the regrettable, but necessary, risk associated with any high-level sporting endeavour, comparing it to the severe injuries sustained by American snowboarder Kevin Pearce on the same Utah "superpipe," in 2009 (Ebner). A longer companion piece to the article places such sports as freestyle skiing (also called "slopestyle," "freeskiing" or "newschool skiing") and snowboarding in the context of the rise of so-called

“extreme” sporting events that have gained popularity over the past decade and a half. The longer article also interviews several practitioners to discern why they subject themselves to such high levels of risk (Makie and Waldie). The answers offered, which characterize risky sports as helping to counteract the sense of boredom and routine associated with modern lifestyles, reveal an important dialectic behind contemporary views of risk-taking, one that will be addressed later in this chapter. Presently, we shall investigate how the media discourse about extreme sport fatalities helps set the tone of thrill and adventure for the entire franchise, and how this popularization significantly alters perceptions of the subcultural practices, like skateboarding, from which these sports derive.

Less than two months after Sarah Burke's fatal accident, Nik Zoricic, a Canadian skicross athlete, died during a World Cup event in Grindelwald, Switzerland. Skicross is a timed, downhill racing event that incorporates terrain features such as the large jumps, rollers,⁵¹ or banks normally found in freestyle skiing. Skiers who make a time-trial run compete in heats of four, the fastest two contenders advancing to the next round. Though physical contact between skiers is not permitted, the event has been called the NASCAR of skiing, or “frozen roller derby” due to the rough-and-tumble nature of the race (Arthur 8). Press reports of the death of Burke and Zoricic, though raising token concerns about the safety of the new sporting events, predominantly eulogize the athletes as heroic individuals striving for “the edge of possibility” (ibid) and “testing the sport's frontiers” (Bradshaw 10). In both fatalities, the cutting-edge

⁵¹ A roller is a small jump that occurs as a natural part of the hill terrain.

newness of their athletes' respective sport is stressed, alongside a discourse of individualized risk management. Warren Shouldice, a world champion freestyle skier who has suffered a broken neck and compressed back, explains that "It's almost no fun doing it if there's no risk...The trick is making it a manageable risk" (Maki and Waldie 11). Another article stresses that, in the young and evolving extreme winter sports domain "the question becomes one of acceptable risk" and that in sports in general "there is a different definition of acceptable risk" (Arthur 8). The acceptance of "manageable risk" is further linked to the elitism of high-performance sports: "All truly elite athletes are searching for that line ... they are trying to push the boundary of what human beings can do" (ibid). In the search for this limit, fatal excesses are accepted as a necessary part of the process, as David Ellis, the director of Canada's national skicross program, makes clear: "In this sport [of skicross] there's always the extremes, and in this sport this [death of Zoricic] was the extreme that unfortunately happened"(Ellis qtd. in Arthur 8).

In the extreme sporting world, the actual limit that the new "elite" athletes are pushing toward is death itself, and the story of the athlete meeting his or her end is the limit case, the extreme possibility that sets the pattern of intelligibility, thrill and danger for the entire field. David Ebner indicates as much when he notes the "disproportionate attention given to accidents in sports compared with the many successes," pointing out that "Burke, for instance, became more famous when she crashed compared with her victories" (11). The pattern in which a death is beyond substantial repercussions—constituting neither a murder nor sacrifice—but is used to set the parameters, the limit, of discourse itself is the logic of Agamben's *homo sacer*: this figure

from ancient Roman law is situated completely outside of social protections as a special case and yet provides the sovereign decision used to ground dominant power structures. Agamben argues that the extreme “relation of exception” (*Homo* 18) whereby one is related to the *socius* through the suspension of its protections and obligations, and which in previous eras was a special and rare designation, has become in the modern age a generalized mode of subjectivity and citizenship (123-25). In contemporary biopolitical societies, argues Žižek, following Agamben, we are all exposed (albeit differentially) to the risk of becoming *homo sacer* (*First* 92). The deaths of Burke and Zoricic were not characterized as the result of negligence or mishap on the part of an irresponsible sports industry that profits from the spectacle of athletes exposing themselves to life-threatening risks. The economic gain of media companies such as ESPN and the various energy drink and sporting goods companies that sponsor these events was barely mentioned, let alone questioned in the popular press coverage. Instead, by emphasizing the athletes’ wilfully stepping outside the bounds of common experience and ability, these articles accede to the athletes’ social position as figures of *homo sacer*. While this precarious position is portrayed as a personal, lifestyle decision, an example of Nietzschean *amor fati* and of individuals pursuing the excellence that is their calling, it is a choice overdetermined by societal constructs which preconfigure the discursive, legal and cultural space that such individuals inhabit.

Agamben warns that we must learn to recognize bare life, and its space of possibility in the camp, in their shifting, modern disguises in order to challenge the exclusionary logic that

produces this figure and these spaces (*Homo* 123). At the same time, his primary example of bare life in the figure of concentration camp victims almost works against this project, causing many prominent theorists to discount Agamben's analysis as grounded in an abject figure of severely limited agency. In support of Agamben's thesis, I posit sports and celebrity culture as two areas where *homo sacer* constitutes a primary structuring logic. I would thus expand Agamben's inventory of the figures (such as the doctor, scientist, expert and priest) by which the sovereign exception is extended into more areas of social life, adding the culture industry as part of the mechanism by which bare life is generalized throughout the populace (Agamben *Homo* 122). In making this claim regarding culture, I recognize bare life not simply as a reduced form of agency, but as also incorporating a supplemental valence of augmented, *increased* animal flourishing. While concentration camps actively worked to *reduce* subjects to bare life, our modern consumer culture operates *permissively*, isolating and amplifying our animal selves as a control structure that is equally marked by the death drive as its defining limit. This form of permissive control is central to the operation of the biopolitical control structures I introduced in Chapter 2: supplementing the repressive activity of the ISAs, the BCAs encourage permissive modes of social control, such as the privatizing of previously socialized risk, and the proliferation of debt, germane to contemporary capitalism.

The intersection of the biopolitical state of exception based on the *reduction* to bare life, and the promise of augmented, animal flourishing offered by such BCAs as extreme sports, is illustrated in the tragic histories we are examining here. Though Sarah Burke was a world-class

athlete in her chosen sport, the medical bills accrued during the nine days she spent hovering between life and death in a the University of Utah hospital—a sum of roughly half a million dollars—were not covered by any type of insurance (Huus).⁵² As Roger Pondel, a public relations agent representing Burke's corporate sponsor, Monster Beverage Co., explained: “Sponsors in general do not provide insurance for the athletes, who are independent contractors. In many contracts if not most, the athletes sign an agreement saying they understand that it is a dangerous sport and that they are responsible for their own well-being” (qtd. in Huus). Since Burke was in the US at the time of her accident, Canadian health care would cover only what her treatment would cost in Canada—a significantly lower amount than the American hospital bill. And because the incident happened during a privately sponsored event, no Canadian ski coaches were present, making Sarah ineligible for coverage under the Canadian Freestyle Association's insurance. Were it not for the generosity of anonymous parties, who donated over \$300 000 through GiveForward.com, the outstanding medical bill would have had to be footed by Burke's family (Huus). The risk management structure of the new action sports franchises thus follows a predictable neoliberal template, constituting the assembled “team” of athletes as so many “private contractors” who must shoulder the risk of their sport themselves. Though the companies associated with extreme sports merchandising rely heavily on sponsorship and promotional events over more traditional advertising techniques—their financial survival being

⁵² The medical fees were later reduced to about \$200 000, perhaps due to public pressure on the hospital.

thus intimately tied to the athletes they support—the well-being of the athletes themselves is individualized and privatized.

Burke's former sponsor produces the popular Monster Energy drink line, a series of sugary, caffeinated beverages that attempt to link the heightened alertness they temporarily produce with the “peak experiences” and athletic performance associated with action sports in general. The marketing of Monster Energy's flavours, with such names as “Khaos,” “Hitman” and “Rehab,” connote the aggressiveness, speed, disorientation and danger of injury associated with action sports. Other energy drink brands follow a similar marketing strategy. The Austrian-Thai company Red Bull DmbH patented a popular Thai drink in the early eighties, giving birth to the Red Bull brand that instigated the Western energy drink market. Red Bull's marketing associates the product with activities in which practitioners “push the limits” of what is deemed possible, while Red Bull “Gives you wings” to reach for ever-further horizons of human achievement. One of their commercials features a montage of action sports activities including surfing, snowboarding, mixed martial arts, cliff diving, wingsuit flying, motocross, Parkour, and skateboarding, as well as break dancing and DJ turntablism. The piece opens with a voiceover saying “the challenge of my life is to find out how far I can take it,” and ends with the “Red Bull gives you wings” slogan. Though the allusion to the Daedalus and Icarus myth of antiquity remains a kind of latent supplement to Red Bull's advertising strategy, it is tragically illustrated by the company's endorsement of the career of Shane McConkey, a Canadian-born free-skiing enthusiast who died on March 26, 2009 in a ski-BASE mishap. Ski-BASE combines free-skiing

with BASE jumping.⁵³ The skier rides off a tall cliff, kicks off skis in mid-air, then parachutes to the ground. Although McConkey did not actually invent the practice, he and his associate J.T. Holmes were the first to regularly incorporate it into their filmed ski routines in 2003 (ibid).⁵⁴ The pair also combined ski-BASEing with the use of what's called a wingsuit—a specially designed bodysuit that allows wearers to glide through the air, much like a flying squirrel. Apart from these innovations, McConkey largely pioneered the free skiing movement itself, designing wider, pontoon-shaped skis for loose snow conditions that have since become industry standards, and founding the International Free Skiers Association in 1996, a move that helped bring free skiing to mainstream attention and paved the way for the career of athletes like Sarah Burke (Gifford). A piece published in *Men's Journal* after McConkey's death highlights the extreme risks to which McConkey and other ski-BASERS subject themselves. Bill Gifford's piece deploys the familiar rhetoric of McConkey as an athlete "getting paid to live his dream" who pushes beyond the limits of what is thought possible, thus revolutionizing the world of sport and human achievement. In McConkey's case, his Icarean pursuit of "perhaps the most dangerous dream of all: the dream of human flight" (ibid) proved his undoing. McConkey, who left behind a wife and young daughter, was uninsurable due to his ski-BASE practice. Despite his being Red Bull's first and perhaps most notorious and boundary-pushing North American rider, his bereaved family

⁵³ BASE jumping is a subcultural practice where individuals jump off tall structures, such as skyscrapers, cliffs or bridges, then sail to the ground on parachutes. "BASE" stands for "Buildings, Antennas, Spans, Earth" (Gifford).

⁵⁴ Stuntman Rick Sylvester performed the first recorded ski-BASE jump from El Capitan in Yosemite National Park in 1972 (Gifford).

relied on Facebook donations for financial support (ibid).

Red Bull's sponsorship of McConkey, who was the first North American athlete on the company's payroll, and whose sponsorship set the template for the entire energy drink industry's marketing strategy, clearly reveals Agamben's *relation of exclusion* as a primary structuring principle of the extreme sports franchise's economic and promotional models. In first creating and then capturing the largest market share of the energy drink industry, Red Bull's co-owner and mastermind, Austrian native Dietrich Mateschitz, relied heavily on viral and indirect forms of promotion such as word of mouth or “buzz marketing” (Yaqoob). Chief among these tactics is the attempt to obliquely associate the product with the types of subcultural, edgy and often dangerous practices that have come to be known as extreme sports.⁵⁵ As a key member of the twelve-man Red Bull Air Force, the company would fly McConkey to different parts of the world in search of new environments in which to enact his stunts, where McConkey's “chief responsibility was to make sure he was wearing his silver-and-blue Red Bull helmet whenever the cameras were rolling” (Gifford). McConkey's drive to “push the limits” of his sport would ensure that his stunts continue to attract media attention, which would then garner seemingly casual or indirect exposure for his sponsor. This strategy allows Red Bull to promote its product without seeming to be *trying* to do so, a tactic tailored to the so-called “Y Generation” of young adults born in the eighties who tend to be cynical about traditional forms of advertising and sponsorship (Yaqoob). But since Red Bull's media exposure depended upon McConkey's

⁵⁵ If subcultures provide “oblique” forms of social critique (Hebdige), then the forms of marketing that use indirect association to promote their products are adopting a subcultural tactic, reinforcing the idea of a continuity between the counterculture and modern advertising suggested by Thomas Frank in his book *The Conquest of Cool*.

remaining in the public eye, perpetuating the material conditions that allowed the athlete to pursue his sport required a continual “upping of the ante” in terms of the danger and spectacle involved in his stunts. Though McConkey is portrayed by Gifford as someone who would be jumping off cliffs even if he weren't being paid to do so (a trope of post-Fordist labour that Andrew Ross, in the context of art and academia, aptly calls “sacrificial labour” [2]), the economic structure that supported his practice required that it become progressively more dangerous—a continual escalation of risk that, arguably, led to his death.

Dying to Live: The Commoditization of Risk under Finance Capitalism

There is thus a circular and accelerating, individualized push towards the extreme limit of death actually built in to the mechanisms by which certain subcultural lifestyle practices are allowed to appear in the mainstream culture. Deviant and initially underground pursuits like ski-BASE receive public attention and material support, and they are included within larger social discourse by virtue of their exceeding what are deemed acceptable risk-taking practices. The social underground thus gains visibility and recognition just so long as its adherents assume full responsibility for any outcome, including death, that might occur, and so long as this morbid exposure to risk is rendered “profitable”—can be used as a vehicle to sell products. Alongside questioning the corporate interests that instrumentalize extreme athletes for profit, we must ask: *why does this exposure to risk, even unto death, provide a figure that appeals to consumers?* Why is this kind of morbid exceptionalism gaining in popularity, to the extent that some of these

practices are now part of the winter Olympics? While the common response to this question might be a pseudo-sociological appeal to “human nature” as being fascinated by the death-defying antics of what are essentially self-trained stuntmen and women, we should look, rather, to historically particular context for such practices being generalized and embraced precisely now: that is, to the dominance of finance capital.

Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee date the rise of finance capital at 1973 when events such as the demise of the gold standard and the Middle Eastern oil crisis signalled the decline of Fordist production in the West. This new regime constitutes a qualitative shift from a capitalism based on the production of surplus value through labour, to a model of profit where “what is increasingly ‘objectified’ in both hedged and speculative derivatives is nothing other than risk itself” (206). Whereas the Fordist order generated surplus value through the manufacture of “hard” goods, the lion’s share of global profits is now generated through monetary self-reflexivity, through currency manipulations made possible by the adoption, in 1972, of a floating rate of exchange, and by increasingly complicated financial instruments such as derivatives, credit swaps and hedges.⁵⁶ These instruments, initially designed to mitigate and control risk in a turbulent globalized economy, can and are equally used to *produce* and *profit from* volatility, since surpluses can be generated whether the market behaves well or poorly, and whether the

⁵⁶ LiPuma and Lee describe the magnitude of this shift: “From 1983 to 1998, daily trading in currency markets grew from \$200 million to \$1.5 trillion, with 98 percent of the 1998 figure intended for speculation; the growth was due in part to the use of complicated currency derivatives. Trading in derivatives grew 215 percent per year from 1987 to 1997, and by the time of the Asian market crash in 1997, the annual value of traded derivatives was more than ten times the value of global production” (204).

commodity that “grounds” these devices increases or decreases in value.⁵⁷ These mechanisms can ensure that profits remain robust even under disaster situations, as the financial crisis of 2008 aptly demonstrated. Under neoliberal-finance capitalism, then, market mechanisms dissolve social securities and collectively shared resources while accelerating and *profiting from* the precariousness of increasing numbers of people. In this context of the generalization and commoditization of risk, extreme sports performers provide a model of subjecthood whose appeal is grounded in its ability to compensate for the shrinking sense of agency, possibility and hope for a better world experienced by neoliberal subjects. The *jouissance* pursued in extreme sports compensates for the deadening, paralyzing effect that the generalized exposure to risk produces in contemporary society: by brazenly “tempting fate,” extreme performers situate themselves as sublime technicians of risk, heroically confronting those monstrous but largely invisible forces to which a growing majority of citizens have been subjected in the past forty years of neoliberal restructuring. Of course, whereas these invisible forces have their legal, material reality in an obscure, abstract world of financial products, trans-national institutions, and digital algorithms, the extreme performer tackles these monsters at the phenomenological level of everyday life, where they manifest as a shrinking sense of possibility and social solidarity. But while the commoditization of these subcultures in the extreme sports franchise

⁵⁷ Melinda Cooper points out how the regime of finance helps “determine the shape of possible future worlds”, leveraging but also creating uncertainty as a strategy that works to the benefit of American hegemony. By destabilizing international currency, the US has set itself up as the “pivot of world power relations.” The recent expansion of speculative finance into the realm of weather and environmental destabilization takes this mode of hegemony and surplus value production to a frightening new level, since it constitutes a form of gambling on the human and environmental disasters precipitated by climate change and environmental degradation (181-82).

centres upon the individual heroically confronting spectacular risk, a supplemental vision of sociality, of the camaraderie and “lifestyle” that exists amongst the athletes, supplies a crucial, backgrounded element of these practices’ utopian draw. This social element is highlighted in some of the narratives the extreme sporting franchise produces to market itself, such as the Ski Channel’s film *Winter* that I examine later in this chapter. Before returning to this example, the critique of postmodern society provided by Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise* clearly illustrates the way in which the desire for sociality constitutes a key affect that these spectacular cultures draw upon, manipulate and distort.

“An Appetite for Terrible Things”: Postmodern Desubjectification in White Noise

The relationship of these forms of extreme performance to our increasingly regulated, fragmented, disciplined but precarious private and professional lives under neoliberalism is suggested in the musings of Jack Gladney, the American professor of “Hitler Studies” from Don DeLillo’s 1986 novel *White Noise*. The victim of exposure to a toxic substance that may or may not eventually kill him, Jack is obsessed by the everyday, systemic and seemingly random forms that death can take in our biopolitical societies where, as Foucault points out, “Death [is] no longer something that suddenly swoop[s] down on life—as in epidemic. Death [is] now something permanent, something that slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it diminishes it and weakens it” (*Society* 244). Musing on the life-threatening risk willingly faced by a friend of his son, Orest Mercator, who intends to sit in a cage with poisonous snakes for sixty-seven days in

order to beat a world record, Jack makes a reflection that could equally be applied to the pursuits of McConkey and other extreme performers:

Is this what athletes do, occupy the self more fully? It's possible we envy them for a prowess that has little to do with sport. In building toward a danger, they escape it in some deeper sense, they dwell in some angelic scan, able to leap free of everyday dying. (255)

Unlike more traditional sports where excellence and achievement are grounded in perfected physical performances—something akin to Kant's idea of the beautiful as “purposelessness purposefulness”—the extreme athlete adds a sublime, surplus element of “building toward a danger,” a pursuit that allows them to “escape” and “leap free of everyday dying.” And yet, as we have seen in the case of the extreme sports franchise, this surplus is defined by actively confronting death, a fact aptly illustrated by the character Orest in *White Noise*. Orest's fear of being killed is muted by the augmented sense of self and possibility that attends the public anticipation of his planned feat of sitting in a cage full of poisonous snakes. Put another way, Orest fears the *loss* of the sense of amplified life associated with his almost certain demise by wilfully exposing himself to deadly harm. *He fears the loss of this sense of being alive more than the loss of his life*, a seemingly paradoxical construction that becomes intelligible when we consider the exceptional pursuit of death, not as an escape from mundane, slow and “everyday” death, but as the supplement or *symptom* that makes this slow death bearable.

To give Jack Gladney's predicament a more precise historical location, we might parallel his “everyday dying” with what Eric Cazdyn calls “the new chronic” or “a mode of time that cares little for terminality or acuteness, but more for an undying present that remains forever

sick”(5). For Cazdyn, contemporary capitalism has undergone a shift from biopolitics to what he calls “bioeconomics,” from a system that justifies itself by its ability to care for its citizens to one that no longer even pretends to be able to do so in a just or comprehensive way (152-55). This generalization of precariousness creates a growing mass of subjects, “the already dead,” whom the system has effectively “killed” but who have yet to actually die. The already dead persist as subjects despite their being abandoned by the system that purports to care for them, creating a disjunction between social and private experience. *White Noise* provides a particularly interesting portrait of this in Jack Gladney who, despite his privileged position as a university professor, is construed as “already dead” by his exposure to the toxic airborne substance, Nyodene D. Following his brief, accidental exposure, Gladney’s body is treated like an inert thing to be scanned and catalogued by doctors who are more interested in charting the effects of the toxin than in providing a prognosis that will ease Gladney’s anxiety. The reduction of Gladney’s white, privileged body to a biopolitical object underscores what Sarah Brophy identifies as one of the central ironies DeLillo treats in his novel: Gladney ultimately becomes subjected to the same fascistic and bioeconomic structures that he fails to address in his role as a historian of Nazi Germany.⁵⁸ It is while trying to come to terms with his already dead state—his having been killed but yet to die—that Gladney, partially inspired by the “augmented” sense of life exhibited by Orest, decides to hunt down and kill Dr. Grey, the mysterious researcher who slept with

⁵⁸ For the insight that, amongst all of the disasters depicted in *White Noise*, the most egregious is that a professor of “Hitler Studies” can ignore the Nazi history of genocide in favour of a kind of celebrity studies of the Führer, I am indebted to Dr. Sarah Brophy’s lectures on the novel that she delivered in her “Concepts of Culture” undergraduate class at McMaster University, January 2014.

Gladney's wife in exchange for giving her an experimental drug designed to suppress the fear of death. (This revenge plan is ultimately set in motion by Gladney's colleague Murphy, a researcher from the "American Environments" department who plays the role of a Sancho Panza launching Gladney on his Quixotic mission—the difference being that tabloid-television culture takes the place of the romances that Cervantes parodies. Via Murphy, Gladney is again objectified—turned into a research subject for Murphy's investigations into the postmodern condition).

By his violent *passage à l'acte*, Gladney hopes to finally conquer his fear of dying. When Gladney finds Grey, however, the doctor proves to be "already dead" himself, his mind destroyed by the effects of his own drug. He is unable to distinguish between words and what they represent—it is enough for Jack to say the words "plane crash" to make Grey curl up into a ball—and his oracular speech is a bricolage of phrases taken from the television that he continually watches. Mr. Grey—his real name turns out to be Willie Mink—thus comes to represent the symbolic order itself: the entire network of postmodern signification suffused with *jouissance*, from trashy TV culture to pseudo-scientific quackery that, like Mink's malfunctioning drug, fails to insulate subjects from traumatic historical events. Through all of this narcotic "white noise," anxiety, the affect Lacan privileges as "the signal of the real," relentlessly hounds Gladney.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the multiple juxtapositions of Nazi culture with American popular culture (the "Hitler Studies" department shares a building with "American

⁵⁹ In *Seminar X*, Lacan repeatedly emphasizes: "amongst all the signals, anxiety is the one that does not deceive... Anxiety, then, is the signal of the real and...of an irreducible mode under which this real presents itself in experience" (*Seminar* 144).

Environments,” Willie Mink is holed up in a cheap hotel in “German Town,” and so on) suggests that the historical formation in which Gladney is caught contains, as its structuring principle, a fascistic and biopolitical element that is the true, unaddressed source of Gladney’s malaise.

Whereas Cazdyn sees in the growing number of “already dead” subjects a revolutionary potential for systemic change, Jack Gladney’s response constitutes a privatization and a misrecognition: he actually reiterates, in microcosm, the murderous projection of societal tensions onto bare life that was enacted *en masse* by the Nazi regime. DeLillo’s novel can help us understand the necropolitics at work in the extreme sporting franchise because it exposes a cultural-affective short circuit that subverts the political impulses of already dead subjects, deflecting them into a cultural sphere that attempts to address our mounting sense of anxiety through an escalating, privatized embracing of risk. In order to recuperate the suppressed, social and political dimension of this cultural formation, we must further interrogate the temporarily augmented, enlarged sense of life that risk-oriented activities deliver. To return to the snake-obsessed character of Orest, his pleasure is depicted as deriving, not from the actual act of his sitting with the snakes (a moment which fails to properly materialize at any rate) but rather in the build-up and anticipation, the collaborative preparation and social recognition surrounding the event. Like many extreme sports enthusiasts, Orest’s pleasure is apparently grounded in his pursuit of an excessively risky, and socially “useless,” goal, a goal that paradoxically threatens his possible erasure as a subject. But what if this augmented sense of life is actually grounded in the social recognition, the communitarian preparations and “buzz” that this spectacle sets in

motion, rather than in the act itself? If this is so, we are faced with the question of *why is this exposure to the risk of death the avenue chosen by these subjects to satisfy their social desire?* What elements of modern society make it necessary to take recourse to such “extreme” forms of sociality? Orest’s plan backfires: the only venue he can find is a run-down hotel room, and the snakes that arrive are not of the venomous variety. He consequently suffers a form of social death, going into “complete seclusion” (283-4). Robbed of the grand spectacle promised by Orest’s original plan, Jack’s son Heinrick reinforces Orest’s abjection, calling him “a jerk” (284). Gladney, who was sceptical of Orest’s plan from the start, notices this contradiction—that Heinrick derides his former “friend” for failing to successfully expose himself to a risk almost certain to kill him—but offers no further analysis. The scene allows us, however, to recognize such “extreme” spectacles as symptomatic of the individualizing restrictions and re-privatizations that our bioeconomic culture offers as one of the few, desperate avenues for satisfying what are essentially social desires for recognition, community and agency. Under the bioeconomic regime, subjects can find vitality and social recognition, escaping the status of “already dead,” only by submitting themselves to an escalating series of risks, at the limit of which is death. One’s appearance and erasure are superimposed. This paradox is the effect of a system that constructs massive structural, economic and cultural barriers to *living well* in the first place. Under the rampant de-subjectification that Agamben holds as characteristic of our stage of advanced capitalism, morbid *jouissance* may be the only avenue left to a subject like Orest to fulfill his social desire to be recognized and valued (Agamben “What is” 20-21).

Adventure Time: Edgework and the Generalization of Risk

We can further articulate the structure of the BCA of extreme sports by revisiting Stephen Lyng's theory of "edgework" (a term coined by Hunter S. Thompson). Lyng describes the heightened state of experience pursued by extreme athletes ("edgeworkers") as deriving from successfully navigating the boundaries between control and chaos, life and death. The defining trait of all edgework, according to Lyng, is the practitioner's belief in his or her "ability to maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos, a situation most people would regard as entirely uncontrollable" (859). *Successfully* navigating the borderline between control and chaos leads to an ineffable sense of "hyperreality" that occurs when one's "perception narrows to only those factors that immediately determine success or failure in negotiating the edge" (Lyng 861). While hyperreality is treated by Lyng as an individual experience, without making reference to the way the term has been adopted by Baudrillard and Jameson to describe the collective, political context of advanced consumer capitalism, Lyng's analysis of edgework does take pains to correlate the desire for extreme forms of leisure with the generalized conditions of alienation and reification experienced in modern risk-oriented society. Following Ralph Turner's distinction between an "institutional" and an "impulse" anchorage for human identity (between those who feel most themselves when pursuing "institutional," conformist behaviour and those who identify themselves through more "impulsive" acts), Lyng suggests that edgework helps subjects navigate the tension between spontaneity and constraint, between

socialized, historically conditioned behaviour and spontaneous, “in-the-moment” kinds of actions (864-67). While these two elements of identity dialectically structure each other, in edgework, the historically socialized self—what Herbert Mead calls the “me”—is suppressed in favour of the immediately acting and reacting “I,” producing an “illusion of control” that is often lacking in subjects for whom the material realities of life do not offer significant avenues for unfettered self-definition (867-72).

If edgework is a reaction to social, material limitation, then these conditions have only escalated since Lyng wrote his article in 1990, providing a plausible explanation for the generalization of edgework practices, and the emergence of extreme sports as a profitable cultural industry. We can take Lyng’s analysis further by noting the ideological effect produced by the suppression of the historical “me” in favour of the in-the-moment “I”: edgework provides an immediate “jolt,” an exhilarating dissolution of historical sensibility in favour of an immediate experience of fear mixed with pleasure. Such a rupturing of time and space allows subjects to feel a sense of mastery over their lifeworld, a feeling that is otherwise increasingly denied subjects in our highly mediated, bioeconomic societies where, as Kid Koala and Dynamite D announce, “The people don’t have the power to change things anymore.”⁶⁰ But these extreme tactics, because they don’t address the root causes of the malaise that structures them, harbour sinthomic desires for the removal of the divided subject produced by this situation. While our desires for actual community and agency are progressively undermined by socio-

⁶⁰ The Slew. “It’s All Over.” *100%*. kidkoala.bandcamp.com, 2009. Web. This album was originally given away for free on the Internet before being released, due to popular demand, by Puget Sound Records.

economic structures (amplified by pervasive apparatuses of technological mediation), the subjectivity produced as a reaction to this blockage is marked by an internal contradiction that manifests as a form of death drive.⁶¹ The individualized nature of the extreme sports franchise, where subjects pay for their social recognition and continued survival by continual exposure to the threat of immanent death, is a symptom of our de-politicized, bioeconomic, risk-oriented form of late capitalism. Only a different kind of death, that of the system itself, is likely to break the hold of the biopolitical cultural apparatuses that lead to this escalating fetishization of human, not to mention environmental and species-oriented, carnage.

