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lucia hulsether
capitalist humanitarianism

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for my brother Mark

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May 2017.

I lodged my cell phone in the straps of my bicycle helmet, freeing my right hand to walk a bike while my left dragged a duffel down the sidewalk. The jerry-rigged suspension system—which somehow broke down only twice during a two-mile trek—made possible the telephone call. My brother is the person I have always sought when I am on the verge of doing a new thing: crouching behind the starting line at a first cross-country meet, collecting myself in some dead-end hallway before a big presentation, settling in on the about-to-take-off airplane that will deliver me to research overseas, enduring a long drive home after a first heartbreak. That afternoon, another moment of transience, needed his voice. I was about to join the hunger strike that the graduate teacher union had called in a last-ditch bid to pressure the university into contract negotiations. We hoped that this action would be the culmination of our three-decade fight to win livable wages, decent health care, and a neutral grievance procedure for the people who do the lion's share of teaching and research at the university, as well as for the people in the city who live under its shadow.

The union's senior leadership had sprung this tactic on the mid-level organizers in what everyone knew, but nobody would admit, was a workaround to the fact that we were nowhere near prepared to pull off an actual strike. We needed a way to shame Yale into concession, fast, before new presidential appointees struck down the legal precedent that had allowed graduate workers to unionize at all. When I stopped lying to myself, I knew the win had already slipped our grasp. But this was why the hunger strike compelled me. The tactic was masochistic, yes, but it was also consistent with the experience of organizing. Rarely did our compulsory performances of movement optimism allow room to admit the costs of what we were doing: the sacrificed time

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with loved ones, the neglect of our own health, the dissonance between our internal practices and the world we said we were building, the friendships that couldn't endure the pressure. I'd lost count of the times I'd joined our standard chant—"I believe that we will win!"—only because opting out would indicate a flagging devotion to the cause. I never felt like explaining why my doubts had nothing to do with my resolve, so I played along. For me, the hunger strike was an overdue acknowledgment of how our fight was forged in loss. Still, the coordinating committee had elected this tactic not through democratic deliberation so much as brute arm-twisting on the part of the charismatic staff. I'd abstained from the last-minute vote on process grounds. But once the majority raised their hands in favor, I knew I'd get in line.

This was how I found myself stumbling, a human luggage trolley, toward the headquarters of UNITE HERE—Local 33. International staff flown in from across the country had transformed the space into a temporary home for eight hunger strikers at a time. Each student participated until the in-house doctor benched them for medical risk. It was mid-May, and some of my colleagues were going on fourteen days. Earlier that day a third-year geophysicist on day eight had fainted in the shower, and I'd been tapped to replace her. We just needed to last two more weeks to Yale's commencement. On that morning locals from across the Northeast would converge on New Haven to mark the conclusion of the hunger strike and its accompanying month of lobbying, protest art, and civil disobedience. The spectacle of self-denial at the center—a battle against biochemical balance, literally impossible to win—gave metaphor to the slow death that precarious workers in the late capitalist service economy faced, in different ways, every day of their (our) lives.

The fasting was not the hardest part. The real showdown with the possible happened in strained one-on-one meetings with skeptical colleagues adamant that they didn't talk politics at work, in the media frenzy that drew celebrity "delegations" to pay homage to starving graduate teachers, in the escalating ultimatums to ex-radical deans, in the street-theater preambles to another round of arrests caught on cell-phone camera, and in the see-it-to-believe-it sequence in which, in broad daylight, we borrowed the local Teamsters' flat-bed truck, loaded it with lumber and Ikea furniture, backed the whole thing onto the granite quadrangle abutting major administrative offices, raised a yurt-meets-boathouse encampment, decked it with twinkle lights and picnic tables and Astroturf, and somehow held this utopian ground for fifteen days and counting. We hadn't even expected the structure to last the night. My brother, Mark, had never been to New Haven, and I had not yet visited him

in Milwaukee, but still each of us knew how the other inhabited space, how to focus the other's senses, how to make the other laugh at the end of the world.

I thought that Mark was the only person who could register the poignancy of a hunger strike for these days of Left melancholy.¹ It was the kind of spectacle we'd learned to revere, and to skewer without mercy, in Sunday school. Churches pastored by our mom, services populated by members who spent weekends trespassing at the nuclear weapons plant before the police booked them (again) in the county jail. The sermons were imprinted on our hearts. Adults told us constantly about systemic sin. Systemic sin—kind of like structural oppression but amplified by the fact that it was an affront to God herself—had poisoned everything. It didn't matter how good or pure an action or motive seemed; anything borne of human agency was bound to be rotten at its root. We heard about our own birthright crimes early. We were the children of two white people with high-level degrees and steady jobs as a professor and a pastor. We lived in a house whose mortgage would soon be paid off, enjoyed the golden-ticket mobility of our US passports, and were raised by adults who could afford to compel our year-round enrollment in team sports. They impressed on us that these were unfair advantages, inheritances of hegemonic power. Our father, who often rehearsed his undergraduate lectures to us at dinner, lobbed this term at us when we could still use our fingers to count our age in years. We learned early on that, for us, hegemony was just another word for sin.

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Both Mark and I had drifted away from the explicitly theological vocabularies of childhood, and we'd replaced them with a more sustained engagement with traditions of philosophical negativity and dialectical materialism that we'd imbibed as young adults. Both still prescribed a certain asceticism about one's footprint on the world; both had room for the resolute social antagonisms and hopes for an impossible utopia that we never didn't know. What I am saying is that, like many siblings, Mark and I had the natural solidarity of a weird upbringing. We reveled in it. We shared gallows humor about it. Mark was first to observe how the Local 33's hunger strike strategy incarnated in its constitution the slow death that capitalist economies inflict on their workers. The strike, in its grandiosity, admitted defeat. "Self-immolation is not a strategy of the powerful, my sister," he had quipped a couple of weeks prior. I could hear his smile. That the graduate union lacked any chance of getting our demands met—that we were going to lose spectacularly, and look arrogant and unhinged in the process—had little to do with the obligation to try.

We talked about the protests for about two blocks of that walk. Mostly I listened. You said you were probably going to lose your job. You had blown off work that day, and yesterday, and you would do the same tomorrow, to wander the city on foot. Leaving that Riverwest apartment where you scraped by without furniture, passing the hippie food cooperative in the gentrifying zone a few blocks south, cutting through the urban nature preserve and the middle school cliques gossiping outside, you eventually came to the lakefront. Spring arrived with you, all its creation overwhelming the fluorescent call center where you spent your daytime hours. The contrast reminded you again that, yes, there was an outside. You told me one more time how you hated work, the threats lodged at you from other cubicles, the surveillance and verbal abuse that you endured. You expected to be fired for excessive absence.

Neither of us acknowledged the other part of the story. It had to do with the news that for the past several months you'd proclaimed to anyone patient enough to bear with you in the sharing. Within the amorphous buzz of a thousand-person contact-center warehouse, you had discovered a subterranean language, its existence mostly unintelligible to bosses and other outsiders but revelatory for those who could decipher the tonal codes. For example, in order to greet a coworker stationed on the other side of building, you only had to answer incoming client calls in the normal way—"Hello!"—while projecting your voice in the direction of the colleague's assigned cubicle. You were sure the messages had gotten through. People were now angling greetings back toward you. A couple weeks later you decided to up the ante and try your hand at labor organizing. "I'm recruiting for the union!" you effused one day on the way from the call center to a jazz club gig. "Every time the word *union* comes up on the script I read for a call, I say *UNION!* really loud to spread the word." You confirmed that you had made yourself understood when the employee-of-the-month scabs in your area began to convey cease-and-desist warnings in this same code. Sentences that untrained ears heard as apologies to dissatisfied customers—"I understand you have *problems*. We *regret* to see you *go*"—masked doublespeak threats to workplace troublemakers. You cut out early. You'd take attendance demerits over the parking lot beatdown that the goons had reserved for you. You knew that they were waiting for their chance. It was clear in how the guy with the tattoos whispered *regret*.