The suppression of the socialized “me” in favour of the presentist “I” evokes the general tendency noted by Jameson of postmodern culture’s focus on a dehistoricized, present-oriented subjectivity (“Temporality” 712-16). This division between a socialized and animal self is also integral to Agamben’s conception of bare life, whereby figures like the *Mussleman* from Nazi concentration camps mark the threshold between the human and non-human (*Remnants* 47; 55). With extreme sports, however, the sub-human, near comatose state hovers in the background as one potential outcome of these practices, while the culture industry foregrounds and celebrates self-instrumentalized bodies and the exceptional acts they are able to perform. These two poles of augmented/diminished life form a continuum, with the former structured by its distance from, and the possibility of a dramatic reversal into, the latter. Because the legalistic and cultural space

⁶¹ Think, in this context, of the tragic deaths of youth who commit suicide after suffering public shaming, bullying and humiliation via Internet sites like Facebook. Rather than this extreme reaction, why not simply turn off the device? The answer, of course, is that without this mediation, subjects are robbed of what they perceive as their true identity—they become like Orest after his failed snake stunt: socially dead.

the two figures occupy is similarly excluded from social norms and protections, I would argue that both the extreme athlete and the comatose patient supply examples of a bare life whose exclusion from social protection simultaneously buttresses dominant norms and power structures. In a similar vein, the glamorous body of the extreme athlete is one of the disguises of bare life that Agamben charges us to learn to recognize (*Homo* 123).

And yet, such “peak experiences” offered in spectacular form through extreme sports are also, surely, one of the things that makes life worth living, even if most of us aren’t willing to push these practices to the limits pursued by professional athletes. Georg Simmel describes the invigorating sense of conquest and quickening that Lyng associates with edgework in a 1911 essay on “The Adventure.” For Simmel the intense, discontinuous and life-affirming episodes that constitute adventure produce a thrill that accompanies the “quick seizure of opportunity,” a characterization that recalls de Certeau’s sense of subaltern “tactics,” but also evokes the kinds of micro-opportunities regularly exploited by finance capitalists in arbitrage, or the kind of subtle niche-marketing and commoditization of “externalities” to which postmodern capital has attuned itself (Simmel 226).⁶² Though perhaps describing a larger category of activities than the kinds of death-defying scenarios of Lyng’s edgework,⁶³ Simmel’s “adventure” emphasizes a similar

⁶² The stock broker turned Cambridge scholar John Coates makes an argument that stock traders resemble extreme athletes in their addiction to the visceral high that accompanies navigating market fluctuations to generate profit. Rather than attributing market failures such as the Sub-Prime Mortgage crisis of 2008 to contradictions and flaws within the capitalist system, Coates calls, as a corrective, for a greater number of women and elderly people to be hired as stock traders (251-7). This seemingly progressive call to have a more diverse demographic working as stock traders covers over the systemic injustices of an inherently exploitative economic system. It indulges a fantasy that the excesses of capitalism can be attributed to the overactive hormones of a group of market technicians.

⁶³ Simmel includes gambling and romantic flings (for men, though not for women) as models for “the adventure.”

openness to the kinds of aleatory factors the successful navigation of which supplies the affective charge of edgework:

In the adventure, the interweaving of activity and passivity which characterizes our life tightens these elements into a coexistence of conquest, which owes everything only to its own strength and presence of mind, and complete self-abandonment to the powers and accidents of the world, which can delight us, but in the same breath can also destroy us. (226)

As in edgework, adventures for Simmel are undertaken by “a subject other than the ego” (222), and are “the extreme example of the ahistoric individual” (223). With this overlap between hyperreality, adventurism, and the evocation of an animal self that finds one of its limits in Agamben's concept of bare life, we encounter a doubling of the kind expressed in the concept of the sacred itself, “sacred” being a single term that can be used to denote both an exalted and a debased state, both more than and the less than human. Uniting the two definitions is their extra-human element: both the elite edgeworker and abject bare life exist beyond the pale of human socialization, even while they serve as the excluded support for the socialized realm. Furthermore, while existing at opposite poles of the extra-human, edgework and bare life do not constitute a mutually exclusive binary set, but rather two polarities of what is better realized as a single complex. Much the way the two sides of a Möbius strip transform seamlessly into one another, the extra-mundane realm of bare life is prone to dramatic reversals, and it is this proximity of ruination to triumph that greatly contributes the sting and frission of excitement experienced as hyperreality.

The sense of *jouissance* we are dealing with in edgework is the particular modulation of a vital substance, a kind of corporeal and spiritual joy without which human life would be unbearable, if not literally inconceivable. A fatal problem with modern, biopolitical societies lies in the way this intimate, life-affirming principle is isolated from its conditions of possibility as a personal and properly relational experience, pursued and produced within a larger and more stable social context, and is instead generalized as an impersonal mode of biopolitical governance. By turning states of exception into the rule, neoliberal capitalism has taken a foundational human good and twisted it into a mechanism for the management of populations, and for the extraction and privatization of surplus value. The production of escalating states of emergency produces *en mass* the kinds of hyperreal affect, the life-and-death scenarios that edgeworkers seek out, then exploits these sites by exercising a social Darwinism designed to divide the population between the fit “survivors” and expendable bare life. Those states that offer a liberating compensation to the necessarily restrictive demands of social life, existing in dialectical tension with the latter, are increasingly being isolated from this social context and generalized so as to supply a kind of hyperreal surrogate for the collective social realm. When this occurs, the promise of liberation and renewal that is offered by these practices quickly turns into a kind of imprisonment, as the social context that gave this liberation meaning has been evacuated of its collective dimensions.

Despite the suppression of the socialized self that occurs in edgework, I would argue that the object-cause of the desire for extreme performances, the *objet petit a* of extreme sports, is not

the adrenaline rush that comes from navigating a narrow window between life and death, but rather the sense of communal or public recognition, the attempted reconstituting of an almost obliterated social bond and agency, that occurs via extreme spectacles.⁶⁴ However, because the root social-economic causes of the initial social fragmentation are not addressed by these practices, the extreme spectacle pushes towards its defining limit in death; it is actually perceived as working best to reconstitute the social bond in exactly this circumstance of the death of the performer him or herself. For only in the situation of death can the bare life of the subject be fully isolated and “freed” from biopolitical governance, thus performing the desire for escape (from precariousness and fragmentation) that drives these practices. It is only peripherally, by interrogating the background of social desire that remains largely unacknowledged in these spectacles, that we can catch a glimpse of the foreclosed social possibilities eclipsed by this focus in individual daring. In the aftermath, when we mourn the passing of these figures, we must interrogate the roots of the feeling of loss being produced: we are saddened by a promising talent cut down in her prime, to be sure, but are we not also mourning something deeper, some loss of the possibility for an “authentic” and communal life that these figures represent? Is not our sense of injustice over the “accidental” factors that produced the tragedy overdetermined, saturated with disavowed frustration and anger regarding the systemic barriers to our own flourishing that we can barely conceptualize let alone contemplate changing under the regime of financialized risk?

⁶⁴ Mark Seltzer makes a similar analysis with his idea of “wound culture,” or a sense of social cohesion organized around the traumatic breaks within the social order (1997).

A Beautiful Death: Market Mechanics of Mourning

If the risky and sometimes fatal pursuits of extreme performers are symptomatic of a larger fragmentation and rendering precarious of the socius, we should acknowledge that our mourning over these athletes' passing is simultaneously a mourning over *our own slow deaths*, our steady, incremental abandonment by and exposure to a machine whose interests are not, ultimately aligned with those of humanity, but to which we remain indentured under late capitalism. In the case of Sarah Burke, this machine takes most immediate form in her corporate sponsors. Monster Energy's Wikipedia page does not, at this writing, list Sarah Burke as one of their sponsored riders, though their official website still has a profile page for her, listing her sporting accomplishments and embellished with a two-sentence sidebar offering condolences to family and friends over her death.⁶⁵ In keeping with predominant workings of the larger media coverage, it seems as though Burke's passing only augments the air of danger and authenticity cultivated by the drink company in distinguishing its brand. Though the Monster Beverage Co. clearly benefits from the risk environment it endorses and helps to materially create, their legally supported disavowal of responsibility for any unfortunate consequences of the same environment reveals the exploitation inherent in the legal and financial structures that make extreme sports possible. Alongside corporate sponsors are the growing media interests, such as ESPN or The

⁶⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monster_Energy> Accessed 15 July 2014; and <<http://www.monsterenergy.com/ca/en/athletes/sarah-burke/>> Accessed 10 April 2012. This page has been significantly updated in the two years since I first accessed it: the sidebar offering condolences has been removed, and several video segments have been uploaded. No reference to Sarah Burke's passing is now registered on the page itself, which merely registers her as from "Canada." Accessed 15 July 2014.

Ski Channel, who create both the physical and the mediated spaces in which extreme sports events occur. While athletes risk their lives in the pursuit of their sport, these outlets reap profit through advertising, endorsements and ticket sales for their events. Not just the discursive space, in the form of the cultural expression of extreme sports, but the institutional and economic coordinates of the franchise are thus constituted around the figure of *homo sacer*. In order to participate in the activity that they see as their calling, athletes like Burke submit beforehand to the possibility of their being reduced to bare life—to a comatose patient in an American hospital whose expensive journey towards death is no longer the responsibility of those corporations situated to benefit most from the event.

In pursuing what is constructed as a purely personal assumption of risk, extreme sports athletes thus legitimate a set of values and relationships that are specific to contemporary, neoliberal capitalist society: these include the individualized assumption of risk (as opposed to its social distribution); a personalized “pushing the limits” and achievement (as opposed to collective projects); a myth of perpetual innovation (where anything is deemed possible, but the danger of being superseded is constant); a temporality that fixates upon a circumscribed, fleeting present (rather than continuity between the past and future); an emphasis on the visual, on the spectacular and on the body; and a constant impetus toward personal growth through competition (both with oneself and others). Importantly, we should add to this list a callous de-valuation of human life itself, for under the new regime of global capital a healthy, well-educated work force is no longer necessary to generate profits. In this situation, we can expect an increase in the

heroicizing of exposure to risk illustrated in the treatments of Burke and Zoricic's deaths.

As Agamben reminds us, “the very body of *homo sacer* is, in its capacity to be killed but not sacrificed, a living pledge to his subjection to a power of death” (*Homo Sacer* 99). And yet, practitioners of extreme sports sustain themselves with the thought that they will be able to escape this subjection, even though the risk of death is part of what renders the practice socially acceptable. Such a stance reveals a kind of seduction, a self-abnegating capitulation to the demands of modern capital—a power structure which, if Agamben is correct, flourishes by the reduction of human subjects to the abject state of *bare life*, or a voiceless object that has lost the ability to testify regarding its own destruction (*Remnants* 156). Within the highly mediated world of extreme sports celebrity, this silencing takes the form of scripted narratives that limit the terms of discourse in a manner that disguises the systemically imposed violence and risk as being merely personally and freely adopted. In an exchange between Sarah Burke and her skier husband, Rory Bushfield, that is part of a Ski Channel’s film *Winter* (Dir. Steve Bellamy 2011), the young couple evoke the acceptance of death on the slopes as romantically galvanizing their relationship:

Burke: ... what our lives are, is being on the hill, and there's a reason for that...It's amazing, it's where we met, it's where we play, we live...

Bushfield (gazing at his wife): And where we'll die.

Burke (gazing back at Bushfield): And hopefully where we die.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ For the full clip see: “An Excerpt from *Winter: Sarah Burke and Rory Bushfield*.” theskichannel.com. 11 Jan. 2012. <<http://www.theskichannel.com/news/20120111/an-excerpt-from-winter-sarah-burke-and-rory-bushfield/>> accessed 15 July 2014. Web.

One is struck, upon watching this exchange, by the youthfulness of Burke and Bushfield, who were 28 and 26 respectively when the video was made. In the prime of their lives, seated in the back seat of a car, the subjects of celebratory media attention, the pair offer a fantasy of romantic fulfillment: two young, attractive and able-bodied Canadians “living their dreams.” The edited short from *Winter* was posted on a Ski Chanel blog on January 11, 2012, a day after Burke's accident and eight days before her passing. Interspersing personal photos, action sequences, everyday life and a romantic wedding narrative, the short goes on to describe Burke as “[t]he winningest, most decorated freeskiier in the history of the sport” and as a kind of feminist hero who “spearheaded the inclusion of women competitions” in action sports venues such as the X Games. After several minutes of expertly produced footage of their wedding, the short ends with the couple sitting on a couch and Rory saying to Sarah “I feel lucky.” The scene then fades to the title “WINTER” on a black background, the large block letters framing more footage from the wedding, underscoring the poignancy of the tragedy that has befallen the couple and the ski community. It is interesting to note how the original, longer film, which features several different athletes and which the Ski Channel released in April 2012, was repurposed into a sombre tribute and memorial focusing on Burke.⁶⁷ In the wake of her accident, the picturesque mountain scenes of falling snow, the extensive wedding footage, and the title of the film itself take on new shades of meaning that highlight the loss, mourning and tragedy that has befallen what the Ski Channel's blog post describes as “the best looking couple in the ski industry” (Keppler). Despite these

⁶⁷ See <http://www.theskichannel.com/ai1ec_event/winter-premiere-presented-by-los-angeles-ski-council/> Accessed April 11 2012.

overtone of tragedy, the video eulogy for Sarah Burke does the double service of promoting the Ski Channel's longer film, imbuing the commercial product with a sense of sacredness. Lost in this mediated apotheosis is any kind of critical attention to the political and economic structures that produced and profited from Burke's untimely passing. The voices of Burke and her bereaved husband are given air time only so long as they help promote the interests and profitability of the action sports franchise.

Sadly, national media accounts do not counter this trend. Written after the added calamity of Zoricic's death a month later, a *National Post* article by Bruce Arthur quotes the same exchange between Burke and Bushfield transcribed above. Arthur writes in a spare, descriptive style that employs a proliferation of conjunctions reminiscent of the Bible or Hemingway, and opens with a solemn description of the memorial paid to the fallen Zoricic by his fellow skicross skiers:

... And they all skied gently down the course and stopped at the final jump—his final jump—and they each took a flower and left the flowers where he landed in a burst of snow and tangle of netting before he slid, unconscious, a little further down the hill. “It was a beautiful thing,” said Canadian skicross coach Eric Archer, choking back tears.
(8)

There is a strange ambiguity regarding the reference of Archer's statement here. He surely meant that the *memorial* was beautiful, though Arthur's composition makes Zoricic's fatal *crash* the grammatical referent of Archer's description. Whether or not this was a Freudian slip, the aestheticizing of spectacular fatality is the general discursive strategy taken by the article, which shies away from any kind of critical analysis regarding larger social responsibility, or the role

played by the rise of extreme sports franchises in the two skiers' deaths. Arthur makes only passing reference to ESPN's X Games, which he describes as having “as a sort of generational necessity been accepted in the Olympics” (8). The narrative that characterizes the rise of action sports venues such as the X Games as an organic response to the demands of a new generation of athletes is supported by the Ski Channel film as well, where the expansion of the franchise to include women is depicted as the result of pressures from individuals such as Burke. In reality, the legitimation of extreme sports and their inclusion in the Winter Olympics are far from the populist, “natural” development that such media characterizations suggest. Rather than a response to popular pressure, the transformation of snowboarding and skateboarding subcultures into the extreme sports movement is the result of a concerted effort on the part of the sporting and related industries to capitalize upon a type of risk-taking activity that was previously serviced only by relatively insignificant niche-markets. Beginning in the mid-nineties, such practices that formerly enjoyed only marginal status as barely tolerated forms of alternative lifestyles have become a new source of revenue for networks like ESPN and drink companies like Monster, Full Throttle, and Red Bull. Archer's characterization of the legitimation of extreme sports as a response to “generational necessity” covers over the corporate fabrication of the extreme franchise, and paints this historical and cultural development as the unavoidable outcome of a seemingly natural process.

Chapter 4

Surfing the Societies of Control: the Politics of Friendship in a Prison without Walls

If the society of control (SoC) theorized by Deleuze and others constitutes a shift from an older disciplinary model based on enclosure strategies, to one in which control is generalized throughout the population via an interlacing of cultural, governmental, technological and institutional apparatuses, then subcultures emerge as part of the set of techniques by which the SoC reproduces itself, changing enough to suit the needs and demands of subaltern groups, but keeping key elements—such as the imperative towards surplus profit, exploitation, individualism, and class hierarchies—intact.⁶⁸ In the midst of a sea change in which “everywhere, *surfing* has already replaced the older *sports*,” it might seem that subcultural subjects like skateboarders are only fooling themselves in continuing to uphold their subcultural as a mode of resistance (Deleuze 5, orig. emphases). My previous chapter examined how the extreme sports franchise, seen as a symptom of the shift to the commoditization of risk via finance capitalism, actually celebrates precarious forms of subjectivity that help reinforce and naturalize the production of bare life under neoliberal biopolitics. In this vision, the social sphere begins to resemble a kind of prison without walls whose disciplinary structures work all the more effectively due to subcultural apparatuses that attempt to cast precariousness and risk-taking as forms of freedom and rebellion. And yet, in keeping with the Lacanian iteration of the symptom/sinthome, this compromise with domination is also a mode of survival that keeps alive

⁶⁸ For Deleuze’s iteration of the societies of control, see “Postscript.” Hardt and Negri further articulate this idea with their description of “biopolitical societies of control” (*Empire* 23-27).

a sense of self and agency in the midst of increasingly limited opportunities for solidarity and political engagement. According to sinthomic logic, our real social desire can only be arrived at *indirectly* as the unintended consequence of an activity whose structuring drives remain hidden from us. In considering the political content of subcultures, we need to address their potential to bring new kinds of solidarities, friendships, and ways of doing and being into existence. These operations, while perhaps seeming peripheral to subjects caught up in this or that subcultural practice, form a reservoir of possibilities for social transformation.

In this chapter, I introduce the idea of *spatial-temporal incorporation* to describe the process by which capitalism attempts to absorb these alternative tendencies and redirect them towards maintaining the status quo. Drawing from Foucault's concept of heterotopia as a space of difference where everyday social relations are overturned or redefined, I suggest that these kinds of spaces have become central to reproducing the system as given, and even provide one of the abstract "diagrams" for societies of control. At the same time, heterotopias provide the opportunity for the new solidarities to form across lines of division that otherwise might prove difficult to surmount. After providing a theorization of spatial-temporal incorporation, illustrated by examples taken from skateboard and activist cultures, I will turn to an examination of Agamben's assertion of friendship as foundational to politics. This assertion of a positive content on which to model our hopes and expectations for a more just and liveable world is key to understanding the politically progressive potential of subcultural formations. In order to work toward changing society, people must first have an experience of something different from the

kinds of controlled, aestheticized and depoliticized spaces and temporalities that are generally encouraged by societies of control. These positive and foundational experiences of difference are found in art, religion, and activism, but also in subcultures, which can thus play a crucial role, despite all of their compromises, in providing utopian experiences that might lead to substantive, social change.

Spatial-Temporal Incorporation and the Biopolitical Reordering of Common Space

Whereas Dick Hebdige articulated two forms of incorporation—the marketing of subcultural innovations (commodity form) and mocking, criminalizing or otherwise discrediting them (ideological form)—I posit a third, spatial-temporal form of incorporation that gains prominence and reinforces the other two in the context of the biopolitical societies of control. *Spatial-temporal incorporation* describes the way lived social space is structured so as to domesticate cultural and political difference, making time and space themselves vehicles of dominant ideology. Just as institutions, practices and rituals have the ability to translate the phantasmic elements of ideological identification into material structures that allow for their reproduction (Althusser 215-16), so too does the social construction of space in its lived, embodied, temporal dimension work to reproduce, and also challenge, ideological formations. Because political rule is an ongoing process by which those in power react to challenges levelled by the subjugated—a process that is complicated in unpredictable ways by changes in technology and the environment—spatial-temporal incorporation is a key mechanism by means

of which the politics of hegemony unfolds in permissive, biopolitical societies. However, because subjectively experienced time and space are akin to background processes that often work unnoticed, and because changes in the spatial-temporal dimensions of shared environments are often wrought at structural levels through developments in architecture, city planning, transportation, technology, communication, media and artistic production, the ideological effects of time and space likewise often go unnoticed in our everyday experience. The exception to this unconsciousness occurs when a sufficiently abrupt change allows for the conditioning of our time-space sensibility to be directly experienced, as happens, for instance, when a long day spent driving a car produces a sense of acceleration to occur when one is resting in bed.

While the spectral sense of automobile motion one experiences when at rest is an example of the historical construction of space-time being accidentally registered, there are many practices designed to intentionally produce an experience of spatial-temporal disorientation and difference. Such practices cover a range of activities, from those performed for pleasure or distraction, such as the rides at an amusement park, to politically motivated interventions into the spatial-temporal order, such as parades or organized strike and slow-down actions. Located between leisure and politics, and so combining aspects of both, subcultural practices also form an important intervention into the given spatial-temporal order. Subcultures often challenge or reinvent these categories, providing forms of alterity and resistance to the dominant order, but also supply new templates by which those in power might further refine the repertoire of strategies for control. The various notions of “dropping out” found in countercultural movements

from the beatniks of the fifties to the hippies of the sixties and the punks of the seventies and eighties—a family of practices ranging from road trips, to café culture, to communes, squats, mosh pits, and other forms of spatial-temporal alterity—constitute a rejection of the rationalization of time and space provided by the Fordist “technocracy” and the market fundamentalism of the Reagan-Thatcher era that followed. The all-night raves that became popular in the nineties supply another good example of an alterity that is both spatial (raves often take place in abandoned warehouses and other re-purposed spaces) and temporal (the sense of dancing all night, often augmented by drugs, creates an “oceanic” feeling of timelessness [Ueno 104-5]). Subcultural practices play an important role in compensating for the repressive elements built into space-time by ruling interests, and can even act as laboratories for cultivating the kinds of experiences and relationships that might develop, under the right political conditions, into new social formations. Such practices, however, are also of keen interest to the ruling powers themselves, who pay close attention to the spatial-temporal dimensions of practices of dissent. Does not the all-night rave, for instance, supply a template for nocturnal art festivals like Toronto's *Nuit Blanche* where everyday urban spaces are temporarily aestheticized and infused with the energy of carnival, and where the thrill of retail stores being open long into the night replaces the oceanic intoxication of the rave with a heady commoditization of the crowd itself? Boltanski and Chiapello's description of the incorporation of dissent, whereby the exploitative structure of naked capitalism is in dire need of critical resistance in order to supply the human content used to sell the system to the larger public, should be extended to subcultural formations

as well, as these are continually being cannibalized for useful strategies that might be employed in service of hegemony. A particularly clear example of the spatial-temporal incorporation of subculture is supplied by Ocean Howell's description of the dialectical relationship between the development of street skateboarding and the refinement of the “poetics of security” by which public space is given the appearance of inclusivity while actually reproducing the narrow interests of class privilege (“Poetics” 11, 14-15). After an overview of some theories that support the historical malleability of space and time as an ideological-perceptual apparatus, it is to Howell's history of street skating that I will turn.

The Historical Construction of Space and Time

Though changes in our collective understanding of time and space are most often linked to advances in scientific knowledge, with the classical Ptolemaic vision of Earth at the centre of a series of concentric, heavenly spheres being replaced by the Copernican model, which in turn is challenged by Einstein's relativity theory, then quantum physics, and so on, these shifts can equally be seen as intrinsically related to changes in the social mode of production. From a materialist perspective, the emergence of capitalism both reinforces and is reinforced by the shift from the androcentric co-ordinates of the Middle Ages to the Newtonian vision of time and space as an abstract, fixed grid that supplies the invisible and empty “stage” upon which the projects of expansion and empire take place (Harvey *Condition* ch.15). What we could call the centrifugal, extensive trajectory of capital—its expanding, geographic annexing of territory—also involves a

complementary, centripetal or intensive countermovement: as new regions and cultures fall under capital's rationalizing impetus, new disciplinary modes are required to keep subjects in line, apparatuses that often are at least partially adapted from the cultural forms of the subjugated themselves. In response to this demand of capital for new, humanizing “content,” the European naive realist view of empty, homogenous space and time existing “out there” needs to be refined to take account of space-time's socially constructed nature. A move towards this view was made in Enlightenment thought itself with the transcendental idealism of Kant and Schopenhauer, for whom time and space are two of the universal *a priori* categories that shape all possible perceptions of the world.⁶⁹ These philosophers were the first moderns to take the revolutionary step of de-naturalizing time and space by distinguishing them as universal attributes of *human* perception (the “preconditions to any experience whatsoever”) rather than actually existing elements of the world apart from human experience. For Kant and Schopenhauer, these categories, though subjective, are still “fixed” and devoid of content, adhering to the Newtonian grid and empty, formal sequentiality. Kant and Schopenhauer's interiorization of space and time as “transcendental” human, *a priori* categories signals exactly the kind of centripetal move characterized by spatial-temporal incorporation: by implanting capitalism's rationalized space-time as the very foundation of human consciousness and experience, modes of domination are subjectivized as well as extended across the globe through colonization. We might even go so far

⁶⁹ See Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (76-104), *Prolegomena* (35-40) and Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation, vol.1* (30-31). Kant had further *a priori* categories such as quantity, quality, relation and modality, but Schopenhauer reduced these to the triad of time, space and causality (*World vol.2*, 33-54).

as to say that the empty, homogenous space and time of capitalist modernity is the ideological nexus point whereat the “contentless” essence of capitalism—its a-moral, purely mechanical, expansive and exploitative structure—is implanted as the *fundamental matrix of subjectivity*, a kind of invisible grid to be filled with the various humanizing contents that make the imperatives of capital seem like the best and natural way of ordering human affairs.

But the Kantian move of subjectivizing space and time also opens the door to a subversive undermining of this apparatus, since revealing space and time as human constructs (albeit fixed and pre-conscious ones) is but a step away from admitting to their historically shifting and relative character. As inheritors of the hermeneutics of suspicion introduced by Nietzsche, Freud and Marx, contemporary critical theory has taken this further step of relativizing and historicizing time, space and causality, revealing the way these seemingly universal “preconditions” of experience are themselves conditioned by historically specific power structures. A detailed history of the developments that have delivered this vision is beyond the scope of the current project, but it would have to include Nietzsche's insistence on the role played by will and desire on shaping our allegedly “objective” truths about the world, Marx's ideas about the structuring of culture, institutions and geopolitics according to the demands of commodity production, and Freud's ideas of the unconscious as a layered reservoir of unacknowledged determinates of behaviour and perception. These three influences are combined in such twentieth-century treatments as Walter Benjamin's descriptions of how our sense of time, space and subjectivity are manipulated by the advent of film (236), as well as his

idea, from the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, of a Messianic time by which lost moments of possibility become realized and appreciated as such, retroactively changing our understanding of history (253-64).

While time was also a central concern for such philosophers and psychologists as Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, William James, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre, it was not until the latter half of the twentieth century that the historical malleability of our sense of space and time as a socially produced, historically contingent matrix for hegemonic struggle was theorized in detail. Henri Lefebvre's groundbreaking book *The Production of Social Space* (1973) provides a major landmark for providing a Marxian analysis of the importance of space in the reorganization of everyday life under capitalism. Of especial use are Lefebvre's categories of *representational spaces* as those officially determined spaces that “tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs” and, by contrast, his *spaces of representation* as harbouring “the clandestine or underground side of social life, [and] also [of] art” (39).⁷⁰ We come across a similar idea in Michel de Certeau's description of the spatial *strategies* by which a dominant group inscribe power structures favourable to their interests into the built environment, while subordinated groups make *tactical* interventions that temporarily subvert this order (*Practice* xix-xxii). One of de Certeau's great innovations consists in his identifying time as essential to the subaltern tactics that roughly correspond to Lefebvre's “spaces

⁷⁰ Lefebvre's distinction between these two aspects of social space echoes Erving Goffman's division between “frontstage” and “backstage” processes at work in the performance of social identities. While the frontstage describes the spaces of official and visible presentation (akin to Lefebvre's representational space), the backstage is that less formal realm more tolerant of contradiction and dissent (akin to spaces of representation) (Goffman ch.3).

of representation.” Indeed, for these and other contemporary theorists, spatial structures tend to hold the imprint of domination while time is coded as a mode of resistance to, and possible reform of, these relatively fixed structures.⁷¹ But this formula takes on a whole new character in the context of the permissive, biopolitical SoCs, where de-centred and temporally nuanced “flows” make issues of timing, contiguity, camouflage and re-assemblage key implements in the toolbox of dominant social agents—operators who have found ways of adapting subaltern tactics of resistance to their own ends.⁷² In terms of Deleuze's zoological metaphor, the snake has swallowed the mole and begun recoding the burrower's spatial strategies according to the serpentine undulations of temporal disjointedness, pulse, ambiguity, illusion and flux (“Postscript” 5,7). Spatial-temporal incorporation gives a name to the manner in which rhythm and sequence, staging and spectacle, have become integral to the production and maintenance of a policed order that hides its restrictive character behind a facade of openness, accessibility and difference. This is only the most recent movement in a history of shifts in our everyday understanding of space and time, a history in which the demands of dominant social structures like capitalism and patriarchy must contend with both emergent and residual challenges.

⁷¹ The prioritizing of time over space in contemporary visions of emancipatory agency can be traced back to Hegel and Marx's ideas of historical progression, though they assuredly have a deeper genealogy linked to the idea of linear time and revelation that structures Judeo-Christian thought. Edward Soja examines the modern emphasis on history over geography in *Postmodern Geographies* (Ch.1).

⁷² The importance of time as an essential co-ordinate of late capital's control structures is supplied by Jameson's analysis of the flattening of historical sensibility under postmodernism (*Postmodernism* 6), and the resulting narrowing of attention to the present and the body (“End”). However, an added twist of our permissive societies of control is supplied in the way subaltern, temporal tactics have been adopted by dominant power structures to make subjugation seem like liberation, an example of which is provided by the fetishism of technological gadgets like the iPhone that blur the line between work and leisure, public and private life, access to information and surveillance.

While the idea that time and space are malleable, historically shifting categories has gained traction thanks to postmodern and poststructural theories, at the level of everyday life experience there is a lingering “common sense” adherence to the Newtonian vision that posits time and space as an empty, fixed grid “filled” by the things of the world. That dominant ways of perceiving time and space *do* change over history has been effectively demonstrated by the emergence, in the seventies and eighties, of a Marxist-informed critical geography, and by feminist geographers and philosophers who challenge the patriarchal biases inherent in apperceptual structures. Alongside drawing attention to the socially constructed and historically changing nature of space and time as perceptual categories, some of these critics have also challenged the emphasis on time as the progressive and active element over and against a spatial dimension that is depicted as conservative and reactive. Thus does Edward Soja make an argument for the emergence of space and geography, and particularly urban spaces, as crucial elements in a Marxian analysis of the political potentialities of modernity (*Postmodern* 54-56).⁷³ Also writing from a Marxist perspective, David Harvey links the contemporary experience of the shrinking of geographical distance and the acceleration of lived time—his famous “time-space compression”—to the lurching transformations of the capitalist system itself as it attempts to instrumentalize ever greater portions of the globe while at the same time responding to internal systemic crises that necessitate an incessant jumping of scales (*Condition* chs. 15-16). Harvey's account links shifts in Western modes of experiencing space and time to changes both *between*

⁷³ See also David Harvey's book *Rebel Cities* (2012).

modes of production and *within* capitalism itself, a trajectory that moves from the relatively fixed and circumscribed, subjective spaces of feudalism, to the objectively perspectival and rationalized space-time of the Enlightenment, to the fragmented presentism and perspectivism of modernity and postmodernity.

Like Soja, feminist geographer Doreen Massey challenges the binary logic that favours time over space as the progressive, politically active element, arguing for a constantly changing and multiple “space-time” as both producing and produced by “networks of relations at every scale from the local to global” (256). Philosopher Elizabeth Grosz similarly disrupts the binary systems that link time and space to other, usually gender-coded dichotomies such as transcendence/immanence and spirit/body. Grosz offers a vision of subjectivity as reflexively continuous with—both shaping and shaped by—spatial-temporal paradigms. Her hypothesis that “as representations of subjectivity have changed, so too did representation of space and time” links changes in dominant spatial-temporal paradigms to social processes of subjectification in the hopes of counteracting what she identifies as a male bias in our conceptions of time and space (99-101). Via this heuristic, Grosz sketches three modern shifts in time-space paradigms of subjectivity: a Kantian concept of centred (though, we must add, formally empty) subjectivity that correlates to the Newtonian physics of fixed points; a decentred Freudian subject corresponding to the Einsteinian universe of relativity; and an emergent third, post-modern self corresponding to “the virtuality of cyberspace and its attendant modes of respatialization”

(100).⁷⁴ Grosz's model of subjectification, with its emphasis on the production of time and space as ways of navigating, and sometimes rupturing, the dominant social order, can help us understand the mechanics of spatial-temporal incorporation, though for Grosz economic paradigms are largely overlooked in favour of a potentially essentializing move in which “the bodies of each sex need to be accorded the possibility of a different space-time framework”

(100). This potential blind spot in Grosz's analysis points to the need for an intersectional approach to challenging the incorporation of alternative space-time configurations. Without a two-pronged approach that addresses both patriarchy *and* economy, feminist politicizations of space and time risk advancing in a manner that leaves the overarching structures of economic exploitation and discrimination intact. Equally problematically, Marxian criticism often remains committed to grand narratives involving the unfolding of economics with an aim towards social revolution, and so risks overlooking normative gender-coded binaries, localized forms of resistance, and other epistemic prejudices in its analysis. It is here that feminist analysis can be very useful in pointing out missed opportunities for heterogeneity, coalitional politics, and anti-essentializing thought, as Massey does in her critique of the bias in strands of contemporary Marxism where a “progressive” historical axis takes precedence over spatial considerations

⁷⁴ A point of transition between the Kantian-Newtonian and Freudian-Einsteinian paradigm is supplied by Schopenhauer, who takes the empty place holder posited by Kant as the “thing in itself,” and fills it with the plethora of affect and impulse he designates as “will.” The Schopenhauerian nexus point allows us to see that the paradigm shifts articulated by Grosz are not discontinuous mutations but rather form a continuity, the overarching attribute of which is, on the side of subjectivity, the historical emergence and then dissolution of the monadic, bourgeois self, while on the side of social collectivity the emergence and mutations of capitalism supply the horizon of these changes.

deemed inherently restrictive (257-60).

Though I have not been able to treat the subject in adequate detail in this current project, paying attention to the way the gendered coding of time and space intersects with, reinforces, and sometimes disrupts the cultural dominant of patriarchal capitalism is an important avenue for further research into subcultural production. Important scholarship has demonstrated that, despite championing an individualistic, non-conformist vision of creativity and authenticity, skateboard culture yet reproduces masculinist biases, devaluing female participants even while asserting alternatives to dominant models of male sports identity (Beal & Weidman 344-45, 349-50; Beal “Alternative”). Following this lead, further research could be done into the way in which discriminatory gender biases are reinforced through skateboard culture by inscribing these value-laden binaries into social space itself. To cite just one example, the technical “freestyle” tricks that Rodney Mullen helped introduce into the lexicon of street skating in the eighties and nineties has been described as the “feminine” side of skateboarding because it relies heavily on gymnastically oriented moves that require a great deal of finesse and balance.⁷⁵ Freestyle is performed on flat ground, and does not involve the kind of “extreme” navigation of dangerous obstacles (like stairs, gaps, and even rooftops) that contemporary skateboard culture offers as a model of masculine prowess. To code the dangerous, “extreme” form of the sport as masculine and the technical, gymnastic form as feminine is to reinforce hegemonic, masculinist divisions. Because freestyle is not based on finding new terrain, but instead focuses on innovative new uses

⁷⁵ In the documentary *Rodney Mullen—From the Ground Up* (2002), professional skater Jeremy Klein simultaneously codes and discounts freestyle skateboarding as feminine: “Freestyle just looks like it’s a ballerina type thing...it seems like it’s more the feminine style of skating. So I think that’s why it died.”

of the skateboard itself, the division between “introverted” freestyle skating and the territorial imperative of contemporary street skating also serves to reinforce the gendered division of social spaces, in which the “public” realm of the streets is coded as a primarily male territory. A skateboard culture that did not rely on and reinforce gendered stereotypes would make the potentially progressive elements of skate culture accessible to a wider range of people. We could even say that patriarchal gender biases constitute one of the major obstructions to recognizing the true dimensions of the common nature of skate culture, and that challenging these biases is integral to making this common culture politically effective for progressive change. Furthermore, in terms of the role played by skate culture in furthering processes of gentrification that I will examine in the final chapter, because the common skateboard culture that contemporary gentrification schemes seek to capitalize upon is already predominantly masculinist, it is much easier for dominant culture to incorporate its potentially resistant elements into discourses and programs that reinforce, rather than challenge the hegemony of the white, middle-class male subject. Pursuing a mode of analysis that recognizes patriarchal biases as essential to the reproduction of capitalist modes of exploitation can thus build more effective modes of critique, resistance and social transformation.

If All the World's a Stage, what does that Make a Parking Lot?

Ocean Howell supplies an illustrative example of temporal-spatial incorporation at work in his description of the dialectical relationship between the skateboarding subculture and

changes in the production of public space that occur in post-World War Two urban redevelopment. Skateboarding in the street, or street skating, emerged in the late seventies and early eighties when the closing of privately run skateboard parks left skateboarders searching for new places to practice their sport (Chiu 27; Howell “Poetics” 4). As Howell points out, post-World War Two urban re-development “where street life was forcibly subverted to property values” cleared away large swaths of low-income housing and replaced it with barren, “defensive” plazas and architecture designed to “exclude the marginalized people whose neighbourhoods they supplanted” (3). These levelled and redeveloped inner-city spaces such as the Bunker Hill area in Los Angeles or the Golden Gateway Redevelopment in San Francisco are identified by Howell as the birth places of modern street skating, an aggressive, temporary, and sometimes destructive tactical re-appropriation of these corporatized, privatized developments (6-7). But if the temporary re-colonizing of these defensive spaces of privilege constitutes a kind of “return of the repressed”—an influx of unwanted subjects that includes, alongside the skaters, the dispossessed original inhabitants of these areas (the homeless, mentally ill, the working poor, students, and so on)—then the very presence of these populations constitutes a sign of the failure of the redeveloped space to attract the kind of affluent, bourgeois subjects for whom the spaces were redesigned. Skateboarding as “urban pathology” thus emerges as a symptom of a failed attempt at exclusionary redevelopment (Howell “Poetics” 2). The “poetics of security,” a term Howell adopts from governmental literature surrounding the architectural competition for the Philip Burton Federal Building in San Francisco, supplies a descriptor for the managerial

response to this failed enclosure strategy. As a refinement of the disciplinary measures of surveillance and internalized coercion outlined by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, the poetics of security “must be proscriptive, but appear humanist” (Howell “Poetics” 11). Skaters have become very familiar with iterations of this strategy over the past couple decades, as the designers of urban spaces modify benches, ledges, handrails and curbs to make it almost impossible to skate on them.⁷⁶ The process of “capping” sites that skaters use or might use provides a good example of the incorporative logic described by Howell. Through a process of “surveillance and simulation” private interests study subcultural uses of space and “meticulously document any challenging social formation—any activity that draws attention to the commercial nature of public space—then vilify it as a threat to the public while simultaneously claiming a sanitized version of the culture's philosophy as their own” (“Poetics” 3). Skaters challenge the bias towards commercial activity that is built into public space by using these spaces in a way that produces corporeal, aesthetic and social pleasure. Rather than purchasing commoditized substitutes for our needs for leisure, free activity and community, skateboarders “produce” these experiences for themselves using the very architecture that is designed to alienate them from any such direct (non-commoditized) experiences. Though skateboarding culture is thoroughly commoditized, the primary *practice* of skateboarding acts as an outside to this commoditization—a source of “authentic” experience and confrontation with the Real that is

⁷⁶ In the Guardian newspaper Ben Quinn critiques the proliferation of “hostile” or “defensible architecture” used to deter skateboarders, teenagers and homeless people from using public space. He links this kind of restrictive managing of public space through environmental design to a growing social neglect of issues like poverty and homelessness.

constantly drawn into the commoditized realm of the subculture.⁷⁷ This practical production of a new kind of space and time poses a direct challenge to the biopolitical control structures that attempt to delimit social space in the interests of capital and the commodity form. However, simply banning or criminalizing skateboarding does not work, as skaters will return to a favourable spot despite the risk of getting ticketed or having their skateboard taken away. Furthermore, such policing of space provides explicit evidence of the generalized tendency to control and limit how citizens use their allegedly public spaces. Installing aesthetically pleasing structural elements that prevent skaters from using a space is the solution that many cities have thus arrived at for controlling this activity (Howell “Poetics” 11). Innocuous but effective, these strategies are examples of spatial-temporal incorporation: by carefully studying skateboarder's use of public space, planners, architects and property owners have found a way to create an exclusive urban space while keeping the *appearance* of openness and inclusivity.

⁷⁷ This model of an outside that is drawn into discourse is further articulated by Elizabeth Grosz's Deleuzian vision of architecture (*Architecture* 66-72).



Fig.8. Becca's H (Robert Murray, 1973), with anti-skateboarding wall and boulders. Photo by Simon

Two Canadian examples will help illustrate this shift, which is linked to the wide adoption of the principles of CPTED, or “Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design.” The first comes from *Becca's H*, a public art work by Robert Murray that was installed in 1973 in front of the University of Toronto's Applied Science and Engineering building on St. George Street in Toronto. This sculpture features a sheet of metal set at a medium angle

that slopes from the sidewalk towards the building, and which is placed between two,

upright metal support beams (which supply the two vertical poles of the “H”). The overall effect of the piece is to invite the eyes of passersby up from the sidewalk, between the two posts and towards the facade of the flanking building, producing a system of gestural site-lines that reinforce a continuity between the space of the engineering building and that of the street. The maroon-painted incline that spatially creates this sense of invitation had also long been used by skateboarders as a sloped surface on which to skate and do tricks, a practice that left arced wheel marks as an unintended embellishment on the sculpture. When I visited Toronto in September of 2013, I noticed that a low stone wall had been erected in front of the statue, an obvious move to

prevent skateboarders from riding on the sculpture. Two granite boulders were also placed on either side of the sloped sheet, behind the barrier, ensuring that nobody would try to navigate the narrow space between the sculpture and wall. The sculpture had been effectively sealed off from the profane use of the skaters. In making these additions, however, the artwork itself was transformed: the ground-level point of connection that made the vertical sloping plane continuous with the street, thus producing the sense of invitation, movement and openness, had been sealed off and in its place bricks and boulders served as sentries highlighting the artwork's status as private property. This rather blunt and artless instance of the Poetics of Security draws attention to how the restructuring of social space reinforces exclusivity, privilege and division. In the case of *Becca's H*, this exclusion is both aesthetic, in the violence the modifications have done to the original spatial flow of the artwork and surrounding area, and physical, in the sense of removing the ability of skateboarders and others to actually interact with and enjoy the piece.



*Figure 9. Maple leaf anti-skateboarding devices.
Photo by Simon Orpana, 2013.*

My second example is more subtle but equally troubling in that it is an illustration of the erasure of truly shared, public and common space in favour of controlled and limited uses that disguise their exclusionary operation via a nationalistic visual rhetoric. Rectangular, slab-style benches near the canal in downtown Ottawa offer an enticing feature for skaters who can use the edges of the benches for grinding and sliding along, and the tops for riding across and off. “Pig ears” is a name given to a variety of metal clips and studs that are installed on the edges of benches, ledges and handrails to effectively deter skateboarders from using them (Howell “Poetics” 11). The adoption of pig ears, however, vex more than just skateboarders, as they constitute a visible sign of the increasingly exclusionary and conflicted nature of urban space. Howell cites a letter from a middle-aged woman to the *San Francisco Examiner* who describes the pig ears as “mean spirited” and “far uglier and distracting than the skateboard marks” (Fuller, qtd. in Howell “Poetics” 11). The pig ears used in downtown Ottawa are aesthetically designed to disguise the disciplinary role they play in relation to skateboarders, the homeless and other “delinquent” uses of public space. Shaped like thick maple leaves, the pig ears are bent over the side of the ledge in

an artistic manner reminiscent of Salvador Dali's melting clocks from *The Persistence of Memory*. Unlike Dali's well-known and enigmatic painting, however, the Ottawa pig ears work to two very specific ends: their aesthetic fashioning both disguises their status as a disciplinary implement and reinforces a nationalistic agenda grounded in policing and security. While the aestheticized message of inclusivity of the *Becca's H* sculpture was crudely undermined by efforts to protect the piece from skateboarders (effectively destroying the piece in an effort to preserve it), Ottawa's pig ears display an inverse logic whereby the policing of public space is being covered over by a hypocritical, aestheticized gesture towards cultural and national inclusion.

While the maple leaf as national symbol has become associated with diversity, tolerance and inclusion to the extent that non-Canadians travelling abroad will sometimes sport the Canadian maple leaf on their backpacks because of the warm reception it often elicits (or once did), the appropriation of this symbol as a policing tool is in keeping with a recent re-coding of the symbol to emphasize the state's ability to maintain law, order and a narrow set of colonial cultural values and economic paradigms. Refuting the gesture towards openness and inclusion that characterized the Canadian national imaginary through the sixties, seventies and eighties, the maple leaf pig ears on Ottawa benches are continuous with a politics that attempts to shut down or limit the nation as a space of difference, discussion and exchange. Linking the policing of public space to a nationalist agenda, the devices transmit the message: "the securing of this bench from misuse and vandalism has been brought to you by the Government of Canada." This

small detail of urban coding fits with a larger pattern regarding the increased policing and limiting of public space, a more flagrant example of which is supplied by Prime Minister Stephen Harper's placing several city blocks of downtown Toronto on lockdown during the G20 Summit of June 2010. The manhandling and mass jailing of peaceful protesters by Harper's assembled security force had the practical effect of shutting down embodied critique of the process by which elected government leaders meet with powerful corporate interests, behind closed doors and with no accountability to the public, to develop strategies for managing our collective resources and lives. But there was another political statement encoded in Harper's excessive use of force, a statement made without words but rather *performed* through spaces, fences, and security guards. By placing the city centre on lockdown and effectively criminalizing the public exercise of the right to peaceful assembly, Harper made a statement about the ability of his government to maintain law and order *spatially*—to rule by force and spatial coercion rather than open debate, and to keep governmental policies and agendas from being disrupted, or even discussed.

Though the spectacular G20 example of the largest mass arrest in Canadian history might seem a far cry from the comparatively unassuming installation of anti-skateboarding devices on Ottawa's public benches, these two developments partake in a shared logic of the biopolitical reordering of social space. This reordering identifies and authorizes ahead of time which subjects are permitted in public spaces, thus narrowing opportunities for difference and discussion, and replacing heterogeneous, diverse and common space with a “simulacrum of the social” (Hardt

“Withering” 39-40). Of course, skateboarders cause damage to infrastructure in the form of chips and scuff marks, and their activity can be perceived as loud, dangerous and intimidating by the general public, facts that support subtle interventions like the pig ears. But one of the defining characteristics of the common social space that is so vital to the life and development of cities and societies is its ability to foster ongoing discussion and debate over the very composition and use of that space. Questions of who belongs where, what gets recognized as “legitimate” culture and expression, whose interests are being served and often invisibly encoded into spaces and institutions must be asked, and continually re-asked, for the democratic invigoration of everyday life and culture. In fact, I would argue that the ability to continually (re)consider the very conditions that make our collective lives possible is one of the fundamental, ongoing processes that constitute collective life. The specific use that skateboarders make of public space does, in fact, constitute a privatization of sorts to the extent that skaters appropriate property for their own, idiosyncratic and subcultural pleasure. In doing so, they often make a particular space at least temporarily unavailable for use by other members of the public. However, I would argue that in the context of the subtle but pervasive privatization of public space that is characteristic of our biopolitical, late capitalist context, the idiosyncratic privatization performed by skateboarders is perceived as offensive, not because it is a reprivatisation *per se*, but because it is the “wrong” group of people who are enacting it. A double standard is implicit in the restrictions placed on “deviant” uses of space such as skateboarding or graffiti in that it is deemed fine for a private company to infringe upon public space with billboards and advertisements, or for legitimated

middle-class patrons of a park to enforce their own vision of what a proper use of such space should be, but when the heterogeneous practices of skateboarders, street artists, the homeless or street-involved sex workers intervene in public space it is perceived as obstreperous “noise” disruption, crime and vandalism. Of course, practices like skateboarding or street art have increasingly come to transcend class boundaries in a way that homelessness and sex-work cannot, and so the urban spatial politics that underpin these different activities are complex and specific to particular contexts. Skateboarders nowadays are as likely to hearken from privileged as poorer neighbourhoods, and so casting their often noisy and destructive uses of public space as automatically progressive or “resistant” steers us into a number of contradictions and complexities. And yet, the noise and scuff of skaters in streets, plazas and parks constitutes the signature of a kind of enjoyment and sharing of place that is often denied citizens in our increasingly controlled and aestheticized “public” spaces. For all the annoyance that these practices elicit, the breach with accepted uses they perform at least opens a space for conversation about the constitution of shared, common spaces, a discussion that contemporary societies of control seem increasingly eager to shut down.

What Makes Life worth Living?: From Bare to Bearable Life

A blending of Marxian and feminist perspectives provides us with a powerful approach for understanding, challenging and transforming ideas about space and time in ways that might provide resistance to the machinery of spatial-temporal incorporation. Combining issues of

public space, economics and gender Judith Butler's 2011 lecture "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street" examines the Tahrir Square protests to frame a theory of human rights grounded in performative, interpersonal, public acts. Butler argues that what Hannah Arendt calls the political "space of appearance" is constituted through "plural action" when bodies gather in a place where they appear to one another (para. 2). However, Butler supplements Arendt's analysis by emphasizing the role played by largely female labour in supplying the often hidden networks of care and support that make such sustained political actions in the space of appearance possible. By disrupting everyday time and space, revolutionary time critiques the "established architecture" of power (para.3) and makes a claim for greater justice, in part by exposing those normally private realms of social and material reproduction to public view: the women who to part in the protest by sleeping in the square and attending to everyday needs like food and shelter brought the material supports of political action—part of the very thing being fought over—into view as a performative, political act (para.2). Butler's argument reveals the gendered division of labour and the social production of space as intrinsically linked in the struggle for political emancipation and human rights. Though she makes what is becoming an almost *de rigueur* move in leftist political theories of rejecting Agamben's conception of bare life as overly apocalyptic, passive and depoliticizing, her argument is couched in biopolitical terms, such as Arendt's idea of bodies being imbued with a "right to have rights...that depends on no existing particular political organization for its legitimacy" (para.10). But if this right predates any political organization that might act as guarantor, then it has, as such, only a performative

claim to legitimacy: it is tied solely to the bare force and popular support that the individual or group exercising it can muster. In contrast to Butler's dismissive reading of Agamben, I think that her description of the performative, retroactively self-justifying origin of the political could provide a productive answer to Agamben's call for alternatives to forms of power constituted through the production and exclusion of bare life. Butler's argument about the performative element in political space highlights a point that will be key in the discussion of the subcultural production of time and space that is to follow, namely, that *open and inclusive, common public space is constituted by the ongoing activity of open and inclusive discussion about what constitutes that space in the first place*. It is this never-completed process of conversation and re-examination, rather than the establishing of definitive origin myths (which so often ground themselves in the production of an excluded, depoliticized other), that is the founding principle of truly public and politically alive spaces.

What we could call the necessarily performative nature of public space does not, however, guarantee that the process of discussion that constitutes it will be transparently open and inclusive. A discussion about re-zoning a city block, for instance, might be ostensibly “open” to the public while actually tacitly excluding many people, like street-involved youth or sex workers who do not feel welcome or safe at such “public” forums, or immigrants who might lack the language or social skills to navigate this space. It is for this reason that any performative assertion of rights and equity must establish a relationship to history that, while avoiding the reification of origin myths, grounds itself in an historical series that links it to the ongoing

process of human struggle for a better world. Only through a materialist, historical grounding can “the right to have rights” be distinguished from spurious claims to power that appropriate a progressive or revolutionary rhetoric in service of maintaining an exploitative and unjust status quo. Our current era is replete with such counterfeit claims, from the conservative right buttressing itself with what it has rebranded as an “insurgent media,” to bids to recast white Europeans as an oppressed racial minority, to gentrification and management strategies that appropriate the language of “creativity” and countercultural subversion in service of class-based exploitation. These tactical manoeuvres are part of the larger process of incorporation by which dominant structures attempt to ground their claims to legitimacy by selectively appropriating the language and practices of subaltern formations. As a group of incorporation strategies, they point to the way that domination in general, and capitalist patriarchy in particular, is never truly creative but must rather expropriate and absorb the creative energies that sustain it from the subjugated classes. This insight, however, requires historical contextualization to remain pertinent under the changing conditions of contemporary capitalism. While class has historically been defined externally by one's relationship to the means of production, under the societies of control it has undergone an intensifying shift that is part of what Hardt and Negri call the hegemonic regime of immaterial labour (*Multitude* 108-115). In the societies of control we might consider the division between the working and ruling class to be both an external division between those who enjoy positions of power and security and those who don't, as well as an *internal division within subjects* separating the creative but exploited element of labour from its

dominating structures. Rather than defining the workers in classical Marxist terms as a group united by their alienated labour—a model that makes sense under the Fordist regime of enclosure structures—the societies of control generalize a process of internalization by which the immaterial labourer is encouraged to exploit, discipline and alienate him or herself.⁷⁸ The appropriation of the language of creativity and innovation by the professional, managerial class is just one example of the way this internalized division is currently reproduced. Rather than the capital/labour binary that was manifest under industrial capitalism, immaterial production fosters a more nuanced, networked and molecular form of exploitation, though the basic structure of extracting private profit from socialized labour remains intact.

Thus, despite the fact that under the capitalist mode of production the subjugated form the only autonomously creative subjects of history, creative moments and practices in their non-subjugated form become very difficult to isolate, and tend to be rendered near-invisible due to the aggressiveness by which the historical record keepers attempt to either delegitimize or domesticate them in service of hegemony. As Walter Benjamin aptly notes, struggles to keep alive the memory of emancipatory innovations are made acute by the knowledge that “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (255). This aggressive revisionism is manifest

⁷⁸ For example, applying for sessional, academic work requires a great deal of preparation and immaterial labour. In order to write a convincing proposal, one must describe how one would teach the course, a process that sometimes requires applicants to submit a syllabus and lesson plan in advance, before one has even secured the position. If one gets the job, the instructor fees might compensate this labour. For the majority of candidates—those who do not get the job—this labour is unpaid. Furthermore, employers then have access to the ideas of the whole pool of applicants, and could potentially use this material for future course content. As the job market for even these short-term sessional positions is very competitive, candidates willingly undertake this labour, internalizing an exploitative structure of discipline in the process.

in subcultural studies, for instance, in the growing tendency to accept the sceptical argument that “subcultures never were political,” a position that, I argue, ignores the historical shift toward societies of control and immaterial production under neoliberalism. Despite these sceptical, de-historicizing arguments, subcultural challenges to the ways we habitually understand space and time constitute a fragile, precarious and necessarily indeterminate, open-ended series of *breaches* in the given order. It is just these breaches, interruptions, fleeting opportunities and moments seemingly stolen from necessity that make our human lives bearable, or even possible. If *bare life* describes the logic of human exception that grounds sovereignty—an always ultimately violent attempt to “fix in place” that which will forever exceed power’s grasp—then *bearable life* designates those acts of escaping, of opening “flight paths” towards a better world that often paradoxically deliver us to exactly where we happen to be standing.⁷⁹ The tendency of the current configuration of social control is to confuse the difference between creative, socialized labour and the capitalist mechanisms that extricate profit from these, a situation in which the erosion of protections and solidarity tends towards the production of bare life at the very heart of the engines of social wealth. In this context, the question of what makes life bearable becomes newly charged with political import. Here, the feminist adage that the personal is political helps open the field of resistance beyond the union hall or shop floor where one’s paid work

⁷⁹ In their book *Escape Routes*, Papadopoulos, Stephenson and Tsianos provide tools and histories for understanding “moments where people subvert their existing situations without naming their practice (or having it named) as subversion,” arguing that these modes of escape are “most crucial for understanding social transformation” (xiii). Subcultures are interesting examples of this, as they often begin as nascent, unnamed practices that are then reified into codified postures (a process that often coincides with their becoming self-conscious as definite subcultures). In the process of being so recognized, subcultures might lose something of their subversive “alterity,” but they also gain the ability to influence larger society “from within.”

constituted the primary lever for political empowerment. Increasingly, as subjects fall back on their own social resources to navigate precarious situations created by the dissolution of Fordist social structures, the formerly “private” networks of community, care, friendship and support are highlighted and even incorporated into governmental strategies.

Despite the manner by which Bourdieu casts aesthetic taste as a buttress of class distinction, one site for the production of bearable life is through art, the historically accumulated body of which provides a record of aestheticized tactics by which humans have sought to come to terms with the hard realities of history and necessity. In fact, the appropriation of art by ruling class interests serves as testimony to its subversive power much in the same way the emancipatory element within religious systems enters into constant negotiation with a dominant order that attempts to ratify itself through conscription of the ultimately ineffable territory designated by the religious-aesthetic realm. Did not Marxism also succumb to a similar fate in the sense that the emancipatory, prophetic visions of Marx and Engels became the ideological engine for one of the most egregious systems of biopolitical oppression in the twentieth century? As an alternative to the dizzying co-incidence of opposites that cultivates the most profound sites of human liberation as fertile ground for the worst instances and systems of domination, bearable life designates a way through the impasse described by Agamben as the relation of exclusion (*Homo* 18). Even in the midst of the logic of exclusion that constitutes the “originary spatialization” by which public space is constituted (111), bearable life signifies a way of navigating the everyday via unanticipated and uncharted openings, a kind of grace in time that,

while requiring active, human effort, cannot be brought about through conscious will or planning. Bearable life is thus the essential but unintended outcome of struggles that must always have a larger context as their guiding definition.

A literary example of this principle is supplied by G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who was Thursday: A Nightmare*, which chronicles the adventures of Gabriel Syme, a man recruited by Scotland Yard to infiltrate the leadership of a notorious group of anarchists operating in London in the early twentieth century. As Syme infiltrates to the inner circle of the terrorists, he is introduced to a roster of disagreeable characters, each of whom is code-named after a different day of the week. However, as he apprehends and unmasks each member of the dreaded Council of Days, he discovers that each of them, like himself, is an undercover police officer. The one true anarchist among them, it turns out, is the poet Lucian Gregory whom Syme meets at the start of the novel and whose election to the anarchist council is usurped by the clever machinations of Syme. Paradoxically, it is the corpulent and enigmatic Sunday, the leader of the Council, who emerges as the mastermind of this whole charade, revealing himself as an embodiment of "the peace of God" (218). As such, Sunday parallels the portrayal of the Deity in *The Book of Job* in his testing of the resolve and character of the detectives. Playing on the side of both the anarchists and the Law, Sunday is the void that structures the intrigues in which the council members are enmeshed. His sublime neutrality reveals the fear and suffering the protagonists undergo to be reflections of their own, unacknowledged psychologies: the anarchist circle is thus a supplement inextricably linked to the world of Law and Order that they believe themselves to

be serving. But out of their impossible project to unseat the “anarchist council,” the detectives form a solidarity and friendship forged in the midst of adversity: though the goal they pursued was illusory—the projections of their own alienation and fear—the actual product of this struggle was the very friendship that provides an antidote to their initial state of paranoia and separation.