This hyperreality still flickered on the fringes of our catch-up, but for the first time in a while, it kept a steady enough distance. You restated what we both took for granted—that you had to get out of the call center, that the place wasn't good for you. Then you'd interrupt yourself to describe, again, the Lake

Michigan horizon, indigo waves against the rocky shore, a rainbow-spiral disk that glided through the turquoise sky until it touched down at your bare feet.

I have tried to understand that walk as your last *fuck you* to the service economy that sold you the barest physical subsistence at the cost of your incandescent perception. But any sense of a victory here is my fantasy alone, a palliative for moments when I want to forget how you twisted in the grip of supercharged meaning. That day in the park, you swung between the ecstasy of your immediate senses and—you finally allowed—your shame. “One second,” you interjected. You set the phone on the ground, tossed the Frisbee toward the pickup game that had thrown it askance, and nodded to people who, if you had a second try, might have become your friends. It took all of three seconds, enough time for me to buckle under what you had shared. You came back, and I tried to overwhelm your feelings so quickly that I didn’t even ask what you were ashamed of, and I still am unsure. Was it about you asking me to float you some money again? Was it that you’d finally found language for what was making your job so cruel and scary, but your friends failed to follow the terms you used to explain it? Was it that, when you plotted a rebellion against the company’s racist labor practices, your confidants inquired into your *mental well-being*? Was it that your friends thought you were slipping away from your musical gifts? If they had intended to be subtle, they had failed. You had majored in psychology and had memorized the diagnostic euphemisms. Did you see the writing on the wall? Did you worry that they were right?

I did not ask you those questions. Instead, I told you what is true, which is that I get mixed up about the lines between regular sibling loyalty and wishing that I could fade into you. I want to trade my compulsive rigidity and risk-aversion for the mind of a person who at three years old composed an original song to celebrate our relocation from Minnesota to Tennessee: “Knocking on Knoxville! Knock Knock! Knocking on Knoxville!” You hummed it, then sang it in full voice as the movers unloaded boxes-made-drums in the sunroom, as you and everyone else tried to ignore the melting-down sibling across the hall, outraged that her brother had a capacity that she lacked. I wish that I were so porous to the atmosphere, to pick up the world’s soundtracks and weave them into rhythms, lyrics, and music. I wish that those gifts came at less of a cost. I told you that when I in my life think of you in yours, the word *shame* does not occur to me.²

Then I continued the mental health first aid protocol. Step 1: Affirm the person’s life and its value (check). Step 2: Confirm their immediate safety (no plans to self-harm). Step 3: Brainstorm actionable, positive steps they are capable of taking right now (send Obamacare enrollment form, look up local

therapists). Step 4: Schedule a time to talk again so that they have a concrete commitment (this Wednesday after work). The final step involves allowing the person their space and saying good-bye with the confidence that their fragile life is not your burden: we are autonomous agents, responsible for ourselves only. This step is a scam.

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What is it to lose the person who lost their mind? You would write a song about the violence of these abstractions; I would exhaust every possible avenue to try to find a precise answer, to pull you, to pull both of us, back from that brink.

I began writing this book thirteen days, four hours, and thirty-eight minutes after that phone call from New Haven's main drag. Thirteen days, three hours, eight minutes after I began the Local 33 hunger strike. Fifteen days after Mother's Day, 2017. Ten days after my brother left his apartment, drove onto Interstate 94 westbound, pulled over to the shoulder just across the Waukecha County line, and stepped in front of a cargo truck. Nine days, fourteen hours, and three minutes after two university security guards approached the graduate student protest site searching for Lucia Hulsether, hunger striker, and triggered our defend-the-structure elbow-linked circle. This is not a drill. No. It is a false alarm. Nobody is under arrest. The police left our utopian boathouse and headed to the church where the fasters slept, having ceded the main encampment to our peers' snack-fueled outdoor slumber parties. The police told the union staff lookout that I should call my mother. She picked up. She said: Your brother is dead. I said: Hold on, you sent the *police* to our base camp because of that? *Do you know what police do?* Also, me: *Did you just say that to your mom? Her kid died. She isn't thinking. Don't make it worse. Don't make it worse.* I grabbed the next flight south from Hartford. Hammered out an obituary somewhere in the water vapor above North Carolina. Time passed as events: cousins at the terminal, visitation, funeral, commencement, cremation, bulldozed encampment, nothing.

I will never stop replaying how the cardboard box glided, like a suitcase at an airport, down the conveyor belt and into the incinerator, one sibling trapped inside, the other's body made useless by a tangle of orphan arms that restrain her on the wrong side of the Plexiglass barrier. There is an almost feral clarity: how I do not want to exist, want to have never existed, in the world that made possible this ending, even though I realize, too, that my desire is self-indulgent and that my mourning has revealed my ugliest propensities, like how I react to my brother's death as if it is special when, in point of fact, death

by capitalism is a multigenerational norm, and if this particular loss registers as outlier, it's probably because the corpse on the highway belonged to a white boy with a safety net, which is just evidence that this event feels apocalyptic for one reason, and it's because I became assimilated to an anomalous reality where twenty-six-year-olds don't die, and I let my body learn everything was fine even when her primary, and to others abrasive, character trait was the obsessive fumigation of hypocrisy in others and myself, but in the case of the latter it was apparently no use, since I was frozen squarely in the storm path of a Category Five nostalgia trip for some lovely reconstituted suburban white family that not only has never existed but that I have never actually wanted to want, so before this goes any further I need an emergency exit *now*, like the rope ladder I imagine unfurling from a window in the sky, swinging me into the air, catapulting me into a canopy of words where I know I can stay, suspended, freed from sense, over the life that is no longer mine. I tell my parents I am going back north. I have a writing project, and it has a deadline.

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The writing project was the first draft of the manuscript that later evolved into this book. I had conceived the project as a cultural history of the idea that capitalism could be made "socially responsible." I was interested in the conditions under which it became possible to even imagine that a political-social-economic system built on plantations, sweatshops, and foreclosures, as well as ongoing histories of slavery and settler-dispossession, could be bent toward a humanitarian good. Three years into my doctoral study, I'd front-loaded my fieldwork. I had road-tripped to fair trade archives, shadowed microfinance bankers overseas, and collected dozens of case studies about socially conscious companies. Mark's day job was in one such firm, a call center with an ethics pitch about delivering accessible sound communication technologies to people with hearing loss. The steady poverty wages supplemented his even sparser income from the jazz and hip-hop circuit that he hoped could eventually become his full-time pursuit. Always my first interlocutor, he brought both his artistic vision and his experiences at the call center into our conversations about research and writing life. When he drifted into a realm of perception that not even his most synesthetic friends could access, then toward the only exit door that he could see, I did not know how to continue with the project.

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My fieldwork took place at a time when I could hear my brother's voice on the other end of the line. I composed the manuscript without that possibility, in

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a partitioned time-space continuum. Loss can explode all systems of measurement and, from the grief and debris, make the most intricate map of existence, memories the sole coordinates on a desolate landscape. The most sheltered among survivors—here I speak to and about most white survivors, and in general anyone accustomed to being protected by present orders—can afford to forget that these apocalypses happen all the time, are the architecture of everyday life, to the point that grief itself gets meted out as luxury. This means that, insofar as I am inclined toward the vocabulary of the apocalyptic to describe intimate loss, then there must be another kind of ending not to dread but to welcome: the overthrow of a system founded on the theft of life from the racialized and feminized poor. Before my brother died, I had not wavered from my negativity, at least in the abstract, but my experience of personal loss threw it into incoherence. Now I simply wanted to get back the life I had before or, failing that, to bargain a halfway covenant with the universe.

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Back in the Smoky Mountains where we had grown up, pounding twilight laps around the high school track, I couldn't outpace these thoughts. I imagined Mark grimacing at my bad faith. I had spent three years interfacing with the embarrassed beneficiaries of neoliberal surplus. I had seen how their episodic bids to manage their own conflicted attachments had evolved into a vast life-support infrastructure for a white supremacist patriarchal capitalist empire that was torpedoing into even deeper crisis. Profits *and* people. Capitalism *and* care. And other bullshit conceits whose seductive power lay in how they defer any reckoning with the magnitude of capitalist abandonment and in how, through their deferral, they both ransack the loss of its politics and held up sentiment as the universal remedy. How mortifying to catch myself propelled by a twin affective current. Not unlike the people I wrote about, I was running after private palliative that, if it was available at all, would enfold me right back into the original violence.

I collapsed on the cleat-pecked grass and allowed myself one more memory of a someone who would have known the course of action. I could almost hear his voice. Ban exception. Ban repair. Ban the sentiment that triggers both. Meditate on the endlessness, all of the losses, the pleas that echo after: stay in this existence; don't die. This book begins from that ground.

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introduction

CAPITALIST HUMANITARIANISM

This book is about what is happening when power reproduces itself through performances of self-critique, historical awareness, and progressive repair. It takes as a launching point an idiom of historical consciousness that is now part of the background to late capitalist institutional life. Notice it in the ribbon cuttings for corporate social-responsibility offices in Fortune 500 firms or in the smiles of farmers from the global South who pose on the product labels of B-corporations and multinational conglomerates. See it in the eclipse of state welfare programs by “public-private partnerships” focused on entrepreneurship training and “social-impact bonds.” Read it in the bookseller niche for executives who tell the rest of us how a neoliberal economy can solve structural racism, stop climate change, empower women, and, in the words of one economist, “save capitalism from its own excesses.”¹ All betray a hope not only that corporations and firms can remedy the forms of privation that they have entrenched but also that free markets generally might promote feminist, decolonial, and antiracist solidarity. I call this hope, as well as the pedagogical projects and institutional arrangements it inspires, *capitalist humanitarianism*.

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Public reflection on history is central to capitalist humanitarian projects. A venture capitalist learns about land-acknowledgment statements at an annual professional gathering and adds one to their website. A microcredit bank envisions a new line of credit products for indigenous women survivors of ethnic cleansing and civil war. An entrepreneur of luxury clothing understands her

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start-up as a bid to preserve artisanal traditions whose survival is threatened by the influx of sweatshops and cheap plastic from overseas. A philanthropic foundation studies its ties to transatlantic slavery and affirms its commitment to black lives. Such understandings of a past that is not past—settler occupation, war, neocolonialism, transatlantic slavery—draw the coordinates of a present-day capitalist moral geography, political theology, and redemption arc. The goal of the capitalist reformer is not to cover up history so much as to use it as a springboard to remediate its consequences.

A litany of confession follows on the heels of this historical recognition. The enlightened beneficiary of neoliberal order recognizes the calamitous consequences of modern so-called progress, with its planetary murder sprees and casual abandonment of entire populations to abject misery. Then they acknowledge their personal complicity in this economy, how their relatively good life or at least somewhat-more-bearable-existence is predicated on the dispossession of countless others who, by design, they probably cannot name but to whom they absolutely owe a debt. Finally, they will commit to doing what they can to repair these relationships and eke out any sliver of hope from the matrix that enabled them. This is where the recourse of capitalist humanitarians to historical narratives—with history signifying either a repository of bad relations to overcome or subterranean possibilities to retrieve—becomes a preamble to the question of what to do now. What if my commodity attachments could express solidarity with exploited and oppressed people? What if the workplace could promote networks of care and friendship? What if a corporation caught poisoning reservoirs or murdering labor activists could rededicate its resources to repairing those harms?

Such questions are a method for managing the dissonance that arises between, on one hand, claiming a commitment to collective liberation and, on the other, benefiting from racist and heteropatriarchal economic violence on a massive scale. Meanwhile, on every platform where converted elites tell the rest of us about their plan to devise a socially just version of capitalism, a platoon of skeptics will pillory their hypocrisy. Each morning I power up my device and let the social media algorithms browbeat me out of my self-deception. “No ethical consumption under capitalism!” scolds the same meme that I have used to scold my boomer parents. I scroll and click and scroll and click, letting my angst generate profit for the billionaire who wrote the code for the feed. I see that yet another hate read on the “elite charade of changing the world” has made it to the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list.² An ad from an outdoor gear company tells me not to buy a new jacket, since habits of fast fashion fuel climate collapse. A bank markets its services by

condemning the scam artistry of other lenders. A cable news broadcast live-streams protesters as they storm the network's headquarters. At some point I remember that many if not most plutocrats are in on this game of self-critique and self-reform. I am never sure how to point this out without joining their self-aggrandizing chorus.

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This book attempts to critique the cultural politics of capitalist reform in a way that avoids repeating, or at least forestalls, the conventions of exposé that are already fully factored into neoliberal institution building. Toward this end, I put analytical pressure on not only the organizational networks that pervade capitalist humanitarian historical archives and ethnographic fields but also the overlapping and contested institutional contexts that have conditioned the actual composition of this book: the state, the family, the corporation, the university, the union, the church.

Capitalist humanitarianism is a pervasive and understudied expression of neoliberal institutionality. The major thread of this book tracks how cacophonous critiques of capitalism on the Left have settled into streamlined efforts to reform, and rebuild, capitalist institutions. The key players in this story are multiply situated. They are missionaries whose opposition to the US global Cold War inspired them to create entrepreneurship programs in military occupations from Puerto Rico to Palestine. They are Central American solidarity activists who transferred their liberation theology into microfinance ventures and food cooperative chains. They are middle-manager bankers dedicated to facilitating financial literacy trainings for rural Guatemalan women. They are global North consumers who feel happy about purchasing eyeglass lenses from a company that provides vision testing for the poor, or who are eager to buy organic fair trade coffee if the profits are reinvested in farmer co-operatives. They are social entrepreneurs who doubt the efficacy of nonprofit aid. They are venture capitalists who attribute their investment philosophies to the radicalism of Harriet Tubman and César Chávez. All share an abiding discomfort with an imperial economic calculus that would section enormous swaths of the planet, and the life that endures there, into glorified sacrifice zones. All remain socially and psychologically tethered to capitalism as an existential plausibility structure. All strive to overcome their dissonance with best-of-all-world ventures, where one can luxuriate in private surplus while also divesting from, even dismantling, late-capitalist systems of expropriation. Their plural efforts, rooted in self-critique, have helped to reify neoliberal markets as a portal into some semblance of freedom.

For example, as chapter 1 describes, some of the earliest champions of conscious consumer practice were the Anabaptist missionaries who founded global fair trade chain Ten Thousand Villages. They did so by brokering two discourses: a tradition of disciplined asceticism with respect to secular modern temptations *and* the siren song of US benevolent supremacy. The founders found practical synthesis in a new model of consumer citizenship that, borrowing from their theological vernacular, would be *in but not of* the world into which it was born. The proposition was a win-win. If I am charmed by a vanity item that, say, was handstitched by a war refugee who received fair compensation from the Christian aid group that hired her, how can that be bad? What if my transaction is a way of turning away from the hollow excesses of mass production and toward solidarity and mutual aid with refugees? From the retrospective outlook in which “conscious capitalism” has gone mainstream, an experiment such as Ten Thousand Villages may look destined for success. But don’t be fooled by the impression of smooth consensus. The dominative structures that even now are managing and concealing the conflicts immanent to them were themselves born out of antagonisms that finally could not be contained.