The provocative question that the novel leaves both the disabused detectives and the reader to answer is the extent to which the agents of order, the detectives, can ever really address the tear in the social fabric expressed by the malcontent “serious anarchist” and poet, Gregory. Admirably, Chesterton’s novel offers no clear answer to this conundrum. An irreducible gap and tension separates the order-loving Syme from the destructive Gregory, a situation that reflects the ultimately irreconcilable nature of any individual to the larger social structure that supports but also necessarily limits each of us. Taking this fundamental fissure in the social fabric as a starting point, Chesterton’s “nightmare” nevertheless points to a resolution: once Syme acknowledges the ultimate Otherness of Gregory—the primal abyss constituted by another’s suffering which ultimately disqualifies any judgment we might attempt to make—he experiences a swoon precipitated by the Christological question Sunday poses to him: “Can ye drink of the cup that I drink of?” (222). When Syme recovers, he finds himself walking down a country lane with his arch-foe Gregory

like old friends. . . in the middle of a conversation about some triviality. But Syme could only feel an unnatural buoyancy in his body and a crystal simplicity in his mind that seemed to be superior to everything that he said or did. He felt he was in possession of some impossibly good news, which made every other thing a triviality, but an adorable

triviality. (223)

The Oedipal ordeal that Syme undergoes in the course of the novel, where the “anarchists” whom he pursues are his own colleagues—versions of himself—leads to his engagement with his own irreducibly anarchistic individuality, providing an image of social cohesion as grounded in a necessary fissure of the social field, an understanding that allows him to reconcile his own perspective with that of Gregory. Whereas he set out to expose and unseat the anarchical principal hidden “in plain site” throughout the book, he ends with renewed appreciation for the singularities that divide any possible social ordering from within, but that also simultaneously constitute that order itself.

Returning to the idea of bearable life, Chesterton’s novel illustrates how this state can be only arrived at indirectly, as the unintended outcome of struggle with a necessary misrecognition. Due to Syme’s particular psychology, the paranoid detective plot was the route that his social desire had to take, a kind of detour through one of the countercultures of his day—the radical anarchist movement—that delivered him to his destined goal. Bearable life as the by-product of social and political struggle thus has an accord with what Agamben calls “the ungovernable” (“What is” 24): it can only be attained through a defeat of our rational and legal categories. At the same time, this “peace which passeth all understanding” finds its fundamental expression *because* of the existence of these categories. Without the breach constituted by the Other, we are bereft of the one relationship whose absence makes life truly destitute: friendship.

The Friend and First Philosophy

Critical theorists have attempted to “locate” the space occupied by the Real via a variety of configurations. Žižek, pointing out the Lacanian logic at work in Laclau and Mouffe's landmark *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* asserts class conflict as the fundamental antagonism that structures social space without ever being adequately represented within it (since class conflict *comprises the very terrain of social space* for Žižek [*Sublime* 184]). J.K. Gibson-Graham takes a similar approach by giving a feminist valence to Žižek's concept of the “subject of lack” that structures the socio-political field. Gibson-Graham places “woman” as “the subject of becoming, whose failed identity stands for the possibility of politics itself” (32). Whereas Žižek takes the vantage point of the social totality as his starting point for political thought and action, Gibson-Graham start with local, micro cultures: “those largely non-capitalist activities” that might provide templates by which subjects can “actively transform our local economies” (34, fn.9). Such a perspective, in privileging the micro over the macro level of political engagement, allows for nuanced responses to social domination and exploitation, though paralleling the plight of subculture it remains vulnerable to having its innovations ultimately subsumed by the larger, incorporative processes of capital. Without keeping one eye on the overarching system, the important Deleuzian “flight paths” Gibson-Graham catalogue risk becoming swept back up into the transformations of capital itself. This danger calls for a form of theory and praxis that incorporates both the macro level of systemic critique *and* the micro level of practical alternatives to capitalist markets. Such a strategy might retain the figure of woman as the

political subject *par excellence* (patriarchy, as Jameson reminds us, being the oldest form of exploitative class relations⁸⁰) without eschewing macro-political critiques as overly “masculine” in their approach (Gibson-Graham 33). Put another way, this strategy might unite what Gibson-Graham identifies, following Hardt and Negri, as the politics of Empire with the politics of place.

Intimations of Equality: the Positive Content of Politics

Reconciling these divergent approaches to the questions of political theory and action requires that we step back and reconsider the terrain of politics from the point of view of its conditions of possibility, asking *what makes politics as a human activity possible?* Postmodern and late Marxian theories tend to settle upon the excision of the Real, on an obscured but determinative scission in the social field that structures its power valences and relationships. Such theories take negativity or lack as the starting point for politics: the political subject is she who has been denied agency and enfranchisement, and whose projected restoration to a position of equality supplies the narrative for political action and transformation. But if these visions of politics are structured on detecting and addressing lack, how is it that we come to understand *lack* in the first place? In other words, what basis do we have for the vision of *equality* or “non-

⁸⁰ As described in *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson's interpretive level called “the ideology of form” reveals the persistence of all previous forms of alienation, the oldest of which being the division of labour between men and women, and the division of power between young and old (85). He goes on to say how “The affirmation of radical feminism, therefore, that to annual (sic) the patriarchal is the most radical political act—insofar as it includes and subsumes more partial demands, such as the liberation from the commodity form—is thus perfectly consistent with an expanded Marxian framework, for which the transformation of our own dominant mode of production must be accompanied and completed by an equally radical restructuring of all the more archaic modes of production with which it structurally coexists” (ibid).

lack” to which progressive politics aspires, as the goal or desire by which we can measure the contours of a given context as somehow lacking this equality? What is the positive content of politics in a postmodern context framed under the sign of lack and negativity?

By revisiting Aristotle's famous treatise on friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Agamben articulates a theory of human relationality that encompasses the resistance to symbolization crucial to poststructuralist theories of the social, but that also offers a constitutive, positive ontology, allowing us to posit the socio-political sphere as fullness rather than lack. More precisely, the fundamental non-identity between (and within) subjects supplies the grounds for an experience of equality-through-difference that provides the positive content of political engagement. This experience finds one of its foundational expressions in the relationship of friendship. Agamben describes friendship as “a proximity that resists both representation and conceptualization” since “[t]o recognize someone as a friend means not being able to recognize him as 'something'” (*What is* 31). The friend is that other who, through excessive nearness or familiarity, resists being placed within a class or category and can only be seen as a sort of diffused singularity. Moreover, Agamben follows Aristotle in recognizing, as a principle of first philosophy, friendship as intrinsic to the process of self-awareness by which we recognize life as valuable and desirable. The human, self-reflexive awareness, the phenomenological sensation of being alive, “is in and of itself sweet” for Aristotle, for “it is sweet to sense that such a good belongs to us” (qtd. in *ibid* 32). But this experience of the sweetness of existence is intrinsically tied to an awareness of the other, for “what a good man feels with respect to himself, he also

feels with respect to his friend” (ibid). Put another way, Aristotle’s point here supports Lacan’s observation that desire is never a solitary or solipsistic element: it always necessitates the other. Even in the case of the rudimentary desire for life itself, without the co-ordinate of the friend, we would likely find ourselves unable to desire—or to live—at all. The friend here occupies the spot of the *heteros autos*, the “other self” whose existence is “equally—or almost equally—desirable” as one’s own existence (ibid). This act of “con-senting” or “sensing together” the intrinsic sweetness of existence (called *synaisthanomenoi* in ancient Greek) is what constitutes friendship for Aristotle, and involves the “con-senting” the existence of the friend through “living together and sharing acts and thoughts in common” (ibid). Aristotle summarizes this as a form of community that involves both our relations to ourselves and our friends in a symmetrical way: “as we are with respect to ourselves, so we are, as well, with respect to our friend” (ibid).

In his gloss on this passage from Aristotle, Agamben highlights the political and existential dimensions of this vision of friendship. As an act of sharing that “lacks an object” (36), friendship is *a division within being itself*: “being itself is divided here, it is nonidentical to itself, and so the I and the friend are two faces, or two poles, of this con-division or sharing” (34). Friends do not share being with each other. Rather, *the friend and I are shared by being*, and friendship is the name of the awareness that we are the expression or manifestation of a being that is non-identical to itself:

The point at which I perceive my existence as sweet, my sensation goes through a con-senting which dislocates and deports my sensation toward the friend, toward the other self. Friendship is this desubjectification at the very heart of the most intimate sensation of the self. (Agamben *What is* 35)

As an experience of alterity that is intrinsically bound to one's own self-understanding, friendship renders the plural subjects involved both strange and familiar to each other: they become singularities that are yet intimately bound, not by inclusion into this or that class, but by a direct engagement with the foundational experience of the con-division of being itself. This is why Agamben insists that “friend” is “an existential and not a categorical” term (35). And yet, despite its complete resistance to conceptualization or generalization, friendship “is still infused with an intensity that charges it with something like a political potentiality” (ibid).

Here we reach the central point around which “friend” as a political category turns. Modern political thought, whether proceeding from Marxian or identitarian based frameworks, focuses on this or that category of subject for its political force and agency. The proletariat is a political subject due to inclusion in exploitative, alienating labour; woman is a category structured by historical exclusions, injustices and divisions of labour, and similar claims could be made for such terms as race, ability, age, etc. Such approaches, to follow Rancière, provide the name for an historical wrong (*Disagreement* 61-63). These categories are grounded in a lack or negativity and gain their potency by making a claim to redressing this lack through historical struggle towards a more egalitarian situation. But the positive content of politics, the situation of equality to which politics grounded in identity strives, cannot finally be conceptualized from the perspective of lack, raising the question of whether identity categories based on lack would even be recognizable in a fully regenerated society. Thus, “woman” as a category cannot be liberated, only particular women or groups of women can, just as “workers” cannot, as a group, lose the

chains that bind them to exploitative toil, even if general working conditions can be improved or worsened. In other words, the terrain of liberation has a completely different texture and set of co-ordinates than the terrain of disenfranchisement, and the politics of lack (that Nietzsche critiqued in his theory of *ressentiment*) cannot be used to conceptualize, measure or positively describe the objective to which it aims. This is a paradox particularly visible in Marxian visions of social transformation: while class remains the operant category in terms of mobilizing resistance to the forms of domination and exploitation that inhere in the capitalist mode of production, the ultimate aim of such a politics is the classless society, a situation for which we do not have abundant or clear historical examples, and which thus threatens to remain a utopian or “otherworldly” spectre hovering on the horizon of social change.⁸¹ Similar arguments can be made about the other identity positions, where the emancipation of women or racialized subjects would ultimately be realized in the dissolving of these very categories, a reality that our liberal, capitalist democracies would very much like to convince us has already occurred, whereas this is really an ideological gesture disguising the ongoing reality of these forms of discrimination.⁸²

And yet, there must be a template or intuition, something from our lived experience, that allows us to even have a concept of the utopian or egalitarian situation towards which any progressive political action strives. For Agamben and Aristotle, the originary experience of being's non-identity, the intuition that the inherent goodness of life is a product of the division of

⁸² In the case of patriarchal discrimination, the dissolution of the category “woman” would only be politically progressive and desirable if it were simultaneous with the dissolution of the category “man” that completes the binary system.

being into self and other, supplies a first principle grounding the particularly human practices of philosophy, sociality and politics. In its most basic form, the self-consciousness that allows us to realize an inherent “sweetness” to existence, requires our having a minimal distance from that existence—a kind of fissure within ourselves that simultaneously opens out towards the existence of the other. As the *heteros autos* or “other self,” the friend provides an image of the alterity to being that is at the foundation of our own self-consciousness. Just as the mirror provides to us an image of ourselves as “other,” as viewed from a point external to our own craniums, so too does the friend act as a mirror in which we can view the mystery of how being shares us, differently but equally. The extreme proximity or nearness of the friend deactivates the abstractions and generalizations by which we cloak the world in a net of concepts, in hierarchies of value, and distinctions of class, taste, gender, race or culture. These delineations remain engaged, but are backgrounded; a clearing is made at the heart of which direct participation in the mystery of shared being, and being shared, renews our contact with the Real. It is this experience that grounds politics in a positive vision of social cohesion, and that gives us periodic access to a more fundamental and egalitarian reality than is offered by the brokenness of an uneven social terrain.

Friendship gives us refuge from the broken world striated and fractured by relations of power, privilege and inequality. This is not yet *the political as such*, but the foundational experience that resides at the beginning and end of politics. Crucial to the formation of actual, everyday politics, is the journey friendship makes as it moves into and through the scrambled

social world. Do our friends remain only those with whom we share certain similarities—of class, disposition, ability, race, culture—or are there opportunities for the formation of friendships that breach the divides that fragment the social sphere? From this vantage point, there are two ways to engage with friendship as the basis of the political. First is the question of barriers to friendship. While Aristotle points out that it is not possible to have very many friends, that the relationship of proximity inherent to friendship does not admit to great generalization (a point that undermines the logic of Facebook), we can at least use friendship as an heuristic principle and ask, *what are the barriers that impede the possibility of having friends whose contexts are radically different from our own?* This is one avenue that, beginning with friendship, points toward political issues by identifying structural and ideological hindrances to diverse friendships. The second strategy for mobilizing friendship as a basis for politics is the inverse of the first, and asks: *what are the positive conditions that might encourage friendships to develop across socio-economic, cultural, gendered and racialized divides?*

Municipal Skateparks as Heterotopia

This last question brings us back to issues of time and space, and ultimately to the proliferation of heterotopic space that I suggest provides a key diagram for the modern and permissive societies of control. Despite their propensity to being co-opted and gentrified, it is in just these kinds of spaces that new varieties of friendship are sometimes given the chance to form. Foucault defines heterotopias as spaces that reflect and invert dominant social norms and

structures, juxtaposing “in a single real place, different spaces and locations that are incompatible with each other” and often constituting a “total breach of their traditional time” (424). We encounter this kind of breach, this reordering of space and time, in the suppression of the socialized “me” in favour of the present-oriented “I” pursued by Edgeworkers (see *infra* 114-120). In the sense that Jameson cites the whole network of post-modern cultural apparatuses, from film to fashion to architecture, as comprising a reduction of subjectivity to the twin confinements of the body and the present (“The End” 712), we could say that edgework, and the heterotopic spaces that it produces, are indeed one of the generalized patterns by which modern societies of control operate. However, the inversion or rearrangement of everyday social relations that occurs in heterotopic spaces, though providing forms of commoditized or ersatz rebellion that often work in service of the dominant order, also provide the opportunity for new forms of friendship to develop. By providing time and space for the emergence of relationships that might not otherwise come into being, a seemingly chance by-product of heterotopia is revealed as its decisive, political content.

A prime example of heterotopic space is supplied by contemporary municipal skate parks: free outdoor skateboarding facilities that have been widely proliferating in North America, Europe and Australia since the late nineteen nineties.⁸³ Skate parks take selective architectural elements that skaters like to “repurpose”—everything from empty swimming pools to handrails, benches, embankments, curbs, stairs and ledges—and consolidate these disparate features into

⁸³ Ocean Howell cites Skateboarder Magazine’s 2006 count of over 2,100 skateboard parks in the United States. He goes on to cite Iain Borden that in 1997, there were only about 165 skate parks in the US (“Skatepark” 475).

one, circumscribed terrain. Removed from their original context, these elements take on new life as accessories to the kind of edgework practices described by Lyng. They thus constitute a re-ordering of space and a breach in normative temporalities that fits well with Foucault's idea of heterotopia. At the same time, giving skateboarders a legitimized and somewhat "idealized" space of their own subtly but qualitatively changes the critical, tactical nature of skateboarding. While many descriptions of street skateboarding emphasize the re-purposing of public space as a form of playful resistance that extends "the right to the city" to youth (even if these youth tend to be white, male and middle class), Chihsin Chiu notes that skate parks constitute a "conformist way of using space in a designated area," one that emphasizes individualized practice over community to the extent that "[s]kating in parks is all about practicing and advancing individual skills" (34-5). To reinforce Chiu's observation, I would add that the individualizing tendency of skateparks is inherent in their very construction as a containment strategy: whereas skating with a group of friends the larger city fosters a sense of camaraderie between skaters, who form a group over and against the larger environment that might register them with varying degrees of alarm or hostility, the limited and enclosed space of skate parks fosters competition *between skaters* for both terrain and attention. This competitive, individualizing tendency is furthered by other park users, such as young kids on scooters or BMX bikes, who make the space more crowded—though the existence of these other groups can also work to foster a new sense of solidarity amongst the skaters, defined *against* the other users. Chiu goes on to note how skate parks often enforce disciplinary measures such as the wearing of helmets and knee pads, limiting

food and drink consumption, video surveillance, and controlling the time skaters can use the space (37-38). Over and above these effects of the spatial-temporal incorporation inherent in skateparks, we can cite Ocean Howell's argument that the emphasis on personal responsibility for injuries sustained, coupled with the imperative in many cities for skaters to engage in fund-raising campaigns to build and maintain these parks, reinforces modes of neoliberal governance that emphasize individualized, contractual relationships between citizen and state ("Skatepark").

For Howell, this reinforcing of neoliberal subjectivities and governance extends even to the wave of do-it-yourself skateparks that have proliferated in the past decade or so ("Skatepark" 485). Ostensibly, the DIY trend constitutes a response by skaters to the containment strategies of municipal skate parks. In keeping with the practice of the repurposing of space inherent in the history of street and pool skating, skaters have taken to seeking out underused spaces—under bridges, overpasses, in transit tunnels and abandoned factory sites—and building semi-permanent structures on which to skate. Unlike municipal parks, these skater-built parks are often kept secret by the builders, who want to preserve them from detection and possible removal by property owners, or vandalism by BMX bikers and others. But several of these sites have gone on to receive official sanction by municipal authorities after the fact, turning them into privately maintained but publically sanctioned spaces. Howell sites this trend as a further example of the neoliberal tendencies inherent in skate park design and functioning. In American cities such as Seattle, Portland, Philadelphia, San Diego, Los Angeles and Oakland "the skateboarders were censured for working outside of official channels but also praised for their

initiative and volunteerism” (“Skatepark” 485). Howell links this reception of DIY initiatives to the shift, in the new millennium, to what has been called the “New Public Management” in urban governance which encourages the reorganization of public institutions in accordance with dominant market principles. This shift has seen a valorizing of risk-taking, maverick public officials who “associate themselves with any entrepreneurial activity that produces measurable social and financial benefits” (“Skatepark” 486).

If skateboard parks of both the municipal and DIY variety comprise examples of heterotopias, then they are also spaces which reinforce dominant subjectivities that are in keeping with the neoliberal turn towards individualized, entrepreneurial and profit-oriented behaviours, and away from collective, protected and common spaces and resources. This supports my thesis that in the shift from a Fordist to a neoliberal social formation, subcultures play a socializing role, providing a Biopolitical Cultural Apparatus that helps refashion subjects according to a new set of values, ideologies and social expectations. Even as skaters vie for space in crowded, self-policed municipal parks, or when they seek refuge in a more personalized, exclusive and “gritty” DIY environment, they are cultivating subjectivities that are in keeping with culturally dominant norms, and they do so while believing themselves to be “autonomous” rebel outsiders with their own brand of authentic masculinity. And while skater’s might unite under a utopian banner as seeking “spatial justice” in their appropriations of space, Francisco Vivoni points out that “one marginalized group’s gain is another group’s loss as skateboarding works to sanitize public space by displacing prostitution, homelessness, and drug use” (137).

Skateboarding's oppositional dimensions work, if at all, within a narrow set of parameters: it makes a widened experience of agency and mobility available to a limited group of subjects who, despite the class and racial heterogeneity that street skating as a populist activity exhibits, tend to largely be white, male and middle class.

At the same time, within the limits imposed by neoliberal, risk-oriented capitalism, even the compromised spaces of skate parks have the potential to act as contact zones between subjects of different backgrounds. Despite attempts to contain skaters in sanctioned spaces, skaters privilege the streets as the authentic proving ground of subcultural distinction and enjoyment (Chiu 40). Following a heterotopic logic in which the polarity between inside and outside, domination and resistance is subject to unexpected inversions, skate parks meant to *contain* skaters are themselves often repurposed as “training grounds for appropriating urban spaces” (Vivoni 145). And there is a good possibility that, as much due to the desire of the skate industry to open new markets as the desire of skaters themselves, the next decade will see an expansion of skate culture to recognize women skaters, and (one would hope) even openly gay skaters, as full members of the subcultural community. The position implied by Vivoni and explicitly explored by Kara-Jane Lombard recognizes the process of incorporation as a double-edged sword: while subcultural practices are selectively adapted to reinforce the cultural dominant, there is also a dialectical counter-movement in which, thanks to their new enfranchisement, subcultural subjects have a certain degree of leverage to change society from within. Lombard rejects the notion of skateboarding as purely oppositional or resistant, while

still acknowledging that incorporation does operate upon and within the subcultures. Examining how this process unfolds in both the commercial and governmental spheres of skate culture, Lombard demonstrates that incorporation is part of a “complex field of contestation” which subcultural subjects have the opportunity to shape from within through their struggles and practices (476). Lombard’s model allows for retention of the Birmingham thesis about incorporation while rejecting the vision of subcultures as somehow “outside” and against a “mainstream.” It is in these liminal, heterotopic zones, where social and spatial desires “unfold somewhere between domination and resistance” (Vivoni 145), that we might yet locate an actual, revolutionary potential in subcultural formations. Under the compressed social spaces and temporalities of the neoliberal regime, a subculture like skateboarding offers subjects an experience of difference. The kinds of autonomy, play and community that are largely reserved for a privileged class are appropriated by subjects who are not supposed to have access to such freedoms. If other forms of exclusion and compromise mark this appropriation, it is at least a starting point; a foundational experience of difference that could contribute to realizing a truly new society. Starting with an experience of how the world *could* be different, some subcultural subjects might be inspired to work towards actually making it so.

Chapter 5

Playing in the Streets at the End of the World: a Personal Subcultural Geography

In this chapter I draw from my own experience, and that of one of my peers, to sketch what Ken Gelder calls a “subcultural geography,” or the way subcultural identities are linked to unique experiences of place and locality (*Subcultures 2*). This personal history will illustrate the ways in which skateboarding helped my friends and I orient ourselves in the shifting social, political and economic terrain of the early years of neoliberal restructuring. Skateboarding’s anti-establishment posture in the eighties, drawing heavily from punk, hardcore and rap culture, pushed against some of the certainties of the Fordist order (such as family, secure employment, and the welfare state) and encouraged my friends and I to experience the precariousness of the emerging social field as a realm of adventure and possibility. At the same time, the skateboard culture that we pieced together from diverse sites was characterized by a millennial, apocalyptic tone that drew from Cold War imagery as much as from science fiction, alternative music, horror films and the comic books that we avidly consumed. I argue that these examples of what I call the “zombie imaginary” were socially symbolic acts of interpretation that allowed us to register the effects, and affects, of neoliberal restructuring even as we were unable to fully understand or “map” the political and economic structures that conditioned these experiences. But the embodied, social practice of skateboarding also provided one of my first, material experiences of personal and collective agency, planting the seed of the idea that the world could be different, and laying a foundation for the political and social values I would develop later in life.

California North: Streetstyle Skateboarding in Barrie, Ontario

I grew up as a teenager in the nineteen eighties in the small northern Ontario city of Barrie (an hour north of Toronto), which had a population of about seventy thousand people at the time. My family lived in what was then the town's southern most subdivision, a few kilometres outside city limits. Our subdivision was only a couple of years old and had no sidewalks or curbs. When I began skateboarding at the age of fifteen, the only skateable terrain was the flat road in front of our house and a short, gentle hill beside it. The high school I went to was stratified into several groups: the "preppies" were the popular kids who wore Ralph Lauren shirts and styled themselves after the characters from films like *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink*. Many of them were from middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds. At the opposite end of the social field were the "scrapers," kids from largely working class or lower-middle-class backgrounds who listened to heavy metal music and hung out in the smoking area beside the portables. My dad was part of the managerial class, placing me solidly in the middle-class demographic, but my family did not have the social capital that many of the preppie kids enjoyed. In the first year of high school, my friends and I tried to fit in with the preps. We sat at their table at lunch, and the preps tolerated us because it made them look good to have "wannabe" groupies. Grade nine was an awkward year that I spent getting into mischief with my peers, the wannabe preps. We would light newspapers on fire in the middle of the street, sneak liquor from our parents' cabinets, and steal cigarettes and cookies from the local Hasty Market (I

acted as the “lookout,” a kind of redundant position in the age before cell phones). If I hadn’t started skateboarding in Grade Ten, I might very well have slipped into delinquency, vandalism and substance abuse.

In Grade Ten, I mostly abandoned trying to be a prep in favour of skateboarding. My skateboarding friends were of more disparate and interesting backgrounds than my prep friends: many of them came from Alcona Beach, a small satellite of Barrie that had a trailer park and was a little “rough” due to biker activity. The majority of my skateboard friends were of middle-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds, although there were some more affluent kids as well. Some of them were artists, musicians, drug dealers, and pool sharks. One of my friends eventually opened a skateboard shop, but it didn’t do very well due to location and the still relatively niche market he was servicing. Even though my skateboard friends were less “respectable” than the preps, being part of this group of misfits, rebels and “freaks” gave us the freedom to explore identities and interests apart from the peer pressure and abuse that went along with trying to fit in with the more popular kids. Skateboarding gave us a freedom from social pressures, and eventually *we* became viewed as “cool” because of our seeming refusal of the (established) logics of distinction. Because it was difficult to get “official” skateboard products in northern Ontario, we made our own T-shirts and board graphics, faithfully copying the logos and designs of our favourite companies with fabric markers and paints. Our skateboard scene was a kind of do-it-yourself cargo cult that attempted to reproduce the avant-garde skate culture of California during the six months of decent weather we experienced in our part of the globe.

The emergent street skating and punk/hardcore movements created a commonality and point of contact for kids coming from different parts of town. Though my first circle of skateboarding friends was limited to peers from my high school, as we began skating downtown my circle of fellow skaters widened to include kids from other schools and socio-economic brackets. We would typically meet in the parking lot of an IGA grocery store, at the heart of downtown, after it had closed. The lot was smooth, with small inclines and a curb that tapered down to the pavement. This was in 1985, and there was only one fellow in town who had learned the now basic move of the ollie—where a skater pops the board off the ground with his feet and uses differential leverage and momentum to lift skater and board into the air. Because of the angle of the IGA curb, skaters could ride up onto it without ollieing, then grind the metal hangers or “trucks” on the bottom of their board across it, and pop off the curb back onto the ground. After skating at the IGA for a while, we would often move across the street, where we eventually destroyed several of the wooden benches in front of city hall with our skateboards. From there, we would cruise through downtown, hitting any number of spots, and finding new and interesting places to skate. Skating gave us a sense of personal and collective sovereignty: the city wasn't designed for adolescents to enjoy, and apart from a sketchy pool hall, smoky video arcade and an under-age dance club, there were few downtown social spaces in which kids could gather. But skateboarding offered us a key to interacting with the city and each other in a new way, transforming the most innocuous and utilitarian spaces into sites of enjoyment, discovery and camaraderie.

Recalling Phil Cohen's thesis about subculture as a way for kids to work out inter-generational tensions spatially, through establishing territory marked by a particular cultural production (see *infra* 74-6), street skating in the eighties emerges as a mechanism by which kids in the grips of the neoliberal restructuring could navigate the contradictory demands and cultural currents they had inherited from their parents. Drawing from my own adolescent experience, the firm division between the "scrapes" and the "preps" largely maps onto the division between the working and managerial classes that still had purchase as a residual structure of the Fordist period when these groups were clearly separated. The kids who defined the prep culture came from well-established, upper-middle-class backgrounds: their parents were doctors, architects, property owners. The scraper kids largely came from industrial, working-class backgrounds. Confounding these neat distinctions was a large middle class that had inherited various iterations of the countercultural demands of the sixties and seventies for greater lifestyle satisfaction and, in some cases, greater social justice. My own parents, for instance, were not hippies or "radicals," but they had rejected religious Catholicism and the conformist social standards of their upbringing in favour of the pursuit of material comfort and mobility. In conscious opposition to the imperatives that had been imposed on them to "be an engineer" or "be a housewife," my parents encouraged my sister and me to pursue our own interests, wherever they might take us. At the same time, the protective bubble that my parents struggled to provide for my sister and I was strained by numerous background tensions. For instance, my father's work was well-paid but precarious, and my family moved often during my upbringing according to the

vicissitudes of my dad’s employment. Even while neoliberal restructuring was implementing more fluid control structures that scrambled older forms of social distinction and security, my high school was set up to stream kids into the stratifications offered by the residual Fordist social structure; it had little to offer the more “creative” types like myself, even while the cultural milieu was starting to celebrate creativity, innovation and “pursuing your dream.” The basic contradiction can be boiled down to an *imperative to be free*: on the one hand I was told that I could be and do anything I wanted in my life; on the other hand, my unhappiness at school and elsewhere was uniformly met with the adage that “sometimes you just have to do things you don’t want to.” I can see now that this was an expression of my parent’s central conundrum: they were financially relatively “free” but still largely alienated and exploited. This situation resulted in a kind of *ressentiment* that, rather than questioning the system that produces these contradictions, accepts social estrangement as a hard fact of life.

With the failure of the Fordist iterations of institutions like church, family, and school, skateboarding offered a way to mediate the tensions I had inherited from my family and cultural history. Whereas both private and public institutional spaces were marked by alienation and contradiction, skateboarding offered a spatial and social solution to these tensions. Skateboarding allowed my fellow misfit friends and me to reinvent the spaces of the city—from residential streets, to the downtown core, to the industrial areas—and to interact with each other and the environment in a manner that neutralized some of the alienating effects of our socio-economic context. The friendships that I made via skateboard and punk subculture during this period of

adolescence played a large role in shaping my sense that identities could be formed in opposition to culturally dominant modes of belonging. It also offered an experience of personal and collective agency that neither the city nor the dominant social institutions were able to supply. In rejecting the realms of school, work and home (for at least as long as we were out skateboarding together—in other words, whenever we could), my friends and I constructed an alternative model of domesticity and family: the city itself became our “home,” and the small but growing tribe of street skaters our extended kin.