This book is full of stories like the above, in which radical social critiques come into dialectical tension with hegemonic forms, and something new emerges. Many of these accounts run against the grain of recent scholarship that has portrayed neoliberal capitalism as an ends-oriented rationality that captures institutions that could or should stand independent of its logics. For example, political theorist Wendy Brown argues in *Undoing the Demos* that neoliberalism is a “peculiar form of reason” that “transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic.”³ The new subject of neoliberalism, *Homo economicus*, has turned her entire life into a hustle. She curates her online image until it reflects her “personal brand.” She runs her household “like a CEO.” She approaches her friendships as “investments” in a professional network. She relates to her government as a consumer of its services. She is, in every respect, an incarnate Kantian disaster. But she may also be on her way to obsolescence. Where does this subject fit within the turn toward socially conscious capitalism?

To the conscious capitalist, the recent efforts to infuse free market systems with humanitarian passions would be an optimistic reversal of the trends that scholars like Brown decry. Instead of a horror house where returns calculation infiltrates a social or political realm that once upon a time offered relative shelter from economic predation, the pundits for a more humane capital-

ism are confident that the sentimental postures of our closest relationships can be rehabilitative blueprints for free-market transactions that have lost their pastoral touch. Thus the savviest companies hawk their luxury goods as tokens of solidarity with global South laborers on the far ends of the supply chain.⁴ A maverick of social investing excoriates Wall Street greed and calls for a “Church of New Capital” that approaches finance as “directed energy” to “manifest [the] impact its stewards intend.”⁵ Microfinance officers assign credit scores based on the credulity with which loan applicants perform “hope for the future.”⁶

At an earlier phase of this project, I planned to argue that the direction of neoliberal cooptation had been inverted. I would have said that the distinguishing quality of capitalist reform movements lies in how it they resignify zones of formal production, such as factory fulfillment centers and corporate megacomplexes, as select centers of social reproduction. That is, champions of privatization and austerity have fought for hegemony as much through discourses of intimate care as through injunctions to rational self-management. But this initial direction turned out to be a false start. As with the claim that neoliberalism has “undone” a prior social world or subjective ideal, my thesis would have reified and reinvested in the conceptual separation between “social” and “economic” processes. Worse, it risked reiterating the capitalist humanitarian axiom of the “double bottom line,” except instead of lauding the merger between profit margins and philanthropic mission, I would have condemned its self-deception.

The liberal distinction between the social and the economic—whether deployed by political theorists defending the democratic public sphere or by finance bankers promoting the possibility of humanitarian markets—is unprepared to reckon with its own immanent contradictions.⁷ Several generations of feminist theory have established the contingency of capital accumulation with socially reproductive labor.⁸ Moreover, the same liberal-settler regimes that are parasitic on this labor achieve structural coherence through the expulsion of dissonant life from their commons.⁹ If late modern institutions are unraveling because of their capitulation to logics of economic utility, this development will be nothing new to those for whom capitalism’s “racial calculus and political arithmetic” have been the rule, not the exception.¹⁰

The problem with neoliberalism is not one of overreach or collapse of spheres. And it is cruel optimism to imagine that projects of accumulation by dispossession could or should be made more humane, less predictably racist in their modes of expropriation, less overtly corrosive of democratic processes, or more beneficent in how they “give back to” and “reinvest in” the life

they brutalized.¹¹ Rather, the problem with neoliberalism is and continues to be racial capitalism and the settler dispossessions, racist propitiations, and murderous abstractions that are its animating structural premise—and whose expressions adapt in relation to the conflicts and pressure points that are never not emerging. Capitalist humanitarianism is one of these adaptations. All the more crucial, then, to refuse its seductions and organize toward its crisis, so that other solidarities can come to light.¹²

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Like all secular modern institutional forms, capitalist humanitarianism arises in dynamic relationship with its wider contexts. The career of capitalist humanitarian intervention is in some respects a story about Christian political theology and Protestant secularism. Proponents of early fair trade and micro-finance ventures were often affiliated with white Protestant churches. These actors were adamantly *not* the pro-business evangelical organizations so often featured in the historiography of capitalism. Rather, they would be quick to insist that their faith called them to resist war, support feminist politics and queer liberation, destroy white supremacy, and never cross a picket line. Their stories complicate studies of twentieth-century capitalism that have laid blame for neoliberal privatization and debt discipline almost exclusively at the feet of the political Right. Within this literature, religion rarely appears, and when it does appear, it usually references strategic alliances between free-market hawks and conservative evangelicals who wish to roll back feminist gains and legislate sexual morality.¹³ The association between Protestantism and capitalism has been especially apparent in scholarship on religion in Latin America, which often tells a story about how Left revolutionary energies sagged when the poor masses turned away from Catholic liberation theology and toward Pentecostal doctrines of personal salvation. The best of this literature demonstrates the elective affinity between the latter theological anthropology and market technologies of credit, debt, and labor asceticism.¹⁴ This argument is not wrong and, in general, has offered important insights into the production of neoliberal ideology. Taken on its own, however, the singular construal of evangelicalism as imperial shock troop and dasher of redistributive aspirations has a secondary effect of making “liberation theology” and “social Christianity” into relative moral safe zones.¹⁵ But there is no such thing.

The apparent demographic anomaly of Christians who are also leftists who also built an infrastructure for neoliberal capitalism is of secondary importance. More primary is the question of how capitalist humanitarianism comes to resemble a political theological discourse. Recurrent motifs in capitalist humanitarian

formations—such as history and agency, contract and accountability, debt and redemption, responsibility and hope—are long-standing tropes in debates over the boundaries of Christianity as a popular movement, as a collective identity, and as a set of disciplines that format everyday life. I do not much care whether readers remember how scrappy bricklayers for (at least one major expression of) neoliberalism operated out of sanctuary churches. I am more invested in demonstrating, with these examples, how a more developed vocabulary around religion can be a jetpack for the task of ideology critique.

This point belongs to the Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall tradition of cultural studies. In a 1983 lecture on “Ideology and Ideological Struggle,” Hall theorizes religion as a discourse that needs to be considered in the work of cultural interpretation—alongside and overlapping with popular culture, law, literature, and grassroots coalition building—and cautions against ascribing independent or transhistorical meaning to religious forms.¹⁶ Reading the lecture can feel like trailing Hall through a series of equivocations. Hall insists that religion “has no necessary political connotation” and that you can’t do cultural studies without recognizing “the continuing force in modern life of cultural forms which have a prehistory long predating that of our rational systems, and which sometimes constitute the only cultural resources which human beings have to make sense of their world.” Obviously, Hall continues, “In one historical-social formation after another, religion has been bound up in particular ways, wired up very directly, as the cultural and ideological underpinning of a particular structure of power.” But such “lines of tendential force” between religious formations and dominative ideological ones are neither given nor predetermined. They can be transformed through creative disarticulation and rearrangement of their constituent elements: “It is not the individual elements of a discourse that have political or ideological connotations; it is the ways those elements are organized together in a new discursive formation.”¹⁷

I take Hall to be warning cultural critics against twin patterns in many treatments of what we take to be religious forms. One approach treats religion generally, and often Christianity specifically, as a shorthand for a stultifying secular modern order that has failed to cast off its irrational and exclusionary past.¹⁸ Here religion is paradigmatic shorthand for what Williams would call “residual,” but without any allowance for how these forms may carry dangerous memory or “flash up in a moment of danger.”¹⁹ A second approach to religion recovers this lost allowance and turns it into implicit valorization. Religion again becomes paradigmatic, this time as the wellspring of fugitive spirituality and otherworldly imagination that secular modernity has failed to contain.²⁰

Between these two analytic styles, we end up with a bifocal framework in which religion looks in one instance like governing normativity and in another instance like a revolutionary, very often racialized, transgression or evasion of those norms. Both approaches run a high risk of abstracting religion from historical-material processes—which is the opposite of what Hall aims for when he writes that the “meaning [of religion]—political and ideological—comes precisely from its position within a formation.”²¹

Hall does not travel alone. Core thinkers in Left cultural studies have engaged religion in tandem with, or as an explicit vocabulary for, the critique of ideology. For Cedric Robinson, who maps the collision of Marxian and Black radical traditions, a critique of religion helps to identify racial antagonisms at the heart of a capitalism forged in the transatlantic slave trade *and* as a way of identifying the metaphysical, mythic resources that fuel rebellion.²² Silvia Federici’s Marxian-feminist analytical frame recasts timelines of capitalist origins and Christian interventions in her excavation of the gendered class relations embedded in, and necessary for, modern divisions of labor.²³ Antonio Gramsci develops a theory of religion as the convergence between philosophy and action. In his *Prison Notebooks*, the Sardinian antifascist explains his concept of hegemony using an extended analysis of the cultural power of the Catholic Church. Against contemporaries inclined to reduce religion to hegemonic dominance, he shows the revolutionary potential unlocked when subalterns rearticulate religious forms in service of counter-hegemonic struggle.²⁴ Karl Marx, who is not as reductionist on the point as some of his readers have claimed, offers religion as a vehicle for interpreting dynamics of alienation, possession, and liberation in contexts structured by labor exploitation and the pursuit of surplus value.²⁵ All of these theorists engage religion in order to better diagnose, and to bring to crisis, structural antagonisms whose dissolution, for them, would be a basic reordering of existence.²⁶

It can be bewildering to behold the extent to which Left cultural studies has been underused, and sometimes altogether absent, in scholarship on religion and capitalism. For example, numerous scholars situated in the academic study of religion have been more consumed with building a constructive case that modern capitalism is itself a religious form and thus worthy of scrutiny from religious studies scholars. This argument has gained traction in a larger effort to disarticulate the academic study of religion from the study of the narrow set of phenomena that settler states, university departments, and ordained clergy have historically defined as “religious.”²⁷ One of the most clarifying voices in this renegotiation of the field’s internal boundaries has been Kathryn Lofton, whose scholarship reanimates the writings of nineteenth-century social theo-

rist Emile Durkheim in the name of a more capacious disciplinary mandate: “Whenever we see dreams of the world articulated, whenever we see those dreams organized into legible rituals, schematics, and habits, we glimpse the domain that the word religion contributes to describe.” Lofton nominates consumer culture as the paradigmatic example of a modern religion: “Where our social and ritual interests are placed now is not in denominational tradition but workplace culture, not in inherited objects but recently purchased goods; not archaic icons but an endlessly rotating cast of minor and major celebrities.”²⁸

Lofton has done as much as anyone to crack open an academic field for those of us who no longer wish to collude with the colonial claustrophobia of a “world religions” model. Perhaps it is the potency of Lofton’s intervention—the momentum of which carries into this book—that explains the surprising thinness of discussion on how her methods relate to the Left cultural studies critiques of people such as Hall and Williams. Which is partly to ask: Why Durkheim? What baggage does one take on board, and what tools do not fit on board, if we make functionalist sociology the preferred framework for interrogating religion and capitalism? A theory of religion, like a theory of capitalism, is never simply descriptive. It is also instantiating a world.²⁹ For example, as chapter 3 discusses in detail, Durkheim’s theory crowns a lifelong quest to discover the possibility of “social solidarity” to counteract the antiso- cial effects of industrial capitalism. Disavowing the paeans to class revolution that had gained momentum during his lifetime, both on the page and in a transnational labor movement, Durkheim planted a flag for liberal reform. He wagered that modern workplaces could be transformed from anomic death traps to totemic hubs for social belonging and collectivity; he insisted that they could be, and should be, the new predominant religious (which is also to say social) organization.³⁰ A century later, Lofton’s *Consuming Religion* refurbishes a version of this position in a statement about what higher-education workers can learn from investment bankers at Goldman Sachs:

Universities are places where it is rare to hear people speak with easy fond- ness about their institutions. Very often you hear resignation about and disdain for their employers. This is a critique inlaid with examples indicat- ing how far their institutions have fallen from the ideal of higher education. Goldman employees like where they work. We could call this a dislikable greed, a moral bankruptcy, or a convenient delusion. If you want to find hatred toward Goldman, there is plenty of it, filling Tumblr pages and Twitter feeds, sitting in comic punchlines and newspaper editorials. Rather

than sit in that aversion, I ask what other institutions besides Goldman could we imagine to be worth creating, and worth sustaining? And what do we think our work, our culture, our commitment is supposed to make, to do, out there? . . . Goldman persists because it has made—for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer—a religion. If its religion isn't ours, what is?³¹

Thinking in terms of contested articulations, there may be a way to read this statement as a call for politically engaged scholarship and pedagogy, presumably as a better alternative to Goldman's religion. But whatever potential is blunted by the rest of the paragraph, which recycles tropes that have been used to malign radical and deconstructive critique in and beyond the academy. Lofton suggests that those who excoriate the power of a major investment bank have been railroaded by negativity. They "sit in that aversion" just as "hatred toward Goldman" is "sitting in comic punchlines and newspaper editorials." These critics forfeit the battle to create the world otherwise—unlike Goldman analysts and scholars who, learning from the workplace that is the investment bank, happily make their own reality.³² A straw impasse between uncompromising critique and commitment to transformative worldmaking is how a bid to sharpen our tools for understanding corporate consensus backs itself into a treatise about reinvesting in the workplace.

This case rhymes with larger debates, which are resonant in feminist and queer studies, on critique, post-critique, and reparative reading. Riffing on the classic essay by Eve Sedgwick, scholars have penned polemics against what they view as an academic tendency to reduce the work of interpretation to the relentless unmasking of repressed violence in texts, rather than as open-ended reading staked in generosity, care, and potentiality.³³ Too often the banner of post-critique has been used to defame critical negativity, as if in refusing to make a last-ditch punt toward pragmatism or hope, they are sabotaging Left solidarity. For all of their emphasis on generosity to readers, post-critical interventions hinge on a presumptive collapse of feelings with politics.³⁴ What is experienced as pleasurable or life-sustaining is imagined to correlate to political solidarity and radical futures; that which is experienced as negative or hostile is imagined to signal political cynicism and social resignation. "From this perspective," Patricia Stuelke writes, "racial capitalism, settler colonialism, and empire often emerge as structures only in need of repair and remediation, rather than as ever-shifting violent structures whose nuances must be perpetually, collectively apprehended if they are ever to be destroyed."³⁵ There is nothing necessarily revolutionary about the satiation of desire; a chance at

radical transformation may well require many people to become much more unhappy with life as they have experienced it so far.³⁶ The same critique that triggers a depressive spiral for a C-suite executive or an economically stable tenure-line professor may be to the precariat an incandescent promise of another possible world or, at the very least, a pure affirmation that their suffering is real, that what they see is not paranoia, that life really can be this bad.

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Writing this book was an experience of constant preoccupation with how the prose would interface with the arrangements of power that I am seeking to understand and interrupt. If the seduction of neoliberal capitalism lies in how it metabolizes and absorbs dissent, on what grounds can radical critique proceed? What performance could throw a wrench into these machines of reification, or interrupt their processes of abstraction, even if just temporarily? If a writer celebrates alternative ways of being and knowing, under what circumstances can this gesture spark dreams of a world otherwise, and when is it one more way of casting a carceral searchlight on what had tried to remain undetected?