No Future: Disenfranchisement from the Cold War to the Zombie Imaginary

Placing the rise of streetstyle skateboarding in the historical context of the transition between Fordist and neoliberal social formations allows us to understand the larger cultural and economic forces that shaped the individualized, rebellious image embraced by the first generation of street skaters and still selectively leveraged by the subculture to this day. This is particularly important now that skateboarding has gone from being a fringe “outsider” practice to a more accepted and even mainstream phenomena. In the eighties, skateboarding and the punk/hardcore culture that was closely aligned with it provided a mixture of artistic, athletic and social outlets that appealed to a wide range of kids who did not fit into the ready categories of the social field; now that the practice is more “respectable” it attracts some of the same subjects who, had they been born twenty or thirty years earlier, might have mocked or dismissed skateboarding as “bizarre.” While a great many factors have influenced this shift, I have been

arguing that the growing precariousness of the middle classes is central to the wide acceptance of skateboarding and other corporeal-based and often risk-oriented subcultural practices. The neoliberal regime has effected a steady erosion of socialized forms of governance, the increasing commoditization of public space and other shared resources, increasingly precarious work opportunities and environments, as well as the accelerated deterioration of the natural environment. These economically determined realities produce a structure of feeling I call *free market claustrophobia*, or the sense that the environments we share and inhabit are gradually but steadily being diminished, encroached upon and dismantled.⁸⁴ Like the unplugged humans seeking refuge in the cramped space ships and underground city of the *Matrix* films, we experience a determinate lack of “wiggle room,” leading us to resort to increasingly ornate, contorted, and torturous strategies to feel sane and human. But while we live and breath in this constricted world, we often do not have the historical, political and economic knowledge to understand the forces that produce and circumscribe our reality. The result of this knowledge deficit, coupled with the lack of any clear way to escape our predicament, greatly contributes to a complimentary structure of feeling I call *the zombie imaginary*: an apocalyptic sense of being under siege by a host of the undead, the removal of which would “cure” our malaise. Working as part of a mutually reinforcing, tandem apparatus, the zombie imaginary ideologically structures, as well as being a symptomatic expression of, the sense of constricted possibility expressed by free market claustrophobia. This ideological formation translates a political blockage—the lack

⁸⁴ Free-market claustrophobia is thus linked to what David Harvey calls “space-time compression” and Fredric Jameson calls the confinement to the body and the present of postmodern subjects (Harvey *The Condition* 285-307; Jameson “The End” 712-16).

of a collective way “out” or forward—into personalized terms: what are actually abstract, social and political forces are translated into or projected upon people, producing an illusion that the true source of our problem is that there are “too many people/zombies around.” Though these disposable others are often devalued according to race, gender, ability and age, the extension of precariousness to large portions of the former (mostly white) middle class under contemporary austerity has established a culture of perpetual crisis in which very few people can feel secure from the threat of being reduced to “bare life.”⁸⁵ Capitalism is a sinking ship—it is a system that can no longer pretend to meet the needs of the majority of earth’s inhabitants. Rather than admitting this and looking for alternatives, we are being encouraged to scramble for this or that “life boat,” even if this means abandoning a mass of less fortunate people to do so.

Skateboarding, like so many of the forms of ethnic and cultural belonging to which people tenaciously cling in these trying times, can be cynically characterized as a kind of fetish: a device for transforming the apocalyptic ruins of twentieth-century dreams of prosperity into a personalized theme park where young people can fool themselves into believing that they might yet be able to “enjoy the ride.” In the popular images produced by the skateboard industry of the “alternative use of empty pools, dried-up ditches, and hollow drainage pipes,” Francisco Vivoni offers a succinct description of the contemporary skateboarding myth as the “crude apocalyptic image of an adaptive organism thriving on the derelict spaces of a once plentiful planet” (135).

⁸⁵ Foucault’s theorization of biopolitics identifies racism as a key coordinate by which states justify discriminatory, structural violence against the population they are ostensibly supposed to be serving and protection (*Society* 258-61). Roswitha Scholz’s theory of “value dissociation,” which describes how capitalism systematically devalues certain kinds of subjects that it simultaneously depends upon for its reproduction gives us a tool for extending Foucault’s analysis of discriminatory biopolitical structures to include categories beyond that of race (Scholz).

At the same time, as a symptomatic response to our depoliticized, market-saturated social sphere, subcultures like skateboarding simultaneously help produce new senses of possibility and subjectivity—new ways of thinking about and perceiving time, space, self and community that are sometimes wonderfully “out of joint” with the dominant paradigms imposed upon us. It is this aspect of subcultural production that we must celebrate and encourage, without being able to know or say ahead of time just where these new avenues of thought, feeling, action and relationality might lead.

The social dissolution and political blockage that we experience today as the zombie imaginary had its predecessor from the fifties through to the eighties in equally apocalyptic Cold War anxiety over nuclear war. It might be difficult for people who have grown up since the nineties, after the fall of the Berlin wall and a general loosening of the political tensions of the Cold War period, to understand the degree to which the fear of nuclear apocalypse was a palpable reality to youth in the first heyday of street skateboarding in the late seventies and eighties. Then again, the current anxieties over terrorist attacks, viral epidemic or environmental collapse play a similar role to the nuclear terror of the eighties, and the proliferation of apocalyptic disaster films over the past decade indicates that anxiety about the total eclipse of civilization remains a dominant fixture of the social imaginary. One overarching effect of these visions of total collapse is to further remove a sense of systemic culpability or popular political agency in dealing with social crises. If the sense of disenfranchisement that ordinary people felt regarding the political and economic systems that govern them was registered in the eighties by

the MAD (“mutually assured destruction”) scenarios that a film like Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* satirizes, then this sense of absurdity has not lessened, and might even be intensifying, now that capitalism has emerged as a global victor. Because strong ideological forces often prevent us from addressing or questioning the political-economic structures that determine the parameters of our everyday realities, we often adopt images and metaphors that give expression to what Raymond Williams called the “structures of feeling” we collectively inhabit (*Marxism* Ch.9). The current zombie imaginary provides an image to express not what we fear *might* happen but what has *already befallen us*, giving our very real social anxieties an imaginary form that allows us at least temporary catharsis. While in the seventies and eighties there was the *possibility* that nuclear war would ravage the planet, the global economic restructuring that was already underway comprised an *actual apocalypse* whose reality was registered in disguised form as a pervading sense of there being, as the Sex Pistols broadcast, “no future.”

Though it is difficult to translate apprehensions over imperfectly understood systemic structures into the language of everyday life experience, a fact testified to by the already-mentioned proliferation of zombie apocalypse narratives in recent popular culture, music is one accessible and popular realm in which affect and analysis, the personal and the political can find a productive intersection. Systemic critique and cultural revolt was captured in the lyrics of countless punk, new wave and rap songs that provided a soundtrack to the streetstyle skateboard

culture of the eighties.⁸⁶ Analysis of these songs could provide material for a whole other dissertation, but many of the sentiments reinforced by the music of the era are articulated in an interview I conducted with Emory Baird, one of the early adaptors of skateboard culture in Barrie, Ontario, and the person who first taught me how to skateboard. In the early eighties, Emory had been to California on a family vacation where he had met professional skateboarders, learned a number of staple tricks of the time, and absorbed Californian skate culture that he brought back to Ontario. He was also one of the first people in Barrie to use the new, wider style of skateboard deck, and he had the first skater-owned “shop” in town—a small operation that he ran out of the trunk of his beat up, sticker-covered car. In Grade Ten, Em was an exotic figure that skateboarded through the school parking lot in a shimmering purple trench coat and sported a punk style “Mohawk” haircut. I conducted an interview with Emory in May of 2013 at the Guelph Civic Museum's *kNOw Skateboarding*, an exhibit that combined skateboard artifacts and images from forty years of skateboard culture. Surrounded by old skateboard decks and antique wheels emblazoned with graphics of skulls and snakes, Emory described the pervading sense of apocalypse and disengagement that informed early street skating culture:

[Skateboarding] was the kind of rebelliousness without, you know, I don't want to be James Dean, the rebel, the “I'm a teenager with a noisy car throwing beer bottles out the window.” That didn't fit. It just didn't make any sense in an age where we were all concerned at the time that we were going to get nuked...The prevailing fear of that

⁸⁶ Konstantin Butz's book *Grinding California: Culture and Corporeality in American Skate Punk* historicizes and theorizes the skate-punk scene of California in the 1980s, examining how “skateboarding punks from the suburban middle class, find ways to resist, distance themselves, and deviate from their social, cultural, and physical environment” (7). West-coast skate punk bands like Suicidal Tendencies or Minor Threat were popular in Barrie in the eighties as well, and much of Butz's analysis of the aspirations and contradictions of the Californian scene holds true to the experiences of my youth.

generation was “we're all going to die in a nuclear bath”... [in that context] you have to live moment to moment, and it's all outside of your control, you can't fix it, you can't protest a nuclear war, you just get hit with it or you don't. And it informed a lot of the music that we were listening to, it reflected that underlying fear that the society we belonged to didn't seem to fit because our parents were told: “get a job with a good company, and then you stay there for forty years, and then you're done.” We were seeing that it was starting to fray at the edges, that that reality wasn't true any more. Jobs were not so certain, and there were new technologies coming up. Computers were coming along, but it was still a long way from the Internet at that point. (Baird)

Emory's description links the rebellious stance of the street skater with an impending sense that human society might be eradicated in a “nuclear bath,” an event beyond one's ability to control, and which reduces everyday life experience to the immediacy of living “moment to moment.” The sense of “not fitting” within this social world is highlighted. But Emory's account makes a double articulation of feeling out of joint. First is a sense that previous popular models of youth rebellion, like that depicted by James Dean's *Rebel Without a Cause*, are unsatisfactory because they lack the sense of apocalyptic crisis and total collapse inherent in the nuclear threat. Skateboarding offered an alternative which, when coupled with the early punk movement, seems to provide a more aggressive and politically charged, as well as a possibly more nihilistic response to the world. But Emory also links his teenage self's sense of “not fitting” to an awareness of the shifting landscape of labour, as the promises of lifetime employment of the Fordist era are replaced by the uncertainties of the neoliberal restructuring. These two events, the collective fear of nuclear war and the global restructuring of economies and societies according to the neoliberal program, are the twin apocalypses marking the boundaries of social totality that was it possible to conceive, given the ideological parameters of the time. The threat of nuclear

apocalypse that coloured my youth provided an imaginary event, a kind of collective dream, that gave tangible shape to a less easily perceivable social apocalypse that was already well under way. The dreams of equality and accessibility that had shaped the post-war development of affluent Western nations like Canada, and the social systems that attempted to put these values into action, really were being systematically dismantled during the seventies and eighties, spearheaded by the concerted efforts of governments such as the Thatcher, Reagan, and Mulroney administrations, and by the corporate interests they supported. Though I was largely unaware of these developments as a teen growing up middle-class, white Ontario, the restructuring of the Global South via the interventions of the World Bank and IMF actually *was* wreaking havoc with whole populations, a situation that was reflected back to the West through the filters of paternalistic initiatives like the spectacular Live Aid benefit concerts. With the idea of invisible radiation that would kill anyone who survives the initial blast, nuclear destruction supplied a focal point for inchoate sentiments about the actual political and social fallout of neoliberalism. It gave concrete form to intuitions about the reshaping of the socius into a meaner, more competitive, less socially cohesive and livable place. Even today, forty years later, we have yet to collectively produce a vision of totality that would move beyond the biopolitical network of nation states, which, as they struggle to manage the effects of market saturation, tend to reinforce rather than relieve the ongoing crises. Until we manage to frame such a vision of totality, one that goes beyond the ideologies of capitalist globalization and the territorialized interests of the nation state, it is likely that such symptomatic structures as the nuclear and the

zombie imaginaries will continue to dominate popular culture, along with the subcultures that form in response.⁸⁷

*“Can asphalt be a political territory?”*⁸⁸

While subcultures certainly supply what the Birmingham theorists called a “magic” solution to very real social contradictions, recognizing them as symptomatic prevents us from dismissing them as merely a form of “bad conscience” or misdirected desire for social change. As I pointed out earlier, the struggle for progressive change encounters a barrier in powerful ideological filters that limit what we believe to be possible: it is hard for us to imagine a world without debt, homelessness, injustice and alienation because cultural and institutional apparatuses are constantly reinforcing the necessity and normalcy of these kinds of social relationships and practices. But ideological obfuscation is not the whole of the problem. Even when we clearly understand the historically contingent nature of those elements of our social world that are ideologically construed as necessary or common sense “facts,” the problem of how to construct an alternative, better world remains daunting. In face of the complex biopolitical structures that govern our world, the “average” person often feels that there is very little he or she could do, despite historical knowledge and a will to change. While it seems clear to myself and others that the days of capitalist—and (hopefully) human—dominance of the planet are numbered, it is impossible to say ahead of time what the emergent formation that

⁸⁷ For a good critique of the ideologies of globalization, see Cazdyn and Szeman’s *After Globalization* (2011).

⁸⁸ Paul Virilio *Speed and Politics* (30).

replaces these will look like. It is here that the cultural realm, and particularly sub-and-countercultures, can help express our *will* to a better world. For while it is impossible to rationally and clearly *envision* the future, representation itself being a necessarily retroactive faculty, we do grope towards our future destiny via the will, via those seemingly blind but often strangely accurate feelings and intuitions that guide our actions, sometimes without our being fully aware they are doing so. The view of a “cunning of history” working through our actions, though only grasped in hindsight was famously articulated by Hegel, and has its roots in the Christian doctrine of Grace. However, it is Schopenhauer (and then Nietzsche, Freud, Foucault and Lacan) to whom I am indebted for the distinction between a blind but accurate willing (a parallel to Lacan’s “drive”) and the world known through representation. The genius of subcultural production, as with literature, is to be able to rearrange the elements of representation so as to reveal or express the normally concealed structures of the will. Both subcultural production and literature/film/poetry allow subjects to undermine dominant interests (the will of a certain class) by subverting the symbolic realm in order to express suppressed, minority interests. Just as poets take the commonplace elements of language and rearrange them into a new and vivid experience, so do subcultural acts of bricolage take elements of the cultural world as given and re-ordering them to express new meanings, hopes and possibilities.⁸⁹ And while the circuits of incorporation might tirelessly work to recuperate the resistant and progressive tendencies of alternative cultures, the utopian striving that fuels these innovations is always prior

⁸⁹ This, of course, was one of Dick Hebdige’s landmark insights regarding subcultural production (*Subculture* 103-106). Phil Cohen first expressed the idea of subcultural bricolage some years earlier in his observations of the emergent British subcultural groups (50).

to, and greater than, the limited forms that their selective appropriation make of them. The constellation of legal, institutional, cultural and everyday forces that must combine to form any new and progressive regeneration of society can only emerge as the end result of a long, slow and fumbling process of struggle on multiple fronts. With the moment of the crystallization of these struggles still somewhere on the horizon, it would be misguided to discount the preparatory work done in the cultural sphere by the struggles for autonomy, community and representation through subcultural practices, however compromised these might appear.

When I returned to school in my thirties to pursue graduate studies at McMaster University, I was exposed to a whole field of leftist political theory and struggle that I scarcely had known existed up to that point. In courses and at public lectures, I was introduced to voices passionately advocating for a re-engagement with the democratic public sphere. My liberal arts education as an undergraduate had introduced me to “the best that has been thought an said,” and I made acquaintance, through their writing, with many of the “great men” of history (and even one or two great women!). But apart from early academic achievement and a short career as a professional cartoonist, my life path had largely taken the “low road” through skateboarding subculture, literary subculture, unemployment, the service industry, and then back to the university for grad school. In what could be cast as a twenty-some year odyssey that began in adolescence, as I encountered various real-life worlds and people, it was only in the cramped quarters of a humanities graduate seminar that I first heard such terms as “democratic public sphere.” Whatever this form of collective engagement is or might have been, it was not

something that corresponded to anything I had experienced growing up as a white middle-class subject in one of the world's most affluent and "civilized" countries. What I *had* experienced were various forms of subcultural belonging—a category in which I would include graduate school itself—and the friendships and communities that I experienced through these involvements made a life of more or less comfortable disenfranchisement bearable. This is likely one of the personal reasons why I am suspicious of academic and other professional commentators who dismiss subcultural production as either a degraded form of politics, or as not political at all. While it may be true that the subcultural context can work to limit forms of political vision to narrow, "corporatist" forms of identification with one's particular group and its outlooks, for many subjects in our de-politicized, biopolitical age, subculture is the only structure that permits a modicum of personal and communitarian identity to stand up against the privatizing and commoditizing forces that beset them. And while it seems true that subcultures most often fall short of the kind of collective engagements that critics on the left would recognize as overtly "political" in an activist sense, we should not discount the many "micro" and often concealed forms of subversion, resistance and redefinition that comprise the fabric of subcultural practices: these too form part of the "long revolution" that can lead to unprecedented change.

In northern Ontario in the mid-eighties, Skateboarding was not the popular, highly commoditized and spectacular practice that it is today. I remember one Saturday afternoon that a few of my friends and I went skating along the main downtown street of Barrie. The sound of our skateboard wheels clacking and popping over the cracks and pebbles of the road echoed out

against the buildings. As we moved along Dunlop Street, more and more skaters joined our ranks, materializing seemingly magically from out the side streets, until we became a veritable swarm of skateboarders commandeering both the street and the sidewalk. My memory of this moment is, assuredly, filtered through the videos and mythologies that have been produced by the skateboard industry, but a kernel of truth structures this trace: skateboarding hit a critical mass in my hometown one summer day in the late eighties, and as skaters we had a sense of collective power that came from feeling part of a larger, youth-oriented movement. This feeling of collectivity was an effect of our ability to command public space, and to do so in a way that was both visible, different than the norm, and somewhat unintelligible to casual observers. There were no indoor or outdoor skateboard parks at this time in my home town. We skated parking lots and alleys, drainage ditches and loading docks. In the winter, I would skate most evenings in my garage, wearing several layers of clothing. A friend of ours built a half pipe ramp outside of town, but we rarely got to skate it because his father was afraid of possible law suits if we hurt ourselves. Skateboarding in this era hinged on the creative re-interpretation of one's local surroundings, and this remains a key element of skate culture to this day, even in the age of the proliferation of free outdoor skate parks built to contain the practice. In skateboard magazine articles, ads, and videos, found street settings are given credence over built skate park settings as being more "authentic." By appropriating what Iain Borden calls "zero-degree architecture"—all those seemingly characterless, purely utilitarian features of modern urban space—and finding new, pleasurable, and shared uses for them, the street skateboarding that developed in the

eighties provided a sense of relatedness to our surroundings, and to each other, that the environment was often intentionally designed to impede or manage (188-190). This practice generated a sense of autonomy, artistry and camaraderie that could transcend the demarcations of race and class, though seldom those of gender (there was only one female skater in my town that I knew of at the time). Though it was assuredly limited to the “in group” of skateboarders, our collective appropriation of public space is the closest experience I had as a teen of what I take to be the political content of a phrase like “democratic public sphere.” Skateboarding provided a lived experience of collective agency in a time and place where there were few other opportunities for a young person to experience this. A key task for progressive politics in our current, biopolitical age is to articulate an overarching narrative, a set of socio-economic coordinates and historical contexts, that can appeal to the collectivist energies of subcultural, identitarian and other “corporatist” formations and unite their various visions of socio-political transformation. The left has very little room to be complacent or tardy in this endeavour, since our opponents have also realized the political importance of the cultural sphere, and they are mobilizing considerable resources in an attempt to galvanize popular sentiment in favour of reactive and conservative ends. In this context, to dismiss subcultures as always/already apolitical seems like shooting ourselves in the foot.

Chapter 6

Smogtown Skates: Beasley Skateboard Park and the Cultural Politics of Gentrification

If it is true that *forests of gestures* are manifest in the streets, their movement cannot be captured in a picture, nor can the meaning of their movements be circumscribed in a text.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (102 emphasis orig.)

I like how what used to make the neighbourhood look dangerous now makes it look valuable.

Lenny, *The Simpsons*, (“Exit”)

This final chapter of my dissertation makes a practical application of the theories regarding subculture, urban space, biopolitics and economics that I have developed in earlier chapters. Beasley Skateboard Park in downtown Hamilton provides a physical site for investigating issues of subcultural production, incorporation and resistance. It also reveals how these processes are overdetermined by class politics that structure emergent regimes of immaterial labour in allegedly “post-industrial” societies. Taking place in the heart of what has historically been a working-class and immigrant neighbourhood currently in the throes of gentrification, the struggles faced by skateboarders at Beasley Park highlight the distinction between the forms of common culture autonomously produced by subcultural subjects and the privatizing, commoditizing tendencies of the dominant culture that often undermine them. At the same time, the incorporation of what has been a relatively autonomous working-class skateboard subculture into discourses surrounding urban renewal and the commoditization of urban spaces and culture has given the skateboard community a certain amount of leverage, and the

opportunity for intervening in cultural and political currents that were previously outside the purview of the subculture's influence. This chapter looks at how the gentrification of downtown Hamilton has placed the skateboarders of Beasley Park in a new position: whereas skateboarders have historically been criminalized and marginalized, the cultural capital of the Beasley skateboard scene is now being recognized as part of what makes the neighbourhood unique and even desirable to the hip, young professionals that the city would like to attract in their bid to redevelop downtown. At the same time, the skateboard park's location directly adjacent to an abandoned industrial knitting mill that is in the process of being repurposed—transformed into mixed-use studios, retail, commercial and living spaces—makes the celebrated rough and gritty character of the skate park a possible hurdle to attracting investors and clients. The ambiguous space occupied by the skaters as both a celebrated and problematic presence points to the contradictions inherent in a model of urban development that increasingly turns to commonly produced and historically unique culture to generate privatized wealth.

This chapter begins by looking at attempts to re-brand Hamilton as a post-industrial city that appeals to the emerging “creative economy.” My primary concern is that capitalizing upon collective, cultural resources, labour and identities to attract investment simultaneously undermines the conditions necessary for the perpetuation of these cultural assets. I will then examine how the skateboard culture of Beasley Park has been implicated in and effected by this redevelopment scheme by focusing on both the potentials and struggles currently faced by the skateboard community. To this end, I outline the unique history of Beasley Skateboard Park, one

that spans more than three decades and that inscribes several major shifts in the history of modern skateboarding into the terrain of the park itself. I divide this history into three phases, each of which is illustrated by a different element of the skate park's topography. I will then examine the tensions and contradictions the skateboarders face as they attempt to navigate the ongoing gentrification of the neighbourhood, specifically focusing on the privatizing tendencies of Richard Florida's model of development and the way these undermine the very uniqueness and "authenticity" of the sites and histories that they attempt to leverage as a profitable "renewal" strategy. My analysis will highlight how the celebrated character of the skateboard culture and other grass-roots initiatives in the Beasley neighbourhood find their conditions of possibility in a version of *the commons* as an evolving and heterotopic space that is neither private nor public but rather collaboratively and performatively generated. As such, the park has become a site of what, following Giorgio Agamben, we can call a profane culture that undermines through play some of the fissures and separations produced by capitalism (*Profanations*; and *infra* pp. 67-73). It is the profane and common nature of Beasley culture that produces the sense of belonging and involvement that makes Beasley an exciting neighbourhood for skaters, artists, residents and activists. However, unless this cultural commons at Beasley is acknowledged, valued and protected as such, and unless the assumptions underpinning the neoliberal forms of development currently being deployed are challenged and altered, I fear that commercializing and privatizing forces will undermine those aspects of Beasley's common culture that made it attractive in the first place, replacing it with a simulated, sanitized and

ultimately exclusionary imitation.

Personal Involvement: The Beaz Steez Project

I moved to Hamilton in the winter of 2002 and became actively involved with the skateboard community a few years later. When I was growing up as a skateboarder in Barrie, Ontario in the eighties there were no competitions, outdoor skateboard parks or formalized organizations; there were only my immediate circle of friends and the other skaters we would meet in our travels. When I arrived in Hamilton as an older man, I found an opportunity to get involved with a skateboard community that had its own organization, the Hamilton Skateboard Assembly (HSA), its own amateur events, and an informal, spatial epicentre at Beasley Skateboard Park. Despite my being unemployed and broke at the time, the Beasley skaters were accepting and unassuming, and it was there that I met my first friends in what was otherwise an alien and forbidding new city. Between 2009 and 2011, I served as the Secretary for the HSA, taking notes at meetings, helping run events and managing a website to publicize our skateboarding events. Being part of the HSA also gave me the opportunity to meet with City of Hamilton managers and councillors, and to get involved with the local Beasley Neighbourhood Association as a representative of the skateboard community. When I returned to school in 2008 to pursue graduate studies in the English and Cultural Studies Department at McMaster University, I turned my interest in skateboard culture into a research project. As a student, I was able to use my communication skills and my flexible, if busy, schedule to participate in

community life by attending meetings and helping to write letters and applications on behalf of my fellow skaters. I have pursued my Ph.D. project as a form of participatory research, a primary goal of which was to try to help the skateboard community navigate the process of gentrification that is underway in downtown Hamilton. To this end, I used some of my research funding to produce a short documentary film highlighting some of the history and personalities associated with the park (*Beaz*). The short version of *Beaz Steez: Skateboarding at Beasley Park*, is available online.⁹⁰ The *Beaz Steez* film project served as both an intervention that attempted to raise public awareness of the long history of skateboard culture at Beasley, and as a way of soliciting the views of some of the skate park's users regarding the importance of the site.

In terms of the former aim, it seems as though the film has been relatively successful. In the stakeholder consultation meetings for the redevelopment of Beasley Park, a process that began in 2013 and which I have participated in, the film helped draw attention to the participatory nature of the skate culture that has been flourishing at the park for three decades. Partially because of the film, “Culture and Heritage” was prioritized by the stakeholder group as an especially important category to consider in thinking about future changes to the park. By highlighting the common culture that has existed at Beasley for decades, the *Beaz Steez* film has attempted to help ensure that the redevelopment process will respect and further this history.⁹¹

⁹⁰ <http://skatebeasley.wordpress.com/2013/09/12/beaz-steez-2/>

⁹¹ In terms of my use of filmed interviews to gather information for the current research project, interviewees were informed of my research, and consented to my using the information and stories they shared as part of this dissertation. The film project received clearance from McMaster University's Research Ethics Board in June of 2011, and has complied with the suggestions and requirements made by the board. I have been enthusiastically supported by the Hamilton skateboard community in both the film and my research project, and greatly appreciate

My project also attempts an intervention into the larger Hamilton community, and particularly the arts community, which has been attracting increased attention and resources over the past decade. Participating in Hamilton’s artistic “renaissance” is one of the things that has made living here so interesting for me. I have always made art, but only since living in Hamilton have I had the opportunity to be part of gallery shows and other events. This is due, in large part, to the grass-roots momentum of the art culture that has been thriving in Hamilton. At the same time, I believe that there are serious flaws with the model of urban development that leverages arts and culture as a vehicle for growth and renewal. Though this chapter critiques gentrification and some of the development strategies adopted by municipal and private investors, I also recognize the heroic and sometimes desperate struggles to rebrand faltering industrial centres. What I question is the often willing blindness of these strategies to the harm they can do to the very people and cultures they would hope to celebrate and serve, especially when these outcomes could be mitigated by adopting alternative measures and models.

Same as the Old Boss: of Art, Steel, and the Ongoing Exploitation of Workers

Hamilton is a southern Ontario city of half a million people that has historically been a centre for heavy industry, foremost of which is steel production. The sale in 2007 and subsequent near closure of Hamilton’s main employer, Stelco (now U.S. Steel), has signalled a crisis for the city in keeping with many other industrial towns in the Canada-U.S. “rust belt.” Downtown

the willingness of local skaters to share their time, stories, memories, photos, and observations.

Hamilton has a large, gloriously visible concentration of working class and immigrant families, as well as people who come to the city from other parts of the country to take advantage of low housing prices and relatively easy access to social services and health care. However, the visibility of marginalized and working poor populations, especially in the downtown core of the city, causes dismay to some of the middle and managerial classes who must navigate this enclave, and to city officials who hope to re-brand Hamilton as a haven for the new information industries. With the waning of heavy industry, the working class that was once celebrated as the “backbone” of Hamilton’s economy is now cast in shadow, as revealed by Mayor Bob Bratina’s statement in the *Hamilton Spectator* in October of 2013 that downtown has been “abandoned to the poor.” In the same article, architecture critic and Torontonian Christopher Hume characterizes Hamilton as a formerly “self-hating city dismissed by the rest of the world for its coarse ways, unwashed residents and knuckle-dragging politicians.” In an article that glibly dismisses Hamilton’s working class and immigrant population in favour of middle-class visions of respectability, Hume goes on to suggest that Hamilton is in the process of “ris[ing] from the ashes of its grimy industrial past” (Hume). Such statements by men in positions of authority betray the devaluing and disposability of the industrial working classes under neoliberal capitalism. By assuming a middle-class position as the unspoken norm, what is at stake in such descriptions is the very definition of what it means to be human. If, as Mayor Bratina asserts in the same article, “[d]owntown is the face of the city,” then it is a face whose public image is not allowed to include many of the people who have historically called downtown home.

With the capital flight that is a direct result of neoliberal trade policies, yesterday's exploited industrial workforce has become today's urban planning problem. The solution that has so far been adopted by Western governments is to engage in biopolitical war against their own people, reducing essential services and the conditions needed for life as a means of buttressing a flawed and exploitative economic order. A further, ideological challenge presents itself to the managers of austerity: how to convince a work force formerly guaranteed at least a minimum of amenities and wages needed for survival, that now even this slim envelope of security should be deemed a luxury. This is a battle waged on several fronts, from the systematic undermining of unions, to personalizing and dehistoricizing the crisis so that the same subjects whose fortunes are a direct result of social restructuring are perceived as having reached their compromised state due to their own poor decisions and character. However, this last strategy ignores the fact that the dilapidated state of Hamilton's urban core, and the populations that elicit its disparaging depictions, are the direct result of a political-economic restructuring that received buy-in from the same (shrinking) middle classes who ridicule and scorn the casualties of this process. Whereas lower Hamilton was restructured in the nineteen fifties to be a containment zone for the working class (bisected by several five-lane inner city one-way "highways" designed to get people to work on time), it is now this very concentration of the working poor, the disabled and the ill—the direct result of Western deindustrialization and the scaling back of social protections—that has become Hamilton's stigma. Rather than admitting responsibility for these populations, the development strategy currently adopted by Hamilton seeks to further abandon

them, restructuring public spaces in ways that will subtly but firmly exclude them from the social fabric and relegate them to neglected, underserviced ghettos.

As we have seen, Eric Cazdyn names these populations that capitalism no longer finds useful or necessary “the already dead” because they are the people whom society has written off as dead, but who have yet to actually die (4-10; see also *infra* 109-112). This designation is meant as *descriptive* rather than *prescriptive*: the people whom Cazdyn thus names are still very much alive and possessing of political and social agency, even if some more fortunately-positioned members of society would like to make them disappear. This exposure of populations to life-threatening risk is justified, under the imperative Cazdyn calls “bioeconomics,” through the excuse that “we simply can not afford to do the right thing” such as feed, cloth and employ and care for everyone (154). If these sacrifices are being made in the name of an economic system that can no longer deliver on its promise to work in the service of the majority of people, wouldn’t a better solution be to change the system itself, rather than adopting increasingly harmful stopgap measures? However, rather than pursuing truly progressive, redistributive and egalitarian policies, cities like Hamilton have chosen to mobilize their resources in service of the production of what managerial literature critic Thomas Frank calls “fake bohemias”: those spaces where “[t]he presence of hipsters is said to be inspirational to businesses; their doings make cities interesting and attractive to the class of professionals that everyone wants.” According to this strategy, “[a]ll a city really needs to prosper is a group of art-school grads, some lofts for them to live in, and a couple of thrift stores to supply them with the ironic clothes

they crave” (“Dead End”).⁹²

Enter Richard Florida, the urban planning guru and celebrated theorist of the “creative class.” In 2008, Florida was the keynote speaker at Hamilton’s first ever economic summit, a day-long event attended by over 125 of the city’s leading voices in business, arts, government, social sciences, health and education (Mann). Florida’s ideas about how to stimulate economic growth when manufacturing is increasingly being shifted to other parts of the world have become popular with Hamilton’s investors and city planners. Florida argues that cities who wish to successfully navigate the shift from manufacturing to an information-and-services driven economy must make themselves attractive to the professional classes who work in these sectors.⁹³ This is done by putting money into arts and culture, by emphasizing architectural “heritage,” and by encouraging the development of the kinds of amenities, like chic restaurants, galleries, and boutiques, that might attract hip professionals of the Google generation. As Emily Eaton points out, the creative class strategy has encouraged communities in which public

⁹² Frank used the term “fake bohemia” during a radio interview: “Thomas Frank and the ‘Creativity Craze’” *The Sunday Edition*, CBC Radio One. 17 November 2013. Web. 11 January 2014.

⁹³ For Richard Florida’s ideas on how cities should navigate the “post-industrial,” “post-crash” economy, see for instance, *Cities and the Creative Class* (2005), and *Who’s Your City?* (2008). His article on “Bohemia and economic geography” (*Journal of Economic Geography* 2, 2002) attempts to measure a city’s “human capital” by the number of “creatives” the city attracts, as measured by his “bohemia index.” Florida’s arguments have been critiqued as utopian in that they overlook the modes of exploitation inherent in the new regime of immaterial labour, they instrumentalize public goods like art and culture in the service of narrow class interests, they superficially advocate for diversity while ignoring the systemic and politic impediments to enfranchisement, they produce greater inequality within cities, and they overstate the economic benefits that derive from this form of development (cf. Cazdyn and Szeman 2010; Krätke 2010; Peck 2005, 2007; Malanga 2004; Maliszewski 2003). Despite these critiques, the City of Hamilton’s “Creative Catalyst Project” (“Creative Catalyst”) has adopted this strategy for urban development. The attempt to turn the abandoned knitting mill beside the skateboard park into a “catalyst” for the surrounding neighbourhood by contributing significant public funds to a commercial redevelopment of the building is also part of this scheme (McCabe 2011).

resources are directed towards “cultural consumption” with a “reduced emphasis on redistribution or the development of local wealth.” Eaton goes on to state how creative class policies often generate rising inequality, as the kinds of jobs generated tend to be in the low paying, part-time service industries needed to support the cultural consumption of the managerial classes. Eaton highlights the gentrification that accompanies the creative class model of development, as “public funding is funnelled into producing safe and welcoming spaces for a more affluent class.” Indeed, in contrast to the redistributive policies of the Fordist era (where public funds were directed towards amenities and services needed to reproduce the industrial labour force), the neoliberal “creative class” strategy largely abandons attempts to address social welfare, focusing instead upon attracting an elite professional class. In the opinion of a prominent member of a local not-for profit development foundation, as stated in a public talk I attended at a luncheon for graduate students in 2012, Hamilton’s problem is not the existence of poverty but the *concentration* of poor people in the downtown core. What is needed, in this vision, is an infusion of wealthier people to disperse this concentration. Rather than aiding and elevating the working poor through taxation and redistribution, the creative class model relies upon the “trickle down” model by which the presence of wealthy investors in the community is believed to “magically” raise the overall levels of prosperity. But however much the “trickle down” ideology might help some agents of gentrification suppress the sense of guilt they feel for the displacement and economic polarization that gentrification strategies are proven to generate, the tendency of this model of development is the creation of spaces that are, as Ocean Howell

states, “quietly exclusionary” to all but the affluent class they seek to attract (“Poetics” 1).

Despite the lack of social responsibility inherent in this model of development, in Hamilton both city managers and civic-minded entrepreneurs alike have embraced the creative class ideology. Frightened by the images of decay in cities like Detroit, the agents of gentrification see their efforts as the lesser of evils, and they are right to a certain extent. Attracting artists, investors and service industries seems to offer a strategy for navigating the decline in stable, industrial employment brought about by neoliberal restructuring. But the devaluation of the underclass, their virtual abandonment by taxpayers and government, is symptomatic of the biopolitical imperative behind these redevelopment strategies in which the poor are largely left to fend for themselves. Hamilton’s downtown, which for the past two decades has been perceived by middle class subjects as a ghetto due to the visible concentration of working class and disadvantaged people, has now become a site of gentrification, as a wave of artists, gallery owners, investors, and trendy shop owners infiltrate the space, taking advantage of low rents and housing prices. This shift has been celebrated in Canada’s national newspaper, *The Globe and Mail*, in a 2006 article entitled “Go West Young Artist.” The article quotes the curator of Toronto’s Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, David Liss, who patronizingly describes the proliferation of art studios on James St. North as “a sign that Hamilton may very well be—finally—culturally maturing” (Mowat). This vision of late-blooming “maturity” overlooks the fact that Hamilton has a long history of culture production. The idea of culture being leveraged in Liss’ vision is here again linked to middle-class notions of acceptability and culture, while

working class and immigrant culture is silently dismissed. Liss also reinforces the creative cities ideology when he describes this process as having “sprung up organically” noting, “[i]t didn’t start in a boardroom. It has the ring of authenticity” (ibid). The characterization of this kind of development as “organic,” “authentic” and unplanned works to naturalize what is in fact an orchestrated process, thereby placing it seemingly beyond critique or accountability.⁹⁴ This naturalization also belies the extent to which the creative class model of development is, in fact, planned, steered and implemented by city governments using public funds. If the gentrification of downtown didn’t start in a boardroom, it has certainly been encouraged by City Hall, which has framed a Hamilton Creative Catalyst Project designed to help the city “embrace...[its] unique culture(s) as a way to attract tourists, create jobs and enjoy a higher quality of life.” By capitalizing upon downtown’s “underused buildings and character neighbourhoods” this city project hopes to “harness the potential of the creative sector to boost Hamilton’s economy and transform the urban landscape” (City). Whereas Liss’ characterization of Hamilton as “finally” reaching cultural maturity overlooks the fact that a diverse working class culture has been thriving (often under adverse conditions) in downtown Hamilton for decades, the Creative Catalyst Project at least acknowledges “the abundance of creative people living in the city”

⁹⁴ The tendency to make poverty invisible (rather than materially addressing it) has been furthered in Canada by the federal government’s 2010 dismantling of the national long-form Census that supplied detailed information for tracing the shifting demographics of a neighbourhood. Because the new, shorter, voluntary census is often ignored by poorer citizens (the other group who tend to ignore it being the very rich), it will become increasingly difficult to find reliable statistical markers to track the effects of gentrification and inequality in Canada’s urban centres. Even as Richard Florida-inspired development projects funnel public money into arts and culture and away from the people who might need it most, the demographic data for key neighbourhoods, like Beasley, won’t be available to measure the effects of these policies (Carter 2013).

(ibid). In 2011, the City of Hamilton’s Economic Development Office posted a short video that featured local professionals and artists talking about the bohemian “renaissance” perceived to be underway. Architect David Premi describes Hamilton as a “real” city that has an “authenticity to it that is sometimes hard to find in other places” (Hamilton Economic). As the video pans through the interior of an art gallery, Premi goes on to state that “what happens in a lot of cities is that the development of a bohemian art scene is usually a predecessor for an urban renewal.” A carded quote from the President of the Real Estate Investment Network of Canada then appears, claiming that Hamilton “[k]nown formerly as a hard-working steel town...has quickly shed this image in the eyes of potential investors—as indicated by the record breaking building permit values Hamilton has experienced in recent years” (ibid).

It is a frustrating contradiction that this video can at once celebrate the “authenticity” of the city while claiming that it has “quickly shed its image” as an industrial centre. Is not the very source of the “authenticity” that so much of the discourse over Hamilton’s renaissance deploys located in that same industrial culture that is simultaneously being relegated to the past? In the same video, Jeremy Greenspan of the talented electronic band The Junior Boys gives his take on Hamilton’s creative culture:

Hamilton art is really cool in the sense that there are so many people doing art and music and creative things, and everybody does it, in my opinion, for the right reasons. People in Hamilton make their weird artwork because they’re compelled to do it. They do it for no other reason than it’s in their nature to do it.

As an illustrator, deejay and maker of “weird” art myself, I must say that it was indeed the

acceptance and celebration of eccentricity highlighted by Greenspan that first made Hamilton attractive to me, and that made James Street North an exciting place in which to live when I had an apartment there during the first years of the street's recent transformation. But it would be an error not to link the conditions that made this kind of art possible to the partial protection from market forces inherent in the vestiges of the Fordist social order, an order that is now vanishing due to the very process of transformation (to a neoliberal, information-and-service-based economy) that the celebration of art and culture is being used to further.

Hamiltonians might make strange art because they are compelled to do so, but this kind of distance from necessity is only possible due to the low rents and the security of stable employment that the now vanishing Fordist-industrial order once provided. Protections regarding the length of the working day, health benefits and wage guarantees meant that artistically-minded people could *afford* to produce such culture in their spare time and without regard for whether their art was “mainstream” enough to sell. A similar logic is at work in the youth-oriented subcultures of punk and skateboarding: teenagers often enjoy a greater margin of freedom from necessity than their parents, giving them the opportunity to pursue such leisure activities. The electronic and punk music scenes that still flourish in Hamilton are directly related to the legacies of working class culture that make use of spare time to engage in the social activity of making music. A truly progressive Cultural Catalyst project would emphasize the extension of the freedom to pursue these kinds of “useless” activities to all members of society by creating the kind of security and socialized protections that encourage playful innovation. Rather than

celebrating artists' resilient abilities to juggle numerous part-time jobs, live in impoverished conditions, pay off costly student loans, *and still make their quirky art*, Hamilton could brand itself as a leader in progressive "creative cities" legislation by offering artists and other service-sector workers the guarantee of a living wage, by implementing rent controls in desirable neighbourhoods, and by pursuing redevelopment in ways that doesn't displace at-risk populations. This would keep alive the history of progressive labour and housing initiatives that made life liveable under the Fordist regime of industrial production, a history that is deemphasized in rhetoric that celebrates artistic production as "the new steel."⁹⁵

However, the predominant trend of the "creative cities" model of redevelopment is in exactly the opposite direction. As Angela McRobbie points out in her study of the acceleration labour environments of contemporary UK culture industries, the neoliberal focus on artists as "entrepreneurs" in which short-term contracts predominate over steady, secure employment actually undermines the kind of independent, original art production that characterized the "first wave" of creative culture industry defined by the UK government in 1998 ("Clubs" 517). McRobbie argues that this shift constitutes "a decisive break with past expectations of work," encouraging the depoliticization of workplaces where an emphasis on networked sociality eclipses a previous attention to democratic rights and protections (ibid). Technological

⁹⁵ Several years ago, a privately funded artist centre in downtown Hamilton adopted the slogan "Art is the new steel" as a marketing tool that tapped into excitement over art and culture as vehicles for urban development. Of course, what this utopian vision ignores is the manner in which artists are expected to labour for low pay in short-term contract jobs with little or no benefits or security: a situation that is markedly different from the job security, high wages, and benefits that steel workers enjoy(ed) thanks to decades of struggles on the part of unions and workers.

developments such as portable computers, smart phones and social media make it that much easier to work all the time, and the scarcity of secure work ensures that one's socializing often entails a large amount of "networking" for future contracts, causing a general blurring between the lines of paid work and private time. Celebrations of the "creative class" overlook this degeneration of the labour environment, where pursuing work that one loves is presented as an adequate compensation for the protections, time, wages and security thus surrendered. It is just this form of "sacrificial labour" that researchers like McRobbie and Andrew Ross cite as becoming hegemonic in the new information economy, with formerly marginal figures such as the artist and the academic providing the template for a new mode of exploitation based on doing what one loves.⁹⁶ A progressive society would allow us to pursue work that we enjoy *without* giving up the hard won securities and protections that are being steadily dismantled in the scramble of Western cities and nations to redefine themselves as hubs of "innovation." Slavoj Žižek might seem to be joking when he defines the communism-still-to-come (in contrast to the state socialism that hitherto has masqueraded under the same term) as characterized by everyone being "allowed to dwell in his or her own stupidity" ("Marx Reloaded"). In the section of the documentary video in which Žižek makes this claim, the editors show a picture of a man in a suit

⁹⁶ McRobbie writes that "[t]he flamboyantly auteur relation to creative work that has long been the mark of being a writer, artist, film director or fashion designer is now being extended to much wider section[s] of a highly 'individuated' workforce" (517). Andrew Ross argues that "artistic and academic traditions extol sacrificial concepts of mental or cultural labour that are increasingly vital to newly important sectors of the knowledge industries," an argument that could easily be applied to the form of labour that supports creative class-driven urban development (2).

in the lobby of an office building, engaged in a performance art piece that involves a television set. In contrast to nightmare images of communism as state-enforced conformity—images that we are all too familiar with from twentieth century Soviet history—actual communism would consist of exactly the kind of freedom to produce “weird art” (or whatever form one’s *jouissance* might take) that Jeremy Greenspan celebrates in his fond description of his home town. Let us remember, then, that it was the partial protections from economic and market pressure offered by Fordism that allowed artistic, common culture flourish, for a time, in Hamilton. And let us not forget that it is precisely this freedom from necessity that is being *undermined* by the new “creative economy” in the form of longer working days and eroded labour standards, even while these transformations are celebrated in the figure of the “entrepreneurial” artisan.

As dire as the above critique of the creative class model of gentrification might seem, the majority of people who support this initiative do so out of a mixture of motives, not the least of which is often a genuine desire to improve the lives and fortunes of Hamiltonians. It is currently difficult for any city on Earth to escape the imperatives and vicissitudes of the essentially irrational and a-human machine of capitalism, and our vision of what is practically possible is largely limited by the ideological mediation deployed in defence of the market’s relentless pursuit of profits for a minority of subjects. It is this same ideological engine that filters our perceptions of downtown Hamilton as in need of “fixing,” and that tends to recognize as “people” only middle class subjects to the detriment of a newly disposable industrial working

class.⁹⁷ I could cite numerous examples from popular discourse citing the need to bring “more people” into the downtown core, when what is really being advocated is a changing of the *kind* of people who live and frequent there. But to do so would be to disparage authors, activists, politicians and small business owners who pride themselves for the investment they have made in boosting the downtown core.

Critiques of contemporary, “creative cities” gentrification are often taken as a personal affront by people who have invested their time, savings and reputations into projects that try to rescue Hamilton from the degraded image it has accrued due to the shifting tides of a globalized, capitalist economy. Rather than accepting the parameters neoliberal ideology imposes on this discourse, we should challenge them: against the paternalistic views of Torontonians like Hume and Liss that disparage the “old” Hamilton, we should take pride in what outsiders register as “degradation.” Such a move would be a first step toward recognizing the common cultures, and the ongoing histories of struggle, that make Hamilton unique and valuable. Here we can take inspiration from the largely working-class skateboarding subculture that has flourished in downtown Hamilton for over thirty years.

⁹⁷ For an astute critique of the public and political discourse about “fixing” downtown Hamilton, see Amber Dean and Phanel Antwi’s article “Unfixing Imaginings of the City: Art, Gentrification, and Cultures of Surveillance”, and pg. 230.



Figure 10. Skaters using the Beasley Bowl in 1988. Photo by Annerie van Gernerden. Used with permission.

A photo taken in 1988 by Annerie van Gernerden shows three young men skating the Beasley Bowl, a kids' wading pool that was appropriated by skateboarders before it was incorporated into a municipal skate park installed in 1992. The "Smogtown" graffiti tag and logo is an innovation of Hamilton skater Jesse-Lee Wolter that incorporates a clever pun. It refers not only to the now famous "Dogtown" skate scene that developed in the ghettos of Santa Monica and Venice Beach, California in the seventies, but also to the "Hogtown" moniker given to Toronto due to its history of pork production. ("Hogtown" is also the name adopted by one of Toronto's first skateboard shops, which opened in 1984.) The Smogtown graffiti thus situates

Hamilton within a chain of signifiers that registers the development of skate culture in association with anti-bourgeois histories of ghettoization and industry. Given that Hamilton has historically been overshadowed by nearby Toronto, the Smogtown moniker also playfully evokes this relationship, enacting a kind of levelling by evoking Toronto's own industrial past.

“Smogtown” refers, of course, to Hamilton's history as a site of heavy industry. Downtown Hamilton's proximity to the industrialized waterfront often suffuses the air with a heady mixture of pollutants, which include effusions from the coke ovens of Dofasco and U.S. Steel, and the odours emitted by the Bunge soya bean processing plant. At Beasley Park in 1988, these emissions were often mixed with the fumes of dyes and solvents from the flanking, now inoperative, textile mill. In contrast to contemporary gentrification schemes that attempt to rescue the city “from the ashes of its grimy industrial past” (Hume) and rebrand it as a sanitized, post-industrial satellite of Toronto, the Beasley skaters embraced and celebrated working-class culture, incorporating it into their subcultural production. The recent project to gentrify Hamilton's downtown core has placed skateboarders in a position similar to that of artists: the (sub)cultural capital they produce can be useful to developers who want to highlight the city's “gritty” past in order to attract a new class of people to downtown, a move that implements a new mode of social organization and control in the process. Providing a historical sketch of the skateboard culture that has developed at Beasley Park will help to situate this contemporary development within a larger historical process, whereby the modes of regulation, resistance and common culture that developed during under the Fordist era are being replaced by the more

privatized, individualized and suffuse control structures of contemporary biopolitical capitalism.

Blood, Sweat and Concrete: A Visual Map of the History of Skateboarding

Installed as an official skate park in 1992, Beasley predates most of the free outdoor skate parks that have proliferated in the new millennium as a strategy for managing the growing number of skateboarders in cities and towns. Because of its location and unique history, Beasley has a different dynamic from many more modern skateboard parks. Whereas skaters tend to view skating in specially built parks as less “authentic” than found environments in the streets, skating at Beasley has an aura all its own, making it a desirable, respected destination, and one of the central “hubs” of the downtown Hamilton skate scene. The unique character of Beasley skate park can be attributed to several factors, including location, history, topography, the demographic of the Beasley neighbourhood, and the diversity and passion of the skaters who have been using the park, some of them for decades. While situating the park as an historical site risks fetishizing its current form at the expense of a continuing process of collaborative development, it is important to note that the park’s topography bears witness to an ongoing and living history that reflects three major moments in the history of skateboard culture. For simplicity’s sake, I will link these three moments to three prominent features: the Beasley Bowl, The Widow Maker quarter pipe, and the do-it-yourself (DIY) Jersey barriers.

1. The Beasley Bowl and the Emergence of Street Skating

Beasley Park was first developed in 1976 as a site of much-needed parkland in the city's core. Located in downtown Hamilton, both the skate park and larger green space are embedded in the fabric and flow of the city in a way that many other skate parks, often relegated to out-of-the-way locations in the suburbs, are not. Beasley Park is very close to the downtown police headquarters, a detention centre, several homeless shelters and soup kitchens, a hospital and a mosque. The skate park is thus embedded amongst a number of institutions that speak to the working-class and immigrant histories that have shaped the life of downtown Hamilton during its heyday as an industrial centre for steel production, and its more recent history of deskilling and unemployment.⁹⁸ When heavy industry began to suffer in the eighties, the downtown core entered a period of what has been perceived and constructed in the media as decline. But it is during this same period that Beasley began to entice skateboarders, who were attracted by a children's wading pool with a nicely sloped transition, perfect for carving across and launching out of on a skateboard.

What is now fondly known as The Beasley Bowl was incorporated into the modern skate park installed by the city in 1992, though it was originally designed as a wading pool and splash pad for kids. Similar half-bowl splash pads from the same era exist in other downtown parks, but local skaters will verify that none of them have the particular transition and contour that makes Beasley an enticing place to skate. The curb that surrounded the shallow end of the pool, and the

⁹⁸ Though the city seems eager to shed its "gritty" image as a steel town, heavy industry is still a major source of employment. For instance ArcelorMittal Dofasco employs 5 400 workers in a fully operational steel smelter ("Home").

hat-shaped concrete form that contained the fountainhead (called “the sombrero” by the skaters) were used as skateboarding obstacles. Skaters would also incorporate parking blocks, garbage cans and other elements into the bowl to do tricks upon and over.



Figure 11. Beasley Bowl in the eighties. Photo by Derek Lapierre, used with permission.

In the eighties, skaters further modified the area by removing a metal railing that was installed at the top of the bowl, and which prevented them from using the incline as a launching pad.⁹⁹ The inclusion of a repurposed, pre-existing element into a municipal skate park is rare, as

⁹⁹ Some of this account of Beasley’s history was constructed from interviews I conducted in 2012 and 2013 for the *Beaz Steez* documentary project. The description of Beasley as “the oldest extant skate park on the Eastern seaboard” was suggested by Scott McDonald, a long time Beasley skater and the owner of Che Burrito, a local

most such facilities start by clearing the ground and erecting all new structures. This quirk of Beasley park is one of the features that makes it a site of living, common history, as the re-purposed bowl supplies a physical token of the emergence of street skateboarding in the late seventies and early eighties when, with the closing of many privately run skateboard parks, skaters took to the streets.

Revisiting Annerie van Gemerden's 1988 photo (Figure 3), to the centre-right of the photo, a metal anchor remains as testimony to the skater's removal of the wading pool's guard rail. Combining this with the palimpsested surface of the bowl, we can see how even in the early eighties, the Beasley Bowl comprised a kind of nucleus for working-class youth culture. Like the factory funk in the air, however, this culture contained its own "corporatist" and carcinogenic tendencies. To the bottom left, a "white pride" graffiti tag registers the white supremacist sentiments that overlapped with some elements of the skateboard culture. Like most reactionary racist and sectarian positions, the white pride movement misdirects its anger. In this case, the increased precariousness of working-class lifestyles caused by governmental decisions to relax trade legislation was misrecognized as the result of immigration. Rather than directing anger to the neoliberal governments that enabled and encouraged the flight of industry to other parts of the world, white supremacist resentment blames immigration for the loss of domestic employment. "Bomb the Boats," a song by the legendary Hamilton punk band The Forgotten Rebels, released about the same time as this photo was taken, candidly and disturbingly

restaurant and lounge. In Ontario, only the city of Sarnia has a still-operant skate park of the same vintage as Beasley (Armstrong 8).

articulates these racist sentiments:

I don't want no foreign pricks to take my job away from me.
My tax dollars pay their ransom, would they do the same for me?
I don't, I don't want them in my home.
I don't, I don't want them finding me alone.
They're commies, subhuman subversives.
They're commies, they're human living curses.
They've got nowhere to go so let them drown,
I don't want them around so let them drown.
So let's bomb the boats and feed the fish.

The Forgotten Rebels supplied some of the most memorable punk rock ballads of my youth. Classic Rebel songs like “Don't Hide Your Face” provide a nuanced satire of mediatised celebrity culture in the guise of a love ballad. The sophisticated, biting critique in songs like “England Keep Your Stars,” “This Ain't Hollywood,” and the Rebels' cover of Barry McGuire's “Eve of Destruction” were part of the soundtrack to my early skate career, and I still listen to and enjoy these songs today. Mickey De Sadist, the lead singer and founder of the band has recently tried to clarify their intentions regarding “Bomb the Boats.” In a 2013 interview he states that “Racism is stupid” and that the song was intended as “a satire on a conversation ... overheard between two racist rednecks” (Schulz). Whatever the original intent behind the song's inclusion in the Rebels' 1979 debut album *In Love with the System*, it is likely that listeners sympathetic to the “white pride” movement would not have consumed the song as a satire. Whether decoded ironically or not, “Bomb the Boats” is important because its lyrics provide a snapshot of the failure, on the part of certain white, working-class subjects, of what Jameson calls “cognitive mapping” or the ability to link the terrain of everyday life experience to larger political-economic

developments (“Postmodernism” 51-54). Furthermore, the song has proven to be an uncannily accurate prediction of developments in Western foreign policy: in the three decades since the song was released, the desire to “bomb [racialized others] far from my country” has become a constant element of neoliberal political practice, manifesting most recently in the various “wars on terror” of the new millennium. However, this tendency to externalize, localize and personalize what are actually systemic issues integral to global capitalism supplies a clear example of the zombie imaginary, where socio-economic factors are depoliticized by projecting them upon people whose disposability is then used to ideologically manage the negative affects experienced by subjugated populations (see *infra* pp.182-86) The sentiments expressed in “Bomb the Boats” tragically alienate the white, working-class victims of neoliberal restructuring from those “commies” and immigrants who would otherwise be valuable allies in the project of addressing the actual political and economic causes of decreased social security and well being under neoliberalism.

While the white pride xenophobia of the seventies and eighties existed in the context of mounting deindustrialization, there are signs that a similar politics of *ressentiment* is forming amongst those threatened with marginalization in the new “post-industrial” and “creative” economy that Hamilton is currently attempting to embrace. Here, the zombie imaginary casts “urban renewal” as a problem of population: rather than addressing poverty as an issue of fair distribution of wealth, resources, and labour, the “creative cities” model focuses on peddling the city’s cultural and architectural resources to a select group of consumers, displacing the victims

of neoliberal restructuring in the process. Because this solution involves casting the deskilled remnants of the Fordist labour pool to ghettoized neighbourhoods away from the now desirable downtown, the backlash from these managed populations can take the form of racism directed against the liberal visions of diversity that Richard Florida flags as important to the “creative class” who would live in these newly colonized cores.¹⁰⁰

Similar tensions have begun to strain the Hamilton skateboard community as well. The skate community is at risk, in coming years, of finding itself increasingly divided between a corporatized, commoditized version of the subculture that dovetails nicely with the new elitism of the “creative economy,” and a grass-roots faction that preserves the memory of Beasley’s common culture but also harbours the kind of divisive *ressentiment* that gets easily misdirected against human targets in the ongoing debates over subcultural “authenticity.” A third option might leverage the cultural capital the skateboarders have collectively produced to negotiate for a more progressive and inclusive model of urban renewal—one that benefits *everyone*. This strategy might avoid the mistake represented in “Bomb the Boats” of directing ire towards the wrong targets (both within and without the skateboard community), and instead focus on how to address the injustices, exclusions and displacements that are being normalized by the gentrification strategies currently celebrated by municipal and private developers.

¹⁰⁰ In March of 2014, racial slurs were found spray painted on the walls of an apartment building on James Street North, across from the apartment of Danielle Wong, a PhD student at McMaster who is doing a project about representations of Asian people in social media (Carter). This street is the epicenter of the “artistic renaissance” that Hamilton is trying to market as a lure to investment. The exacerbation of racist sentiments thus needs to be placed in the context of the changing class dynamics of this part of downtown: insofar as the new redevelopment works to displace part of the population that has historically lived there, the backlash to this may take a misdirected, racist form similar to that of the “white pride” *ressentiment* detailed above.

2. Spatial-temporal Incorporation: The Widow Maker and the Municipal Skate Park

In the early nineties, Jesse-Lee Wolter, an artistic and enterprising young skater whom we have already met as the inventor of the Smogtown moniker, procured the architect's plans for Beasley Park from the local library. He approached city officials with the argument that having a kids' wading pool so close to a power transformer station (which flanks the east side of the park, just metres away from the Beasley bowl) was unsafe, and that the area would be better suited for the dry use of a skateboard park. In 1992 the city agreed, incorporating the bowl into a larger paved delta and adding a quarter pipe, a hump, railing, and some other contoured areas. Rumour has it that the quarter pipe, called the "Widow Maker" due to its steeply inclined transition, is so because the city accidentally installed it upside down.¹⁰¹ However, the skaters have turned this difficulty into a virtue: mastering tricks on the Widow Maker is one of the markers of authenticity and skill amongst Beasley skaters—proof that one has spent enough time at the park to learn to navigate the steep transition.

In 1994 Derek Lapierre, another local skater, started what would become the annual Beasley Skate Jam, a two-day amateur skateboarding event that has been running for over two decades, and which attracts skateboarders from all over Ontario and farther afield. That same year, Lapierre spearheaded *Nomads Magazine*, a publication chronicling the skateboarding, music and rave culture in Hamilton and surrounding areas. What started as a photocopied 'zine

¹⁰¹ Thanks to veteran Hamilton skater Scott MacDonald for sharing this piece of Beasley lore.

quickly developed into a printed, glossy-covered magazine with advertising and one paid staff member. The Hamilton Skateboard Assembly, a volunteer organization that runs the Skate Jam and other events, originally the brainchild of Wolter, was formed in 2002 by local skaters such as LaPierre. With the installation of Beasley Skate Park as a site where skateboarders could practice their sport without being ticketed or kicked out, and with the development of events like the Skate Jam, publications like *Nomads*, organizations like the HSA, and local skate shops like DMBC, Hamilton skateboard culture began to solidify its own unique identity. This development can be attributed to the efforts of older skaters who grew up in Hamilton, like Wolter and Scott McDonald, and skaters who had moved to Hamilton for school or work, like Derek Lapierre and Grant Coates, working together to gain support from city hall and from their fellow skaters to advance these and other projects.