Questions like these cannot be answered with any closure but must be worked through continually across contexts. Moving with their pressure, my thinking has found its shape as much through decisions about written form as about what parts of my research to highlight. I have divided the book into six chapters, each of which theorizes a dynamic of capitalist humanitarian reform, and each of which is preceded by an interlude that situates the following chapter in the conditions of its creation. Readers will notice a permeability between the traditional chapters and the first-person accounts that divide them; their blur of first person and third person is one way that the book asks its audience (and author) to reckon with the immanence of all critical gestures and the unreliability of all narrators. Porous as their boundaries are, however, the interludes and the chapters do different kinds of analytic and affective work. The interludes can be read as formal pauses, devoted to the narrator's realization and unraveling around questions of loss, repair, and critique. The chapters connect those themes to currents in academic research and discourse. Combined, these pieces are an effort to bend lines between public analysis and private seeing, between acknowledgment of a context and critique of that context, between argument and form.

Now a word on how the research for this book developed. My initial fieldwork involved two three-month trips to Guatemala in the summers of 2015 and 2016, a more condensed follow-up visit during summer 2017, and extended

engagement with US-based organizations and their archives during the concurrent academic years. My research methods included participant observation and interviews with microfinance, fair trade, and responsible-investment organizations that operated between these two countries. I initially chose to focus on Guatemala because of its history as a ground for United States– and World Bank–led adventures in neoliberal economic reform and austerity.³⁷ Despite or because of this history of exploitation, Guatemala has become a destination for eco-tourists, missionaries, and self-described “social capitalists” who seek to contribute to the region’s economic development while immersing themselves in neocolonial fantasies about the indigenous people there. Capitalist humanitarian groups often invoke Guatemala’s long history of civil war, entrenched anti-indigenous racism, and CIA-backed dictatorships—and then pitch their own ventures as the incipient pivot from grisly past to glorious future. After three-plus summers shadowing financiers and fair traders, however, it became clear I had limited the project by tying it to the nation-state borders of the United States and Guatemala. I drew this conclusion not because states and localities become moot under neoliberal reform; we know that state power is almost always central to neoliberal policies and that the effects are variable depending on scale and context.³⁸ I stretched my lens because I was struck by how programs of humane capitalism—these quests for a free market defined by multicultural reconciliation, interpersonal care, and political freedom—had gathered momentum. I wanted to comprehend how this happened.

Over time, this study became less like a typical history or ethnography and more like an interdisciplinary hermeneutics focused on attachments that capitalist humanitarian projects rely on and reproduce. My time with people and organizations in Guatemala—all of whom are assigned pseudonyms, sometimes with inconsequential identifying details changed—remains core to the analysis. But of equal importance are conferences of Silicon Valley investors, visits to microfinance institutions’ headquarters in sleepy US suburbs, adventures in the archives of corporations and nonprofit aid groups, trips to churches that boast about their Christmas fair trade bazaars, attendance at conferences for scholars who study capitalism, and everyday encounters in a university that trains future elites in the vocabularies of neoliberal multicultural humanism. Each scene in this book is a clue to how an imperious capitalist humanitarian consciousness is contested and reproduced in a local context. Together they tell a story about how grounded critiques of neocolonial dispossession and racist dispossession found symbiosis with a sweeping ideological project to make anticapitalist dissent into a neoliberal *raison d’être*.

There are multiple routes through these pages. One approach would divide it into two parts. Chapters 1–3 detail historical practices out of which capitalist humanitarianism emerged and evolved. Chapters 4–6 are concerned with how those histories manifest in recent missions to bring finance discipline to the global South. That said, there’s no clean break between the two halves. The chapters that draw primarily from capitalist humanitarian archives also attend to how more contemporary capitalist reformers have both domesticated and derived knowledge from those archives; the parts that highlight live encounters with financiers, investors, and reformers also reckon with the historical and material conditions through which they came to be in those places, in those ways. The same principle holds for the relation between the interludes and the chapters. A reader could hypothetically sever them from each other, approaching the interludes as creative essays and the chapters as sequential installations that add up to a more traditional monograph. But I recommend that they be read together: they are designed for mutual enrichment, with each conceived as a kind of photographic negative for the other. Moved by authors who discovered that their losses could be a starry portal to some different or more demanding kind of existence, I am writing against the fallacy that the creation of knowledge could or should be sequestered from the life that bears it.³⁹

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The opening chapters introduce the liberal and Left reformers who laid the groundwork for an idea that participation in market exchange could under certain conditions ameliorate the worst of capitalist ravages. Chapter 1, “May Analyze like a Capitalist: Fair Trade and Other Histories,” revisits the post–World War II missionary roots of the modern fair trade movement. It illuminates a genre of historical consciousness that manifests in “conscious-capitalist” projects. Qualifying a historiography of capitalism that has tended to privilege the role of religious conservatives in the dismantling of New Deal policy, it excavates the role of Left Christians in the rise of the neoliberal order.⁴⁰ I focus primarily on the pioneering fair trade chain Ten Thousand Villages, which was founded by Mennonite missionaries stationed in Puerto Rico and Palestine. They sought to design systems of exchange that would both empower poor women as income earners and provide a way to monetize, and thus preserve for posterity, artisanal crafts that the missionaries saw as threatened by globalization. Their practice of historically conscious self-critique not only rationalized their foreign interventions but also modeled a kind of reflection that would become a hallmark of capitalist humanitarian projects: an impulse

to recognize and confess how the present bears a debt to a past violence, and then to offset this debt through monetized transaction. As historical exposé emerges as a discourse of neoliberal institution building, this case is instructive for critics who want to clarify how the production of historical knowledge on capitalism relates to movements for popular democracy.

The next two chapters address legacies of the early alternative-trade movements: the cultural mainstreaming of fair trade models and the ascent of microfinance. Chapter 2, “Ethical Vampires: Conscious Capitalism and Its Commodity Enchantments,” illustrates how the pioneering coffee cooperative Equal Exchange retheorized the commodity fetish. Rather than assume commodities always index alienated relation, Equal Exchange discovered a *conscious* and *fair* kind of commodity, which glimmered with its powers to reverse exploitation and broker solidarity among oppressed people. The fair trade commodity spoke on its own behalf, transmitted messages back to its producers, and initiated the purchaser into a gift economy, where ethical transactions in the global North saved peasant farmers from industrial plantations and backbreaking maquiladoras to which they would have otherwise been condemned. Fair trade products even resisted Ronald Reagan’s imperialism in Latin America. And still, the career of the responsibly reenchanting commodity had barely commenced. Enter the “conscious-consumer” ideologies of the new millennium, when entrepreneurs began not only to define conspicuous consumption as an act of charitable giving but also to insist that the acts of earning and spending money comprised an “energetic exchange” infused with spiritual potential. By working through an evolving mash-up of the commodity fetish and the bonded gift, chapter 2 tells the story of a transition from fair trade dissent to conscious-consumer saturation.

The arc wherein proudly leftist fair trade ventures give way to the spiritual entrepreneurship of millennials resonates with another story of strange bedfellows and counterintuitive outcomes: the rise of microfinance as an antipoverty instrument. Chapter 3, “Marxists in the Microbank: From Solidarity Movement to Solidarity Lending,” explores this convergence. It follows the dual trajectories of two pioneering but politically opposed microfinance institutions (MFIs): ACCION International and FINCA International. ACCION, established as a Kennedy-era international volunteer program with anticommunist objectives, had by the late 1970s endorsed commercial “microenterprise” as a route to hemispheric soft security and economic returns. FINCA, in contrast, had opposite allegiances. Its early backers were liberation-theology-reading and anticapitalist Christians politicized by the Central America solidarity movement. These supporters believed microcredit could help small-scale

indigenous farmers stand up against the financial austerity and free-trade policies ripping through Latin America. Alongside Muhammad Yunus's Grameen Bank, by the late 1990s these organizations had put microfinance at the top of the US international development agenda. Moreover, they had seeded a model of aid with enough ideological ambiguity to unite social democrats and Sandinista sympathizers with exponents of free enterprise and trickle-down economics. Blending historical and ethnographic analyses of microfinance, I argue that this convergence should be seen as a watershed moment not only in a manufactured neoliberal consensus around antipoverty strategy, but also in the embrace of free markets as a domain of political solidarity.