As a whole, this era of Beasley's skateboard history represents a period of skateboarding's rise in popularity and incorporation into the mainstream. The decade that saw the installation of Beasley Skate Park in Hamilton precedes and anticipates the wide proliferation of public skateboard parks that occurred in the new millennium.¹⁰² In Chapter 4, I introduced spatial-temporal incorporation as a supplement to the two forms of incorporation that Dick Hebdige articulates (*infra* 129-151). Spatial-temporal incorporation occurs when a commonly produced, heterogeneous or oppositional culture (a category that overlaps with many subcultures) is incorporated into existing temporal-spatial structures in a manner that crucially

¹⁰² In the first decade of the new millennium, over 2000 skateboard parks were built in the USA alone (Howell "Urban" 475).

changes the nature of that culture, adapting it so as to reinforce the cultural dominant. We can see an instance of this form of incorporation in skateboard culture with the mass implementation of skateboard parks as officially sanctioned spaces to contain an otherwise renegade practice of skating in the streets. As Chihsin Chiu points out, skateboarding in a sanctioned park crucially changes the character of the activity: in the compressed spaces of busy parks, skaters must compete for space and attention, emphasizing the individualistic aspect of the sport over its group dynamic. These spaces are also often commoditized and regulated through the mandatory use of equipment like helmets and pads. The presence or absence of illumination likewise regulates the times skaters can use the parks, while the presence of parents and surveillance often impinges upon the sense of autonomy sought by skaters (37-38).

This kind of spatial-temporal incorporation is well illustrated by Turner Skate Park in the suburban “mountain” area of Hamilton. Turner is a smooth, well-crafted modern skate park built between 2008 and 2009 for half a million dollars taken from funds generated when the Hamilton privatized its hydro-electric utility. The park is thus a physical token of the kinds of liquidation of socialized resources characteristic of the shift from a Fordist to neoliberal social structure. Turner Park does the further work of containing and reconfiguring the common, resistant practice of skateboarding in the streets, individualizing, regulating and rationalizing the subculture in the way described by Chiu.¹⁰³ The disciplinary and policing functions of Turner are

¹⁰³ Ocean Howell also describes the neoliberal tendencies inherent in contemporary skate park culture. Howell argues that modern skateparks emphasize an entrepreneurial model of subjectivity and risk management that has supplanted the values of loyalty and civic responsibility from the Progressive Era of playground management (“Urban”).

dramatically highlighted by its particular location: to quell local residents' concerns that a skate park would increase crime and vandalism in the area, the park was installed directly beside a police headquarters, since this location would ensure 24 hour surveillance of the area.¹⁰⁴ Nestled between the police station, a library and a YMCA, Turner Park provides a contradictory space of controlled rebellion, a fitting emblem of the emergent, biopolitical societies of control where “[e]verywhere surfing has already replaced the older sports” (Deleuze 6).



Figure 12. Beasley Skateboard Park after the city renovations in 1994. Photo by Derek Lapierre, used with permission.

¹⁰⁴ A Culture and Recreation report from the City of Hamilton (Makins 2005) “recommends the construction of a new skateboard park to be located at one of two areas in the north-west corner of Turner Park... with the understanding that the Hamilton Police Service will provide video surveillance of the park 24 hours a day, seven days a week.” The park is described as enhancing “Community Well-Being” by providing a “much needed designated space for the skateboarders, moving them out of the streets and parking lots of businesses.”

As we shall see in the next section, despite the contradictory nature of municipal skate parks, skateboarders often develop a sense of belonging and ownership of these spaces. The Widow Maker quarter pipe at Beasley Park provides an emblem of an era in skateboarding history when cities responded to the disruption of the given spatial-temporal order posed by skaters by offering them a compromise in the form of their own proper and circumscribed spaces. But spatial-temporal incorporation is not the end of the story of skateboarding's subcultural development in downtown Hamilton. By embellishing and modifying the space of the park, skateboarders have taken stewardship of the space, an on-going project that has granted them a certain amount of leverage, voice and representation in the current project to redevelop the downtown.

3. The Jersey Barriers and DIY Project

If a struggle for autonomy is a central element of skateboarding subculture, then the implementation of public parks like Beasley comes as a mixed blessing: skaters gain their own, special space within the city, but lose something of the larger “right to the city” that they attempt to assert through street skating. Skaters respond to this incursion by continuing to skate in places they are not supposed to, but also by adapting and modifying the ones they are given. In the controlled spaces of many skate parks, this resistance might take the casual form of the litter skaters leave behind, of wax applied to concrete edges to make them easier to grind, or of a hastily scrawled graffiti tag. At Beasley, skaters have struggled for a larger degree of latitude. Until the city of Hamilton passed stringent anti-graffiti legislation in 2006, painting was tacitly

allowed at Beasley Park, and a procession of murals decorated the walls of the bowl, quarter pipe and ledges. The anti-graffiti campaign narrowed this proliferation of colour down to a trickle of tags and profanities until 2012, when the HSA worked with the BNA to get city permission to paint in the park on certain days during the summer.

The return of mural and graffiti art to Beasley was one element of a larger push on the part of the skaters, the neighbourhood association and city to renovate the park. On the skaters' side of things, two decades of winter frost heaving and elemental wear had rendered the surface of the park difficult to skate, despite yearly municipal maintenance. The skaters took it upon themselves to fill in some of the cracks, showing up on designated weekends with tools, a portable radio and the materials needed to repair some of the rough patches. In addition to this, starting in 2010 the HSA worked alongside the city to design and install some new elements, including a ledge and flatbar, and to have bright new overhead lamps installed to make the park safer and easier to skate at night. From the perspective of neighbouring residents, the presence of skaters helped give the park a "lived in" feel that made what was sometimes perceived to be a rough and dangerous part of town feel safer.¹⁰⁵ The skateboard culture of Beasley was even celebrated in a public mural by Hamilton artist Bryce Huffman that was commissioned by the BNA in 2012. Alongside a picture of the neighbourhood's Beasley Badger mascot (adopted as an

¹⁰⁵ Skateboarding is sometimes celebrated as useful in turning "blighted areas and neglected space into useful and safe destinations" (Heywood 30). Such optimistic appraisals overlook the role skaters' activities play in gentrification projects that often culminate in excluding the skateboarders themselves (Howell 2005). One way to resist this tendency is for skaters to form coalitions with the disadvantaged people whom they might otherwise help to displace. However, this kind of political activism is not often celebrated in the representations of skateboard DIY culture that circulate in the popular media.

emblem of defiant resilience), and an image of the Cannon Knitting Mill that registers the industrial and architectural heritage of the area, a helmeted skateboarder navigates an aerial manoeuvre with the Widow Maker quarter pipe in the background.



Figure 13. BNA Mural in McLaren Park, by Bryce Huffman, 2012. Photo from the BNA website.

The skaters were recognized in more concrete and legislative ways as well. In 2011, the BNA developed and published a Neighbourhood Charter document that described the various “stakeholders” in the community, and an Action Plan that outlined key strategies for improving

the neighbourhood.¹⁰⁶ The skateboarders, represented by the HSA, were invited to sign the Charter and participate in the framing of the Action Plan. Inviting the skateboarders to take part in this process involved them in the governance of the park in a manner that recognized them as part of a larger social fabric. Two representatives of the skateboard community, myself and Derek Lapierre, were also invited to take part in the Beasley Park Redevelopment Public Stakeholders Group, a group of citizens representing various elements of the Beasley neighbourhood with whom representatives of the city have been meeting in order to come up with a workable proposal for renovating the entire park area. These opportunities for the skaters to take part in local governance and community events highlights Kara-Jane Lombard's argument that, by virtue of its imbrication in the process of incorporation, subcultural resistance can work constitutively to change the dominant culture from within. Lombard's recuperation of Hebdige's incorporation thesis is in keeping with the insights of Sarah Thornton, who provided an important foundation for post-subcultural theory by highlighting the "paradoxical combination of resignation and refusal, defiance and deference" that characterizes subcultures (167). Using examples from the extreme sports franchise and Australian governmental initiatives, Lombard shows how the incorporation of skateboarding into mainstream culture has given some skateboarders the opportunity to push back against exploitative mechanisms and misrepresentations. In a similar fashion, the involvement of local skaters in decision making processes regarding the future of the Beasley neighbourhood has given the skateboarders a voice

¹⁰⁶ See McNeil, Mark. "Beasley neighbours' charter believed to be a first." *thespec.com*. 21 June 2011. Web. Accessed 22 April 2014.

and a certain amount of leverage. Although the skaters' stewardship of the park might sometimes take forms of privatized, entrepreneurial subjectivity that reinforces a neoliberal model of civic agency (Howell "Skatepark"), it has also allowed some of the skaters to practice forms of citizenship and political representation that go beyond the tactical appropriations of skating in the streets. By attending meetings, making media interventions, collaborating with the city and neighbours to renovate the park, and participating in such initiatives as Hamilton's first foray into participatory budgeting (in 2013), the Beasley skaters have been able to draw attention to themselves as engaged citizens rather than just the passive "consumers" of municipal programs and spaces.

With these and other collaborative, grass-roots and city-supported initiatives to improve the park and neighbourhood, a sense of community, opportunity and good-will has developed between many of the different groups and classes that make up the fabric of Beasley. Whether this sense of inclusivity, agency and possibility can be maintained and expanded to include those subjects who have the most to lose should the demographic of the neighbourhood change is the crucial question hovering in the background of the initial, "utopian" phases of this kind of urban redevelopment. For instance, the BNA Huffman mural celebrating the skateboarders and knitting mill is on the wall of a ball court in McLaren park, a smaller park a couple blocks from Beasley that is heavily used by the children of immigrant families from the neighbouring high rises. Due to economic and linguistic barriers, such people might find it difficult to participate in the kinds of discussions and decision making processes that are currently underway to decide the future of

the neighbourhood in which they live. Had they been so included, the mural that decorates McLaren Park might have better reflected the heritage and interests of the group of people who primarily use it. While the skateboarders might serve as a ready icon that registers a gritty but celebrated working-class and urban culture, as a figure of edgy “otherness” they can also be used to cover over more precarious forms of alterity experienced by immigrant, homeless and street-involved populations. Without skaters necessarily intending to, the largely white, masculine, and working-class norms of the Beasley skateboard culture can operate to eclipse and disenfranchise more vulnerably positioned members of the community. This is one of the hidden modes of exclusion effected by the “creative cities” model of development articulated by Richard Florida, by which artist and “authentic” street culture is encouraged as a way of attracting the professional classes to the same downtowns that this demographic fled in the “white flight” of the post World-War Two era. Because this form of gentrification appears to happen “organically” rather than by the more dramatic interventions of modernist redevelopment, the displacement that it produces is likewise characterized as a “natural” process, allowing developers and planners to disavow their responsibility for these outcomes. In the creative cities model of redevelopment, rather than forcibly evicting residents from “blighted” areas which are then dramatically restructured, cities encourage arts and culture as a way of setting a process in motion that will effect a similar, but more subtle and gradual gentrification (Howell “Creative” 33).

In his examination of the history of John F. Kennedy plaza (also called “Love Park”) in

Philadelphia, Ocean Howell examines the role played by skateboarders in the gentrification of urban spaces. In the context of the gentrifying city, the critique of space that skateboarders perform can be recuperated as a generator of “marketable ‘street culture’ imagery” that reinforces rather than resists the cultural dominant (Howell “Creative” 33). Once they had been used in this way, the skaters in the Love Park example were banned from the plaza through policing and redesigning the space. But displacement need not take such dramatic forms: through gentrification, the class dynamic, norms, surveillance and policing practices of an area can change in such a way that the subjects who formerly used it no longer feel welcome in the space. Phaniel Antwi and Amber Dean argue that, in the discourse of urban renewal currently being deployed in Hamilton, the displacement of “supposedly undesirable people” acts as a “fix” that attempts to rationalize the “living, messy city (with its multiplicitous views)” in favour of a narrow definition of citizenship that emphasizes home-and-business-owners (19). Here again we encounter the zombie imaginary at work (see *infra* 182-86), where political issues are projected onto people, the removal of whom becomes the magical “fix” to problems that demand, instead, a politics of inclusivity, tolerance and redistribution of wealth.

While the City of Hamilton has pledged not to move Beasley Skate Park, the skaters’ subcultural capital might be used to produce surpluses that could ultimately undermine the skate park’s heterogeneity, erase or co-opt its history, and displace its current users—and by users here I mean not just the skateboarders, but the more precariously positioned subjects who frequent and enjoy the larger space. By marketing the unique features of an area, investors can collect

monopoly rents: profits generated by proximity to or association with a resource that is perceived to be rare or singular.¹⁰⁷ In the case of Beasley Park, the vibrant skateboarding history is a cultural resource that the city, neighbourhood and local merchants can use to (re)brand themselves. In an area characterized by a concentration of social services, low-income apartments, and welfare organizations, the skateboarders project an image of autonomy and stylized self-reliance that dovetails nicely with dominant neoliberal ideals celebrating individuality, entrepreneurialism, and personal risk-management. At the same time, local shops might attempt to monopolize the skate park, garnering legitimacy by their association with Beasley while simultaneously commoditizing the space. In both cases, a collaborative produced culture is co-opted by limited interests and used toward ends that ultimately undermine the common nature of the resource, either through developmental strategies that exclude the most vulnerable, or through commoditization.

At the present writing, the overall effect of the improvements at Beasley has been to breath new life into the skate park, and to attract new skaters and scenesters to the spot. While there has always been a group of locals who have grown up skating the park, the DIY improvements have attracted talented skaters from other parts of town, such as the suburban mountain area and the neighbouring municipality of Burlington. Many of these skaters took an active role in the weekend park repair sessions as well, adding a further dimension to their engagement with and stewardship over the space. In the interviews I conducted for the *Beaz*

¹⁰⁷ David Harvey (2012) provides a detailed account of monopoly rent and the role it plays in urban development schemes in *Rebel Cities*, ch. 4. See also, *supra* pp. 242-45.

Steez film project, some of the new wave of skaters said they were attracted to Beasley because of the sense of excitement regarding the renovations, and the opportunity they had to be part of this process. There was also a sense that the park was a fun and relaxing place to just “chill out,” and that it had a welcoming sense of respect and community. A narrative of regeneration was evident in several testimonies, with people citing the bad reputation the park used to have in contrast to the current image of the park as a “happening” place.

In the film, I tried to place this contemporary Beasley aura in a historical context, showing the three decades of stewardship that the skaters and other locals have enacted over the space. The common culture at Beasley developed during a period when downtown was largely ignored and avoided by residents from other parts of the city. During this time, the skateboard culture of the park was more insular and exclusive: one often had to “prove” oneself to be accepted in the space, and skaters who were outsiders to the scene were sometimes harassed or driven away. This kind of policing helped maintain the skaters’ space and identity in what was a sometimes rough neighbourhood. One long-time Beasley skater I talked with expressed nostalgia for the time before the renovations, saying “Maybe it's just my fucked up thing, but I liked the old park, when it was rougher.” When I asked why, he said because “fucked up things used to happen...it was more entertaining.”¹⁰⁸

When Beasley was just a ghetto instead of a ghetto in the throws of gentrification, the skaters could largely do what they wanted, since no one else much cared about the space. This

¹⁰⁸ Personal communication with skateboarder, 8 July 2013.

same skater quoted above had a philosophical attitude toward the current changes, saying that they are part of the way things evolve over time. We must be cautious, however: viewing the changes to common space like Beasley Park as merely part of a natural process covers over the extent to which temporal-spatial incorporation instrumentalizes common cultures in urban development processes that work in favour of private interests, often to the detriment of subcultural groups and precariously positioned subjects.

Unless intentional measures are taken to counteract the exclusions inherent in processes of urban development that instrumentalize art and culture as a means of attracting investors, the new attention given to the skateboard culture at Beasley park could become a way for more fortunately positioned subjects to publicly mediate their sense of guilt over the hidden forms of disenfranchisement that fall upon less visible members of the community. Happily, many members of the neighbourhood association are sensitive to these issues, and actively work to create a space that includes marginalized subjects. For example, BNA meetings regularly include several members of the community with developmental challenges who require assisted living arrangements, as well as representatives of the local Mosque, and representatives of groups who advocate for people struggling with poverty and addiction, and street-involved youth. The modern iteration of skate culture at Beasley displays a similar respect and openness to difference, in the sense that the skate park is host to a diverse group of users in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, ability and class. But this goodwill can falter in the face of the economic pressures that

attempt to “catalyze” change in a neighbourhood.¹⁰⁹ Here we might revisit Jameson’s observation that culture only emerges as a category in the relationship *between* two or more groups:

This is to say that no group "has" a culture all by itself: culture is the nimbus perceived by one group when it comes into contact with and observes another one...in this sense, then, a "culture" is the ensemble of stigmata one group bears in the eyes of the other group (and vice versa). (“On Cultural” 33)

The much-lauded category of community, though often viewed as a space of exchange and inclusion, must also bear the various “stigmata” of difference and potential exclusion that structure the emergence of culture itself. Within this context, hospitality towards the Other remains an always-unfinished project that requires continual critical analysis and evaluation. Applied to the intersection of local interests and the politics of urban development as they unfold in neighbourhoods like Beasley, the inherently exclusionary structure of culture and community mean that, without legislative and institutional support for at-risk populations, the goodwill of residents and skateboarders can become merely the friendly face of a process of structural displacement. More insidiously, this last point can prove true even despite the best intentions of the people and groups involved.

¹⁰⁹ The language of creative industry as a “catalyst” was adopted by the City of Hamilton in 2008 in association with a largely successful project to transform an old cotton mill in east Hamilton into an arts centre (McCabe 2011b). However, the use of this same language in the context of a very different, densely populated downtown neighbourhood raises serious issues. City literature enigmatically describes the Cannon Knitting Mill redevelopment project as potentially having a “catalytic effect” on the surrounding neighbourhood (McCabe 2011a). The use of this term covers over the extent to which the redevelopment might “catalyze” the surrounding neighbourhood in ways that will be detrimental to some of its most vulnerable residents. This chemical metaphor is also in keeping with a history of biopolitical language that, at least since the Victorian period with such terms as “degeneration” and “urban blight,” has attempted to cast the management and displacement of populations as part of “organic” processes that are, in reality, intentionally engineered by the state and private interests.



Figure 14. Skateboarders adding a concrete transition to a Jersey barrier. 2012 Photo by Simon Orpana.

One way to counteract this tendency is to point out the heterogeneous, messy and always

incomplete processes that produce social spaces. Though this heterogeneity is often revised and edited to produce the kinds of tidy narratives that comprise the “origin myths” of dominant groups, highlighting the history of surprising developments and agents that contribute to the production of social space can help to keep these process more open, inclusive and equitable. Two concrete Jersey barriers, dropped off in the park by the city in July of 2010 and modified by the skaters over the course of several years, serve as ready tokens to illustrate the grass-roots, community-oriented, DIY ethic that informs the skaters’ response to the degeneration of the skate park. Jersey barriers are the angled concrete dividers often used for partitioning off construction areas on roads and highways. The angled faces of these barriers also make them attractive to skateboarders, who can ride up the side of them and even perform tricks on the top or “lip” of the barrier. The skaters determined the best place for city workers to position these obstacles, then organized several weekends in which they applied concrete to turn the barriers into smoothly transitioned surfaces that greatly improved the skateboarding potential of the area surrounding the bowl. These materials were donated and paid for by the skaters themselves. During these weekend events in the summers of 2012, 2013, and 2014 (this practice is still ongoing at this writing), local skaters volunteered their time, resources, and expertise to shape the park into a place that was desirable to skate. Providing an example of just the kind of surprising developments that sometimes get smoothed over or lost in the construction of dominant histories, two neighbours from across the road who often sit on their porch watching the skaters donated additional supplies, and helped supervise the laying of the concrete. These

two older men had construction experience, and took an active role in coaching the skaters and refining the construction of the Jersey barrier upgrade. Another neighbour brought her son's wagon loaded with cans of enamel paint and brushes to decorate the cast-iron posts that delineate one edge of the skate park. Blaring music, concrete dust, paint fumes, neighbourly exchanges and skateboard antics combined to create a festive, carnivalesque atmosphere during these weekend sessions, one of which coincided with a grass-roots May Day festival being celebrated with free food, music and activities in the flanking green space. Though the skaters tend to be more focused on skating than leftist politics and activism, many of them made a trip to the festival to enjoy the free vegan food being cooked and shared as part of the May Day celebration. Some of these skaters might have also stopped to check out the array of free 'zines set out on display. The politically charged live rap performances by Lee Reed and others also provided welcome sonic accompaniment to the skateboarder's activities. In the heterogeneous social space of the park, it is difficult to assess the cross-fertilization that might have occurred on this and other occasions when different groups of users interact, but these kinds of spontaneous exchanges can help lay the foundations for newly emergent formations and social relationships.

Common Culture as a Site of Struggle and Transformation

This brief history of skateboarding at Beasley Park reveals a dialectical process by which the tactical interventions of youth appropriating urban space are countered by containment strategies like municipal skate parks and anti-graffiti legislation. These, in turn, are met by

further innovations on the part of the skaters who through the collaborative DIY process have been able to maintain a sense of agency and build a unique community by taking stewardship of the skate park. This common culture provides an alternative to the consumer-oriented, rationalized spaces predominant in the city, but it also generates a form of surplus value that can be used to further strategies of redevelopment that utilize a neoliberal “creative cities” model. A key contradiction in urban gentrification that leverages monopoly rents as an accumulation strategy is that it almost always undermines the same unique, local qualities that it celebrates as an impetus to “growth.” David Harvey employs the Marxian category of monopoly rent to describe the way cities attempt to capitalize upon unique products, spaces, attributes and histories as a way of generating value for the ruling class. Monopoly rent is generated when “social actors control some special quality resource, commodity or location which, in a certain kind of activity, enables them to extract monopoly rents from those desiring to use it” (*Rebel* 91). In our increasingly service and information-oriented Western economies, monopoly rent is the primary lever by which, for example, Microsoft generates profits every time someone purchases access to a piece of software, or by which iTunes generates revenue by “renting” you the rights to listen to a song on a particular device. In the urban sphere, monopoly rent is generated when property values increase due to proximity to a desirable amenity, such as the cafés and shops of a trendy downtown neighbourhood. When a previously industrial building is “repurposed” and turned into loft and office spaces, rent is generated by the desirability the location and historic patina adds to the space. It should be noted that, as in all capitalist modes of profit extraction,

what is traded upon in monopoly rent is usually the product of some form of collective endeavour which is then privatized and made to serve the interests of a much smaller group than those who actually produced the value in the first place. In the case of the repurposed industrial building, for instance, the “weathered” look that is preserved in the beams and bricks of the newly renovated spaces is the product of the underpaid hours of toil performed by anonymous labourers. While the factory was in operation making products, these workers were paid only a portion of the profit they generated (usually, just enough to reproduce themselves materially, so they can live to work another week, month or year). When the same factory is sold to be made into lofts and offices, these now unemployed labourers are exploited a second time in the form of the expropriation of surplus value that they are directly responsible for generating in the form of the wear inscribed in the building itself. In the *Beaz Steez* video, I included footage from an interview I conducted with Joseph Benning, a former worker at the Cannon Knitting Mill that flanks Beasley Skateboard Park. Joseph describes how the current labour market predominantly offers casual contract work, while dwindling pensions and social services leave workers “to their own demise.” And yet it was the labour of Joseph and other workers that contributes to the post-industrial ambiance making the Cannon Knitting Mill a desirable “heritage building,” one whose transformation into condos, studio spaces and yoga studios is described in city reports as having a potentially “catalytic” effect on the surrounding neighbourhood (McCabe “Cannon”).

In a community meeting in which Glen Norton, the City of Hamilton’s Urban Renewal Manager, was pitching the idea of turning the Cannon Knitting Mill into a “Innovation

Exchange” centre for the creative industries, a woman from a nearby housing complex asked whether the new building would have any space set aside for community uses. This woman came from a humble background, and sensibly suggested that it would be nice to include spaces that reflected some of the historical uses of the building. Specifically, she suggested that setting not-for-profit space aside for a women’s knitting collective might be a suitable use of part of the building. Norton was forthrightly dismissive of this suggestion. The Knitting Mill project, he explained, was a private-public partnership with a Toronto investment company, and the space had to be put to solely commercial uses that would help to recoup the four million dollar investment that the city and company had made towards the property.

To be fair, 2010 saw the opening of a new Community Centre attached to Dr. Davies Public School that flanks Beasley Park where such community uses as a women’s knitting collective might be stationed (although in this venue, it would have to share the community room with other users, and so wouldn’t have a permanent space). However, the fact that the Knitting Mill project is being undertaken with an investment of two million dollars of public funds should raise serious questions as to which groups will benefit from the planned development. A mixed-use housing/retail/studio/office development that does not also put space aside for community and non-profit space will almost certainly be tailored to a higher class of person than has historically called the Beasley neighbourhood home. It is difficult to imagine ex-employees of the Mill like Mr. Benning or some of the other clients who make use of the Good Shepherd Centre directly across the street from the Knitting Mill feeling welcome in the kinds of upscale,

purely for-profit spaces that the city plans to create. Rather than having a mixture of commercial and non-commercial spaces that could include and celebrate some of the common cultures of the current residents of Beasley, the parameters of the current Knitting Mill project will almost certainly undermine the inclusive, grass-roots and common nature of Beasley. This is a form of gentrification that takes common culture, in this case working people's contribution to the history and culture of the Knitting Mill and neighbourhood, and exploits it in service of generating monopoly rents for a select and privileged demographic.

This situation is made all the more lamentable when we remember the longer history of Beasley Park. In the mid seventies, downtown councillors had to fight even to secure this valuable green space in the heart of what was then a more heavily industrialized area. In 1975 Jim Bethune, a former real estate agent who had spent eight years as a councillor for Ward 8 of the city's affluent mountain area, tried to oppose the Parks Planning Committee's recommendation to make a nine-and-a-half acre green space at what is now Beasley Park. Bethune argued that it was not economically feasible in the downtown area to uphold the city's recommendation that there be one acre of parkland for every thousand residents. And despite the fact that federal government funds from the Neighbourhood Improvement Program were available to buy up the land needed to make a park, Bethune suggested that the one-and-a-half acre park in the more affluent south of downtown would satisfy the needs of the area ("Bethune insists"). Forty years ago, people like city councillor Bill McCulloch, who represented Ward 2 wherein Beasley is located, had to fight the prejudices of representatives from more affluent

parts of town to even have a park installed at Beasley. Part of the legacy of this battle is the much smaller size of the park: 3.75 acres versus the 9.5 acres that had been initially proposed. In the midst of the challenges currently facing this neighbourhood, it is important to remember this history: the workers and immigrant population of Beasley had to fight middle class opposition to even get a park for themselves; now that they have a park, they risk losing it to investors who would like to co-opt this collective resource in service of limited interests. The stakeholder consultation process that is currently underway to plot a path for redeveloping the park has put a friendly face on this initiative. However, even if the redesigned park highlights the cultural heritage of the park in the form of recognizing it as a site of skateboard history, this commonly produced cultural asset will provide a stamp of “authenticity” and added value that the Knitting Mill development can leverage in attracting clients and investors. At the same time as the skateboarders and other users of the park provide this pedigree for the real estate project, they might find the unique culture of their space undermined by upscale developments whose presence will change the norms and values that structure the larger neighbourhood space.

We have already identified the sense of community, autonomy, care and sharing celebrated by diverse users of Beasley Park. This larger atmosphere is also what makes the skate park seem different from the hurley-burley of the busy downtown that surrounds it: insulated by the sound of skaters’ wheels from the background noise of car traffic, the park offers an image of freedom as skaters engage in an activity that seems a world apart from the commoditized spaces of our increasingly consumer-driven society. It is important to note that this space of

difference—what Foucault called a “heterotopia”—exists as such because the institutions that support and surround it (the school, prison, community centre, hospital, soup kitchen, homeless shelters) harken from the Fordist period when significant state funds were directed towards the production of shared and socialized resources that helped reproduce the labour force needed for industrial production.¹¹⁰ The culture of difference at Beasley is partially the product of residual Fordist social structures—institutions and norms that have been buffered from neoliberal restructuring due to Hamilton’s ongoing industrial history. The attempt to re-brand the city as a creative hub after the loss of its manufacturing base celebrates the city’s countercultural capital in the form of quirky art and subcultural investments, like skateboarding and punk music. But the Fordist institutions such as living wages and regular working hours that might allow these cultural innovations to continue to flourish are increasingly undermined by a post-Fordist regime that celebrates flexible, precarious contract work, low-paying service industry jobs, higher housing and transportation costs and increased educational debt. The creative city model of development celebrates and capitalises upon the residual cultural assets of the Fordist era in favour of an emergent post-Fordist and “immaterial” labour formation that actually removes the very conditions that these cultures need to flourish in the first place. In this sense, the creative cities model of gentrification is a neoliberal apparatus for parasitically liquidating socialized

¹¹⁰ Foucault describes the older “heterotopias of crisis” being replaced, in modernity, with “heterotopias of deviance” which contain and manage social difference (2008). The vision of subculture as a spatial solution to inter-generational social tensions (Cohen 1999) supplies a context for the proliferation of heterotopias as places that help subjects navigate the transition from Fordist to post-Fordist social formations. In this context, the idea of spatial-temporal incorporation reveals heterotopias as spaces whereby social norms and relations might be challenged, but also perpetuated under the guise of resistance or rebellion.

wealth and common culture.