The second set of chapters turns to contemporary landscapes of capitalist humanitarian interventions in the global South, with emphasis on their pedagogies of financial selfhood and multicultural reconciliation. Chapter 4, "Representing Inclusion: Humans of Capitalist Humanitarianism," takes stock of the representational conventions of social capitalists and the racialized sexual-reform projects that they support. Two tropes of gendered financial subjectivity took hold in the aftermath of the 2008 stock market crash, recession, foreclosure spree, and Wall Street bailout. The first was the fiscally bootstrapping global woman-of-color microentrepreneur. The second was the racialized subprime borrower, disgraced after she squandered her chance at the American dream of home ownership. More than the mere colorwashing of racist economic violence, this discourse of qualified citizenship and liberal freedom ties both ideals to the reproduction of financial infrastructure. In making this claim, chapter 4 extends recent studies of post-1970s "predatory inclusion" in the subprime and microfinance industries while situating these financial schemes within a longer history of "philanthropic banking."⁴¹ It finds a precursor for financial inclusion in an early twentieth-century progressive campaign to legalize small personal loans for specified segments of the working poor—namely the white ethnic immigrants that social-workers-qua-credit-officers deemed assimilable into normative racial and sexual citizenship. To revisit this moment is to cast a harsh light on calls among financial reformers for "universal financial inclusion" for "unbanked" people, exposing the ways that these discourses undergird the expulsion of entire populations from a circle of neoliberal multicultural citizenship.

The final pair of chapters draws most heavily from fieldwork with financiers who work between the United States and Guatemala. Chapter 5, "The Hunt for Yes: Archival Management and Manufactured Consent," concerns cultures of data collection and knowledge production in MFIs. It moves between the bare corporate suites in midwestern US suburbs to Guatemalan highland

towns where credit officers amass data that they then transmit back to headquarters. I show that the challenge of information management in these settings is also a problem of how to procure something like a moral warrant for continued interventionist presence. The capitalist humanitarian fixation on record keeping—the surveys shoved into clients' hands at the end of each loan cycle, the quarterly due-diligence reports jerry-rigged by unpaid interns, the account-book photocopies that credit officers file and never look at again, the wall-to-wall charts on every conceivable variable—is less about game-planning the future than affirming the immediate urgency of MFIs' institutional endurance. Immersed in such paperwork, one is already and always falling behind, already and always having to rush to master whatever data point has so far escaped its domestication into the total system. The principle of capitalist humanitarian accounting is the following: whatever difference or dissonance one encounters in the field, there is a larger system of knowledge that contains it. Here there is no such thing as an archival silence or a rebel interruption.⁴² The capitalist humanitarian archive asks its subjects to consent to their own inclusion in it. Then it translates every yes, every no, and every nonresponse into a license for further expansion.

Chapter 6, "Hope for the Future: Reproductive Labor in the Neoliberal Multicultural Family," reflects on capitalist humanitarian visions of the future, especially ones that vest hope in a "next generation" that will inherit its predecessors' labors and strivings, wealth and debts. I meet MFIs that provide in-house reproductive health-care services as a perk of membership, entrepreneurs who mobilize rhetoric of "youth empowerment" to rationalize child labor, and loan officers who determine creditworthiness by how well mothers convey optimism in their children's upward mobility. To observe these practices as they are enforced in various locales—the bank, the family home, the factory, the hotel, the vans shuttling between them—is to reconsider frameworks that understand neoliberalism as the subjection of all domains of being to an economic calculus.⁴³ These scenes also dramatize the colonial politics of what Melinda Cooper has identified as a neoliberal and neoconservative alliance around a Protestant secular regime of "family values."⁴⁴ Attentive to how finance discipline refigures theological tropes of inheritance and salvation, I show how capitalist humanitarian reproductive surveillance aims to capture any kinship formations that would escape the bank's reach. In the process, these technologies legitimate the factory and the firm as privileged zones of social reproduction, standing ready to adopt the lost and vulnerable into the care of a global corporate family.

The epilogue reflects on a latent tension within this book. I have repeatedly tripped over the expectation—from readers, from interlocutors, from myself—that such a heavy account of consuming violence and compounding loss should also make an explicit nod toward that which is not subsumed. Another version of this book could draw attention to the everyday flights to freedom, pleasure, and creation that people make daily. I could lift up grassroots organizers and popular uprisings that in their shared governance processes and their models of mutual aid manifest the social democratic vision that they seek. I could sketch out a vision of life lived in solidarity and care, and I could make a list of things that one could do or create or look at right now to see a glimpse of that life. It's not as if I don't have ideas. I could recite a reason to believe that a win is either immanent to our present or at least coming down the pike.

This book is more reserved on such gestures. It is conceivable, then, that it will be encountered as a disavowal of possibility in struggle or a treatise on how all difference is subsumed into the death-dealing itineraries of racial capitalism. How a book is read, of course, is not for an author to decide. Still, I invite readers to stay alert to the utopian refusals and radical experiments that not only shatter delusions of neoliberal consensus, but which in their defiant incarnation are nourishing other possible worlds even now. We might begin to see capitalist humanitarian reform not as the capture of movements, but as the counterinsurgent response to the everyday people who have held ground against full tidal wave of neoliberal austerity. Is there any better explanation for why investment bankers would rebrand themselves as heroes in a battle with economic predation, if not out of a sense of their own vulnerability now that grassroots democratic movements have persuaded a critical mass of people that free markets will fail to deliver the prosperity they promise, and that there are more compelling ways to distribute resources, labor, and care?

Insofar as I did not focus on popular freedom struggles and their emergent strategies, this was an expository decision. As I comprehended the scale of capitalist humanitarian surveillance and incorporation of local knowledges, I could not justify another way through this material. I have circled back to the question: How does context inform our choices about when and how to perform a commitment to hope, when and how to perform a commitment to negativity, and when and how our expositions are received as such by our readers? This book's core research is based on thousands of hours immersed in an industry that literally specializes in capturing instances of insurgent worldmaking, precisely toward the commodification of their signs and the

theft of their tactics. The days of translating field notes into readable prose became a long confrontation with how the sentences and paragraphs I wrote would interact with those processes—processes that I was convinced had colluded in the murder of my brother, times a million others whose names I do not know. For all of these reasons, I have staked this text in a more negative, sometimes apophatic, pitch. This does not mean that the narrator ends up in the same place that she begins or that she is confused about the substance and stakes of her demands. Even less does it mean that the stories shared in the coming pages deny the immanence of freedom for those who tune themselves toward its rhythms and signs. When I say there is no way out, this is another way of saying: begin.

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notes

PREFACE

1. Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholy."
2. Li, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, 20.

INTRODUCTION

1. Reich, *Saving Capitalism*, 167.
2. Giridharadas, *Winners Take All*.
3. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 17.
4. See chapters 1 and 3.
5. Emerson, *The Purpose of Capital*, 202. See also chapter 2.
6. See chapters 4 and 6.
7. By far the best treatment of this general theme is Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 672–88.
8. Bhattacharya and Vogel, *Social Reproduction Theory*; Briggs, *How All Politics Became Reproductive Politics*; Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*; Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero*; Weeks, *Problem with Work*; Morgan, *Laboring Women*.
9. Of the vast body of scholarship on the expulsions that are the substrate to liberal inclusion, the works that have most influenced my thinking include Byrd, *Transit of Empire*; Cacho, *Social Death*; Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*; Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*; Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*; Reddy, *Freedom with Violence*; Sharpe, *In the Wake*; and Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."
10. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 6.
11. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*.
12. Melamed, "Proceduralism, Predisposing, Poesis."

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13. Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*; Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands*. Other key works include Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*; Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure*; Grem, *The Blessings of Business*; and Kruse, *One Nation under God*.

14. On finance discipline and evangelical Christianity in Latin America, see Bartel, *Card-Carrying Christians*, and O'Neill, *Secure the Soul*.

15. On the circulation of liberation theology as a fetish product for white Western audiences, see Althaus-Reid, "Gustavo Gutierrez Goes to Disneyland."

16. Hall, *Cultural Studies: 1983*, 127–54. See also Hall, "Problem of Ideology—Marxism without Guarantees," 24–45.

17. Hall, *Cultural Studies: 1983*, 43, 143, 143–44.

18. Many scholars have attempted to excavate Christianity as the germ that hides inside concepts of political sovereignty, the nation-state, history, and the secular. These analyses trace these terms to the Enlightenment, which they portray as the movement that finally transposed Christianity into the idiom of secular modernity and historical progress. The most vivid example of this is Andijar, *Blood*, viii. Andijar necromances the political philosophy of Carl Schmitt, who wrote nearly a century ago that "all the significant concepts of the modern doctrine of the state are secularized theological concepts." See Schmitt, *Concept of the Political*. For a lucid critique of the search for Protestantism in the secular, see Khawaja, *Religion of Existence*, 235–42. For generative analysis of the implicit disciplinary secularism of modern capitalism, see Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Secularisms*; Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*; and Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.

19. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 198.

20. Using the figure of "spirit" and "sacred" as a name for what is fugitive to racial capitalism and its anomie has become an increasingly common turn within queer theory and critical-race and ethnic studies. Three examples are Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*; Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*; and Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 154–202.

21. Hall, *Cultural Studies: 1983*, 143.

22. Robinson, *Black Marxism*.

23. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*.

24. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 405–26, 501–6.

25. Marx, *Capital*, 1:163–77; Marx, "On the Jewish Question," 26–52; Marx, "The German Ideology"; Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*.

26. For an extended engagement with this argument in relation to the academic study of religion, see Bartel and Hulsether, "Introduction: Classifying Capital," 4–7.

27. On the categories of religion, coloniality, and their study, see Chidester, *Savage Systems*; Keane, *Christian Moderns*; Wenger, *We Have a Religion*; and Masuzawa, *Invention of World Religions*.

28. Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 3, 9.

29. More work should be done on the merits of a relatively Durkheimian framing (oriented toward social solidarity and even uneasy social consensus) versus a more Marxian and conflict-laden framing (attentive to fissures, contestations, and outright violence internal to any society). For example, this conversation can be easily extrapolated to a prior debate about consensus versus conflict in American studies and US

historiography. On this historiography and the problems with consensus, see Denning, "Special American Conditions"; and Pease and Weigman, "Futures."

30. Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*.

31. Lofton, *Consuming Religion*, 282.

32. On political consequences of this epistemology, see Bernstein, "I'm Very Happy to Be in the Reality-Based Community."

33. The language of reparative reading was developed in a now-canonical essay by Eve Sedgwick, who elaborated a distinction between paranoid and reparative critical practices within queer studies scholarship. A more recent cohort of queer and feminist studies scholars has called for a new "turn" to the reparative. For the early essay, see Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*. For calls for a new reparative turn, see Love, "Truth and Consequences"; and Felski, *Limits of Critique*.

34. Robyn Wiegman identifies in the reparative "turn" a compensatory impulse on the part of the scholar determined to reproduce her own act, even if that means ceding the ground on which a critique or judgment of the conditions of her work rests: "Here, in a present in which the value of critical thinking has undergone attrition in contemporary cultures that prioritise accounting without accountability, discourse without truth, and meaning without interpretation, the reparative turn quite significantly rewrites the critic's value as the consequence of the object's need. . . . [The reparative turn is] a compensatory tactic aimed at redeeming the critic's self perception in the twilight of the hermeneutics of suspicion, where one of the most potent remnants of its critical habits can be found in the repeated accusation that the declining significance of the humanities is the critic's own fault." Wiegman, "Times We're In," 16–18. See also Tonstad, "Ambivalent Loves"; Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 120–25; and Shahani, "Future Is Queer Stuff."

35. Stuelke, *Ruse of Repair*, 17.

36. On how the subject who identifies a problem with normative power is identified as the one who is actually causing damage, and on how freedom entails becoming affectively alienated from and tearing down normative institutions that have been a source of belonging and good feeling, see Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*.

37. Grandin, *The Blood of Guatemala*; McAllister and Nelson, "Aftermath: Harvests of Violence and Histories of the Future"; Smith, "The Militarization of Civil Society in Guatemala."

38. Tsing, *Friction*.

39. Especially helpful have been the following works: Abdurraquib, *They Can't Kill Us until They Kill Us*; Boyer, *Handbook of Disappointed Fate*; Cacho, *Social Death*; Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*; Cottrell, *Sorry to Disrupt the Peace*; Crosby, *Body, Undone*; Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*; Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*; Nelson, *Tough Enough*; and Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

40. On post–World War II liberalism and racial capitalism, see Geismer, *Don't Blame Us*; Connolly, *World More Concrete*; and Mittelstadt, *From Welfare to Workfare*.

41. See Taylor, *Race for Profit*; Chakravartty and Silva, "Accumulation, Dispossession, and Debt," 368–85; Roy, *Poverty Capital*; Karim, *Microfinance and Its Discontents*; and Elyachar, *Markets of Dispossession*.

42. On archives and the history of capitalism, see Morgan, "Archives and Histories."
43. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*; Murphy, *Economization of Life*; Lazzarato, *Making of the Indebted Man*.
44. Cooper, *Family Values*.

INTERLUDE ONE

1. Aviv, "The Philosopher of Feelings."
 2. Jaycox, "Nussbaum, Anger, and Racial Justice"; Srinivasan, "Would Politics Be Better Off without Anger?"
 3. Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*, 18–61.
 4. Davis, "Culture and Struggle," 11–14; Roy, *Reds, Whites, and Blues*, 28–49, 210–15.
5. The workshop description read, "For decades, consumers around the world were encouraged to look for the fair trade seal on commodities such as coffee, a guarantee that the product was purchased from an organization of small farmers and at a 'fair' price, among other things. However, even from the earliest years, products such as tea were permitted into the system under conditions no different than they had been for a century. And then led by certifiers seeking market share, and perhaps permitted by authentic fair traders, the system was manipulated to the benefit of large players, both in the North and the South such that the original set-up was no longer recognizable. What does this mean for our work moving forward?" Notice how the story of declension hinges on an appeal to an original authenticity and sets up, rhetorically, a charge to reclaim it. Equal Exchange, "Summit Schedule: June 8–9," acquired at Citizen Consumer Action Summit, copy in author's possession.

CHAPTER ONE. MAY ANALYZE LIKE A CAPITALIST

1. I am grateful to Pratima Gopalakrishnan for sharpening my thinking on this point. For a smart intervention into public histories of race in classical studies in particular, see Kotroisits, *Lives of Objects*, 145–64. For an outstanding analysis of the pre-suppositions at play in debates over United States national origin stories, see Jackson, "The 1619 Project and the Demands of Public History," <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review>, accessed December 10, 2021.
2. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 1–30.
3. Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," 9–10.
4. Stephen Nolt discusses the relationship between traditional Mennonite commitments to simplicity and separation and economic globalization in the twentieth century: "During the mid-twentieth century Mennonite efforts to distinguish themselves from prevailing Cold War sentiments resulted in new and more frequent encounters with Christians in various contexts around the globe. . . . Separatism had simultaneously encouraged Mennonites into seeing themselves in a global context, while giving North American Mennonite globalism a distinct cast." Nolt, "Globalizing a Separate People," 488.