The steady erosion of free time, security and resources in the new, entrepreneurial “creative economies” makes it increasingly difficult for common people to create the kinds of semi-autonomous culture that was possible under Fordism. To give an example, for almost twenty years, the Beasley Skate Jam operated under insurance coverage supplied by the city. In 2012, the City rescinded this coverage, a development that is in keeping with the predominant neoliberal climate of privatized risk.¹¹¹ In order to run events, the HSA now must yearly procure expensive, private insurance coverage. Registration fees from the events no longer generate the revenue needed to keep them going, and the organizers have had to host an annual fund-raising drive. In the future, they might have to rely more heavily on the private sector, commercial advertising and sponsorships, a tendency that will work to undermine the amateur, grass-roots character of the Skate Jam and other events. In the context of this shift towards entrepreneurial models of citizenship and social engagement that emphasize privatization, it is important to note that the Skate Jam itself was originally the product of a state funded social program to retrain workers. Enrolled in the Canadian Special Event Development Program in 1992, Derek Lapierre learned the events management and desktop publishing skills he needed to start the Skate Jam

¹¹¹ The official stance taken by the city of Hamilton is that the skaters had never been covered for the twenty previous years they had run the event, even though they had paid for and been issued permits by the city and so understood themselves as being covered by the city’s insurance. Apparently, in 2012 city workers simply became better educated as to the risks involved in skateboarding, and so required the HSA to provide its own insurance. But this shift in city policy can also be read as part of a larger shift to the privatization and commoditization of risk under neoliberalism. For more details, see: “Skateboard contest.”

and *Nomads* magazine.¹¹² Such state funded programs are becoming increasingly rare as education and job training have become profitable industries in themselves in the post-Fordist restructuring.

Cultural spaces like Beasley Park are the product of diverse people, institutions and governing bodies lending their energies, resources, skills and time. While every person has his or her own reasons for participating in such a project, there is a kind of spontaneous giving that characterizes these scenes and events. The social pleasure of being part of a collective, semi-autonomous movement is a reward in itself, over and above whatever private and personal motivations might inform one's participation. Because common culture is produced collectively through diverse people contributing their resources and without immediately commercial motivations, it has an aura of authenticity and seems to offer an alternative to the kinds of utilitarian and commercial interests that structure the vast majority of our public spaces. At the same time, because it offers an alternative to dominant modes of commercialized public space, this kind of common culture is a fragile structure that, if it is not recognized as such, can be easily reprivatized by interests that can undermine the conditions that made it desirable in the first place. As an example of this, urban development strategies such as Richard Florida's "creative cities" model do not value art and culture for their own unique attributes, but rather use them as part of a larger equation in which cultural capital is instrumentalized as a means to stimulate economic growth that favours the professional classes at the expense of less fortunately

¹¹² Conversation with Derek Lapierre, March 15 2014.

positioned subjects. Developers are increasingly turning to the cultural and artistic realms to provide the unique “content” that can be leveraged to make cities attractive to investors in the wake of de-industrialization that is occurring in many Western countries. This increased attention to arts and culture gives cultural (and subcultural) producers a new sense of importance, but it also makes them vulnerable to forms of exploitation that are inherent, though perhaps not readily apparent, in the labour and commoditization surrounding culture. Returning to the example of skateboarding at Beasley, whereas an earlier form of incorporation (the building of the skate park) acted primarily on a spatial scale to manage or domesticate the oppositional practice of skating in the street, the newer form of incorporation creates value for the dominant culture by virtue of skateboarding’s semi-autonomy as an “externality” that can be used to leverage development. This change is illustrative of the larger shift of Western cities and societies from a Fordist formation with its delineated binaries (public/private, work/leisure, mainstream/subculture) to neoliberalism’s destabilization of these categories via the installation of the more fluid control structures.¹¹³ But even as the societies of control colonize greater areas of our collective and private lives, they become increasingly dependent on various iterations of the commons for the production of value and forms of life. This dependency opens new possibilities for resistance grounded in already existing formations, which yet require skilful articulation if they are to be developed into effective, collaborative forms of political resistance.

¹¹³ As Howell points out, skateboarders are particularly useful as the “shock troops of gentrification,” helping reinforce neoliberal modes of subjectivity and the privatization of social space, because they usually have “no personal memory of the postwar contract between labour and capital” that characterized the Fordist era (33).

Conclusion

The Decadent Proletariat¹¹⁴

In terms of the periodization of subcultures, the first two decades of Beasley skate park's existence offers an example of a "heterotopia of deviance," a space "occupied by individuals whose behaviour deviates from the current average or standard" (Foucault "Of Other" 423). Situated just blocks away from the Barton Street jail to the north and the downtown police headquarters to the south, flanked by a public school to the east and the former Cannon Knitting Mill immediately beside it to the north, the skate park supplies a space in which the values of productivity, conformity and discipline as they were manifest in the institutions of Fordist society (factory, jail, school) can be temporarily suspended and overturned. If conformity was one of the prices demanded in exchange for the security offered by Fordism, then the skate park offered a space where one might find temporary respite from these disciplinary structures. On the one hand, this supplementary function operates as a "pressure valve," allowing the disciplinary structures to function all the better by giving subjects a circumscribed space to vent frustrations and indulge illicit desires. On the other hand, this space of deviance offers subjects the opportunity to develop a sense of agency, camaraderie and identity that might exceed the social formation in which it is embedded. As examined in Chapter 3, skateboarding encourages subjects to become individualized technicians of risk, assessing the difficulty of a given

¹¹⁴ Thanks to Derek Lapierre for this title heading, which he poetically enunciated in January of 2014.

manoeuvre and always seeking to push the envelope so as to navigate the line between accomplishment and injury. In doing so, skaters pursue patterns of behaviour that have become hegemonic in the neoliberal era, as John Coates' comparison between the brain and body chemistry of stock traders and fast-reacting athletes illustrates (53-81).¹¹⁵ However, at Beasley Park, and with the emergence of street skating in general, this kind of socially valorized risk-seeking is pursued by what are perceived to be the wrong subjects, in the wrong spaces, and to no immediately productive end. The *jouissance* that is celebrated in the stock trader's navigation of financial risk (as socially reckless as many of these transactions are) is, in the physically risky actions of the skateboarder, seen as excessive, deviant and dangerous.

Here we encounter an example of Agamben's idea of profanation at work: class hierarchies aren't so much eradicated as temporarily neutralized through play (see *infra* 70-73). To the extent that skaters take part in the kinds of pleasures that recklessly structure the contemporary financial world through the navigation of risk, they co-opt dominant culture, appropriating for themselves a form of subjectivity normally reserved for the dominant class.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ While Coate's investigation into the embodied nature of financialization makes for fascinating reading, it displaces the structural, systemic reasons for the failure of capitalist markets, such as the 2008 crisis, onto the physiology of bankers and traders, blaming the predominance of young, male subjects in the banking industry for excesses that are actually the outcome of the systemic constants of capitalist production (such as profit expansion and uneven development). It is difficult not to see Coates' vision of an embodied capitalism as a symptomatic response that attempts to compensate for the increasingly de-humanized, dis-embodied and abstract nature of the economic systems that govern us.

¹¹⁶ Jacques Rancière provides an important history of this same principle at work in *The Nights of Labor*, where he tells the story of working class poets in mid-nineteenth century Paris who appropriated for themselves the bohemian lifestyles enjoyed by select members of the middle class. These figures found themselves subject to a double exclusion: they were often seen as traitors to working class solidarity because they "indulged" forms of bourgeois luxury, but the middle class were reluctant to acknowledge them as legitimate poets. By seeing underemployment as an advantage rather than a detriment to the construction of identity, the poet/worker "who draws secret pleasure

Both stock traders and skateboarders are performing aspects of the enjoyment that structures neoliberal capitalism: the individualized, essentially selfish and even antisocial pursuit of excess (though they do so in very different realms). On the one hand then, a skateboarder's *jouissance* can be seen as a subaltern tactic that doesn't so much contradict the cultural dominant as appropriate it by subjects who are structurally excluded from more socially sanctioned access to these behaviours. It is here that skateboard culture displays the conciliatory function I describe as providing a Biopolitical Cultural Apparatus (BCA) by which subjects can be socialized into the value structures of the emergent "immaterial" capitalism. On the other hand, the way in which subculture plays with these values, adapting them to uses that deploy them in the wrong spaces, at the wrong times and by the wrong sorts of people, supplies the extra, subversive element by which that very order, while it is not completely overturned, is at least made liveable by the subjects upon whom it is imposed. The various skateboarding moves (like the memes that compose other subcultures), supply so many *sinthomes*—semiotic atoms infused with enjoyment—that, taken together and applied to the streets and parks of cities, comprise a language that *performs* something of the unconscious of our society. As such, these practices constitute a delicate space of freedom with the cultural dominant, displaying dissent and agency in ways that navigate the borders of acceptability. At the same time, these practices might also contain the templates for future and unanticipated transformations, a potentially radical trajectory that can only come to fruition by holding to the apparently false, compromised position of

from the very uncertainty of his occupation" is a fitting figure to revisit in our own era of precarious employment (Gauny qtd. in Rancière *Nights* 82-83).

“resistance” that these cultures perform.

While we might recognize radical *potential* in these subcultural formations, the emergence of lasting and effective alternatives to the cultural dominant of late capitalism can never be assumed as a “natural” or automatic process of historical development. Because humans are thinking and speaking animals, the physically performed commons requires a supplemental performance—that of language itself—if it is to be consolidated and directed towards progressive ends. An analogy to this relationship between action and language is supplied by psychoanalytic dream analysis. According to this thesis, our dreams work to manage and direct our psychic functioning whether we pay conscious attention to them or not. They might even work best when they are unconscious—if maintaining the status quo, or equilibrium, is one’s goal. However, the skilled dream interpreter can help a subject to become more conscious of the processes that constitute his or her identity and relationship with the world, and thus help the subject to become a more fully responsible and active agent of his own destiny. In the same way, theoretically analysing largely mute (sub)cultural practices might help us bring the energies inherent in these practices into sharper focus, channelling them to potentially transformative ends, and challenging the status quo rather than reinforcing it.

The history of Beasley as site of common culture provides a fragile and possibly fleeting example of the kind of alternative spaces that subcultures can produce. This production of a spatial commons, however, is the direct result of a corporeal practice that draws upon a performed, *embodied commons* that had developed over the course of skateboarding’s history in

the form of a collaboratively produced lexicon of gestures, moves and manoeuvres. What Michael Nevin Willard calls the “tricknowlogy” of skateboarding is, in fact, a form of commons: though particular individuals are often credited with the invention of a certain trick, these rapidly become common property as a set of moves that are applied to new environments in endless variations. As a set of shared practices that have the effect of making an otherwise alienating environment humanized and liveable, skateboarding’s embodied knowledge constitutes something akin to Paolo Virno’s theorization of the “general intellect.” In the breakdown of the categories and certainties that structured the Fordist social formation, argues Virno, the population is exposed to a generalized sense of unease, a “not feeling at home” that resembles Freud’s description of *the uncanny* (Virno 23-5). The saturation and reordering of the social sphere by the logics of capital—the “real subsumption” that we can link to post-modern, financialized capitalism as well as the rise of the “biopolitical societies of control” (Hard and Negri *Empire* 22-7)—causes the dissolution of historically grounded communities and the “buffer” they provide against the vicissitudes of the market and fate. In this situation, Virno asserts that “the most general linguistic structures are becoming instruments for orienting one’s own conduct” (27). What Virno calls the “common places” of language are not the specialized discourses of trades or academic disciplines, but rather the generalized capacity for communication that is an attribute of human sociality in the broadest sense.

A couple years ago, I was sitting in a somewhat fancy coffee shop that was part of a national chain. In the booth behind me, a young man was being interviewed by an older woman,

who was asking him complex questions about his “leadership abilities,” his greatest strengths and weaknesses, his personal aspirations, etc. By the detailed and personal nature of the questions, I assumed that the job he was being interviewed for was some kind of public-relations or management position. As I listened to the fellow respond to these questions in an articulate way, I became anxious for him, and was glad that it wasn’t me who was being interviewed for the job. As I was leaving, I looked at the pair in their booth, and realized that the person doing the interview was a manager of the café: the job the fellow was applying for with his acrobatic communicative performance was that of a humble server of coffee, muffins and sandwiches. This anecdote illustrates Virno’s point about our reliance on the general intellect, as embodied in language, body gestures and interpersonal skills, being a foundation of the post-Fordist social order and economy. Whether one is a truck driver delivering shingles, a cashier at a sandwich shop, or a university instructor (and despite the proliferation of accreditation becoming necessary for even the most rudimentary of jobs), it is largely our common, communicative skills that we are asked to draw upon and that characterize the essence of our labour.

This being thrown back upon our communicative capacities summons a kind of tactical creativity as a strategy for navigating an increasingly precarious world; our reliance on the general intellect requires that each of us deploy virtuosity. Similar to Michel de Certeau’s description of skilful communicative acts whose performance constitutes their meaning (80-81), Virno offers virtuoso performance (exemplified by piano impresario Glen Gould) as an example of “an activity which finds its own fulfillment (that is, its own purpose) in itself” and “which

requires the presence of others” (53). Virno locates the seeds of this new generalization of virtuosity in the culture industry as “a mode of production which...in the post-Ford era, becomes elevated to the rank of canon” (58). (We have already seen how Andrew Ross and Angela McRobbie provide a more detailed analysis of this paradigm shift in their descriptions of the once marginal production of artists and academics now becoming the hegemonic template for a generalized mental labour. [See *infra* pp. 210-11]) It should not be a great stretch, then, if we add the subcultural production of a practice like skateboarding to the communicative commons modeled by artists, academics and the culture industry.

A skateboarder’s appropriation of this or that feature of the built environment is not, ultimately, a semiotic recoding that translates one meaning into another; nor is it even, in the last analysis, a form of “noise” that disrupts the hegemonic order; rather, a skateboarder’s performance is an act of *jouissance* that means exactly what it does:

They constitute an act which they intend to mean. There is no need to add a gloss that knows what they express without knowing it, nor to wonder what they are the metaphor of. They form a network of operations whose formal rules and clever ‘coups’ are outlined by an enormous cast of characters. (de Certeau 80)

These words refer to the story telling practices of historian and anthropologist Marcel D tienne who Michel de Certeau describes as eschewing any attempt to re-cast the performative element of the story into another kind of discourse. But they could equally apply to the complicated figures deployed and deciphered by skateboarders. Since the nineteen nineties, technical innovations from the specialized domain of “freestyle” skateboarding have been incorporated into the more mainstream street skating lexicon so as to make an almost infinite variety of

different stylistic flourishes possible.¹¹⁷ Many of these trick variations depend upon flipping the board in complicated ways in the space of time between jumping off the ground (“oillieing”) and connecting with a particular obstacle. These tricks can be done going forwards or backwards, flipping the board clockwise or counter clockwise, using one’s toe or heel to execute the flip, turning one’s body 180 or 360 degrees to the left or right, doing an extra trick as one dismounts an obstacle, etc. What constitutes a fascinating form of virtuoso performance amongst skateboarders might appear, to a casual onlooker, as so many similarly opaque and obscure motions. To skaters, these nuances constitute a common language that produces a community. The overall effect of these performances for skateboarders is to cement a feeling of belonging and shared adventure that is grounded in the collaborative enjoyment of our common environment. At this level of the performance of a commons, the subcultural practice of skateboarding constitutes neither a politics nor its lack, but rather *takes the very form of politics itself as virtuosity*: for “every political action...shares with virtuosity a sense of the contingency, the absence of a ‘finished product,’ the immediate and unavoidable presence of others” (Virno 53). The political is already inherent in skateboarding as social act done for its own sake, much in the same way that Agamben locates friendship as an inherent good that is the foundation of the political, a being *shared by* something larger than what one generally recognizes as oneself (see *infra* 161-68).

This performance yet requires a supplemental torsion if it is to become articulated and

¹¹⁷ For a description of this form of skateboarding, see *infra* 140-41.

fully recognized as political. Here we might cede that Oliver Marchart is correct in his analysis that subcultures risk becoming stuck in the merely “corporate” or tribal mode of praxis if they fail to articulate their micro-political actions into a larger, macro-political vision. However, this danger is not reflective of the fact that “there is no ‘politics’ in subcultural politics” (Marchart 86), but rather that subcultures are grounded in the production of a commons that is inherently political: it is the very foundation of politics under contemporary capitalism, but it is in constant danger of being subsumed by privatizing influences. I would argue that the struggle to fully realize the commons inherent in subcultural formations, and to assert this common culture in the face of ongoing privatizing influences, is the point of articulation that links subcultures to other major political struggles of our time.

De Certeau supplies a version of the praxis needed for this supplemental articulation in his reference to the Greek idea of *metis*, or practical intelligence, which he designates according to three criteria: 1. “metis counts and plays on the right point of time (*kairos*),” 2. “it takes on many different masks and metaphors: it is an undoing of the proper place,” 3. “it disappears into its own action, as though lost in what it does, without any mirror that represents it; it has no image of itself” (82). The paradoxical practice of virtuosity that can never recognize itself as such (for to do so would be to “break the spell” of concentration required to perform the act in the first place) needs an articulation to make its operation intelligible. However, for this articulation to be effective—to not merely erase the political content being performed—it must share something in common with the act itself; it must be continuous with the act and an

extension of the act's performance of the commons. This is why dismissive accounts of subcultural practices so often fall short of the mark: like Sean Dinces' analysis of skateboarding videos, they stop at the representation of the act rather than searching for a solidarity with its performed reality.

Having established the political core of skateboarding in its performance of a commons akin to Virno's articulation of the "general intellect" or de Certeau's *metis*, we can now return to noting how contemporary capitalism has placed the exploitation and appropriation of this commons at the very heart of its accumulation strategies. Indeed, in our era of "disembodied" finance capitalism and immaterial labour, we seem to be pressing towards a crisis whereat collective, commonly produced culture is increasingly in conflict with the privatizing imperatives of an economic regime that parasitically depends on the commons for the extraction of surpluses. Whereas under industrial production the capitalist could justify his exploitative relationship to labour by virtue of his bringing together workers, materials and machines for the production of new commodity objects, post-industrial capitalism has a much more "hands off" approach, letting subjects work semi-autonomously to produce cultural innovations and "content" that are then privatized, marketed and sold to those who can afford them. In a way, incorporation is the very mechanism by which this new, and at the same time more primitive, form of capitalist exploitation functions. Returning to my example of the young man being interviewed for a job at a coffee shop, the entire restaurant and its apparatuses for preparing food are revealed to be largely secondary to the social experience that can only be provided by the

right kind of employee: someone with “winning” leadership qualities, a good education, and an upbeat attitude. The commodity the proprietor hopes to secure with her stringent interviewing practices is the product of the employee’s entire social life: his schooling, friends, upbringing, cultural capital, future prospects, etc. This commons is co-opted and mobilized as the “added value” that goes along with one’s coffee and muffin. In the gentrification strategies mobilized under Richard Florida’s “creative cities” model, a parallel appropriation of commonly created culture and value is being enacted: intangible “externalities” are sought as means to increase rent and property values, even though the people who have contributed to producing this common culture are not necessarily recognized and rewarded, and even might be harmed by this process.

Reclaiming the Commons: Some Ideas for Beasley Park

Because hegemonic bourgeois values limit what we see as possible, discussion over gentrification tends to become polarized, and those who challenge it are often accused of wanting to keep neighbourhoods impoverished and ghettoized. To address this issue in a more productive manner, we need to look beyond a vision of social possibility that falls into the trap of either/or thinking: either we gentrify a neighbourhood according to the values of the new “creative class” or these areas will remain in “decline.” A third option is to recognize that what middle-class people categorize as “urban decay” is often symptomatic of prejudices and biases which prevent them from recognizing forms of culture and life that do not fit the dominant, consumerist model. Beasley Park is one place where diverse and “scruffy” common cultures are

in the process of being recognized and celebrated as legitimate and valuable, but there is a danger that the “creative class” ideology will attempt to refashion this space into a trendy, upscale and exclusively middle-class area that makes only token, aestheticized gestures towards the older, working-class and immigrant cultures that have historically flourish there. A division between the original, common culture and the new bourgeois values has already begun to form in the skateboarding community, and has manifest as conflicts over the use and legacy of the skateboard park. These divisions in the skateboarding community centre around distinctions of “authenticity,” and tend to form along fault lines that many people attribute to the personalities of the actors involved. If we probe a little deeper, however, we can recognize the politics of gentrification at work. One group of skaters recognizes that a new value structure is attempting to implant itself, threatening to overwrite the history of autonomous, common culture that they themselves identify with, because they have helped to produce it. This group reacts by claiming to safeguard the “authenticity” of the original movement, and by attacking those whom it sees as representing a newer, commercially-oriented faction. This other faction, for their part, feels under attack and so responds defensively and aggressively, creating a “winner take all” mentality that further divides and undermines the community. These struggles over authenticity and representation thus register the structural realities of gentrification and the commoditization of collective resources, even if they are manifest in what seem to be conflicts between various personal actors.

Sarah Thornton’s groundbreaking study of British rave and club culture in the nineties

highlighted the hierarchies of distinction that exist *within* subcultures to complicate the Birmingham work that cast subculture as class-based resistance to a posited monolithic and external “mainstream.” By adapting the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Thornton’s analysis makes important contributions to our understanding of subcultures, and helped launch the wave of “post-subcultural studies.” However, some theorists have taken the trajectory initiated by Thornton’s work on subcultural capital in a single direction, ignoring the historical specificity that Thornton herself registers (166-7) and that I have tried to highlight in the shift from Fordism to neoliberalism. Crucially, the divisions that have formed within the Beasley skateboard community, though reinforcing hierarchies based on cultural capital and “authenticity,” can be seen as a response to the breakdown of the class demarcations that existed under the Fordist structures, and the attempts to install a new class dynamic in downtown Hamilton via the “creative cities” model of gentrification. Though Phil Cohen’s work has been largely neglected by the post-subcultural turn, it provides an important vehicle for retaining class as a determining factor in subcultural formation. Specifically, Cohen allows us to make sense of the hierarchies of taste and distinction that Thornton highlights without abandoning class and resistance as primary structuring principles. In the case of Beasley’s skateboarding community, the fragmenting of this scene into discordant groups echoes the positions that Cohen maps in his spatial analysis of the subcultural field of east London in the seventies: one group identifies with an “upwardly mobile” position, largely embracing the gentrification of the neighbourhood and seeking to find a place within the newly emerging, middle-class consumer culture, while another faction holds on to the

“residual” working-class culture, casting itself as the more authentic “underdog.” The tragedy of this configuration is that, by splitting the loyalties of the skateboard community, it becomes much more difficult for the skaters to collectively mobilize in a way that benefits the whole community, and that might act as a break on the larger disenfranchisements and displacements that often goes along with gentrification projects of this sort.

Here again, a return to Cohen’s work might offer a way beyond the impasse. Cohen, we remember, saw the territorial conflict between and within subcultures as a way of displacing generational conflict, which in turn displaced the “traditional parameters of class conflict” (61). However, in the context of the various subcultures of east London in the mid-seventies, Cohen worried that

For the kids who are caught up in the internal contradictions of a subculture, what begins as a break in the continuum of social control can easily become a permanent hiatus in their lives. Although there is a certain amount of subcultural mobility (kids evolving from mods to parkas or even switching subcultural affiliations, greasers ‘becoming’ skinheads), there are no career prospects. (60)

The two ways out of this bind that Cohen identifies are marriage or membership in one of the delinquent groups that “exist in the margins of subculture and often adopt its protective coloration” (60). However, in our contemporary context of advanced consumer capitalism, the extension of the envelope of youth that was offered by the early subcultures has been adopted as a social norm: everywhere we see the celebration of youth as a marketing ploy, and even as a mechanism of biopolitical control (think, for instance, of the proliferation of new-age lifestyle franchises that claim to enable us to retain or recapture youth). Though subcultural career options

were scarce in the seventies, there has since developed a culture industry that overlaps significantly with subculture. Goths, skateboarders, punks, and hip-hop fans all have specialty stores that cater to them, and the newly emergent “creative economies” rely heavily on the semi-autonomous subcultures for innovations on which to capitalize. With the much more fluid boundaries between subcultures and the “mainstream,” there are opportunities for subcultures to leverage their subcultural capital in ways that can attempt to mitigate some of the exploitation and disenfranchisement that is inherent in the new immaterial economy. This, indeed, is Karajane Lombard’s point about the constitutive role that resistance plays in the process of incorporation. It is also reinforced by David Harvey’s observation that “[t]he spaces for transformational politics are there because capital can never afford to close them down.” Harvey points out that anti-bourgeois forms of culture can take two forms: they can often “veer into local, regional, or nationalist identity politics of the neo-fascist sort” or “[t]hey can be the locus of exploration of alternative lifestyles, or even social philosophies” (*Rebel* 111). In our age of advanced, global capitalism, Harvey states,

No alternative to the contemporary form of globalization will be delivered to us from on high. It will have to come from within multiple local spaces—urban spaces in particular—conjoining into a broader movement. It is here that the contradictions faced by capitalists as they search for monopoly rent assume a certain structural significance. (112)

Let us return to the example of the proposed redevelopment of the Cannon Knitting Mill that flanks Beasley skate park. The proposed development project seems to cater to upscale clients in a way that commoditizes a sanitized version of the neighbourhood’s working class, immigrant and youth cultures in order to provide the “authentic” and edgy feel that will entice young, hip

professionals to the area. There is a gradual but substantial shift that can result from these kinds of changes to a neighbourhood, which might appear much the same but will *feel* different. The shift in register from the accepting if slightly gritty breathing space the park currently offers to a more frenetic, “plugged in,” polished and professional space will be felt differently by different users of the park. For instance, a report aimed at “Improving Beasley Park” completed in 2010 by Matt Armstrong as part of a Masters project in Urban Planning at the University of Toronto points out that the park is underused by women, and that redesigning areas in the peripheries of the park that allowed for undesirable uses (like public drinking and drug use) could help create a safer environment for a wider range of park users (Armstrong). Undoubtedly, developing the now abandoned Knitting Mill that flanks the park into a useful space will likewise help foster a safer environment. However, if this redevelopment proceeds according to the city’s plan, it may not create a welcoming space for people such as the woman from a nearby social housing facility who suggested having space for a knitting circle in the building. The curt dismissal of this idea by the city’s director of the project betrays the class boundaries that divide “legitimate” cultural endeavours from “illegitimate” ones: the creative cities model of development favours only those versions of working-class and common culture that can turn a profit, or that can help generate the kinds of “externalities” that might prove useful to attracting middle-class investors and clients. It is interesting to note that, in the same meeting, the Urban Renewal Manager remarked that the Knitting Mill might be a good place to have a skateboard shop.

Skateboard shops are one of the nexus points at which the common, collaborative street

culture of skateboarding meets the commoditized, hierarchical, individualized and rationalized world of the “extreme” sports industry. Including such a business next to the skate park would be a good way of commoditizing the grass-roots, laid back vibe of the current skate park, as any shop to occupy this space would benefit from the sense of authenticity that has been generated by countless skaters who have gravitated to and participated in the park’s culture solely for the love of it. Including a skate shop in the new Knitting Mill would be an easy fix for the city, but it would not ensure that the new development actually catered to the needs of the existing Beasley neighbourhood in a substantial way.

An alternative idea would be to use some of the space to run programs that introduced youth into the ways art and culture can be used to foster social change. An example of this already exists in nearby Toronto. In 2009 high school teacher Craig Morrison created the Oasis Skateboard Factory as one of three programs offered by the Oasis Alternative Secondary School. Students are introduced into all aspects of skateboard production: they get to make their own boards, graphics and accessories. They also get a chance to write for the *Concrete Power* skateboard magazine, and to run workshops at public schools. The program is run out of the Scalding Court Community Centre, and benefits from the centre’s location next to a famous DIY skate spot in Toronto (“The Skateboard Factory”). By tapping into an already existing interest, subcultural investments can be used to foster education that can introduce kids to opportunities that might otherwise be inaccessible to them. Especially in low-income areas with higher than average school dropout rates, these kinds of alternative, arts-based education programs can play

an important role in the empowerment of youth. Importantly, the Oasis Alternative School offers two other programs: The Triangle Program, which focuses on LGBTQ culture, and an Arts and Social Change Program. Without a focus on social issues, history and community engagement, art programs aimed at youth might merely reproduce the exploitative, individualized and “entrepreneurial” models of subjectivity currently celebrated by the “creative economy” model. However, arts programs that engage with popular culture and subcultures provide a good opportunity to challenge neoliberal value structures by drawing attention, within their curriculum, to the historical struggles centred around common culture, artists and other marginalized people for equity, rights and representation.

In the case of the proposed Cannon Knitting Mills redevelopment, the neoliberal model that sees privatized, commercial uses as benefitting even the large demographic of poorer residents in the existing neighbourhood, by virtue of the “trickle down” effect, needs to be challenged. Given that significant public funds have been directed to this project, social responsibility demands that developers find uses that benefit the whole community. If public funds are being used to stimulate commercial development, they must be utilized in a way that will not disenfranchise portions of the already existing neighbourhood. Ideally, a solution could be found that directs the profits made from commercial activity towards progressive, community-oriented initiatives like an alternative school, art and educational programs, or a housing collective. The many vacant buildings and brown fields of downtown Hamilton provide a kind of canvas upon which citizens can project their hopes and aspirations for what the city

could become. My experiences with civic-minded Hamiltonians never cease to amaze me as to the willingness to work out new solutions and strategies to produce a humane and flourishing city. In this regards, Hamiltonians have proven willing to go beyond following fleeting trends, and engage in practices such as participatory budgeting or land trust developments that have social well-being and democratic engagement as a guiding principle. I have great hope that this tendency will continue to produce a city that thwarts stereotypes and cynical expectations that take a narrow definition of culture and economy as their guiding vision.

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