Habitats of Abandonment: Subjectivity and the Aesthetics of Dispossession from the Industrial Revolution to the Great Depression

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation draws on American literature from the Industrial Revolution to the Great Depression to fashion a theory of abandonment, a term that designates both a material reality and a conceptual framework; abandonment names what remains unincorporated into the governing economic, political, gender and racial logic. This study examines, therefore, literary representations of poverty, homelessness, forms of working-class labor, and the work that race and gender do within these conditions of existence. It arises from the intersection of the Marxist, feminist, poststructuralist, and queer theory that has sought not only to account for the inequitable economic distribution of goods but also to confront the deeper problem of injurious power structures and hierarchies.

The literature of abandonment discounts the practice of seeking recognition within a dominant structure of power; rather, abandonment brings to light the spatial practice of the subject’s struggle for re-signification of such structures. Thus, one can begin to conceive of the abandoned subject by asking what one produces when one inhabits a space typically deemed uninhabitable—by discovering forms of being where one’s being is impossible or illicit—because it is in this act that subjectivity for the otherwise abject becomes possible. This study asks more specifically how literature as an
aesthetic practice imagines the production of an abandoned subjectivity and, by extension, alternative social, economic and political structures.

The driving question of this dissertation is, how can a concept such as abandonment allow one to address without interpelling its subject? That is, can one value the abandoned as such, without incorporating it into an injurious system of evaluation or the prevailing neoliberal discourse of recognition? This entails asking how these processes are represented as being deeply aesthetic and what the relationship is between literary form and “habitat.” That the fact of abandonment is not quite available for representation, at least not without recovering it from itself, but is available for inhabitation, is illustrated in each of the texts this dissertation examines. In bridging socioeconomic material and thematic readings with a study of literary form, this dissertation argues that literature itself performs the very calling into being and inhabitation of this spectral space; which is to say, literary form lays bare the spatial underpinnings of narrative, allowing one to enter into the currents of dispossession rather than their fixed social positions.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my father, Joseph Callahan, for encouraging me to pursue the things that I love.
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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my dissertation supervisor, Priscilla Wald, for challenging me to ask difficult questions in my research and giving me the freedom to experiment and take risks in my writing. I would also like to thank the members of my dissertation committee, Tom Ferraro, Tsitsi Jaji, Sarah Deutsch, and Joseph Entin, for their generous attention to and thorough engagement with my work.

This dissertation would not have been possible without the intellectual support of my colleagues. I would like to acknowledge Christopher Ramos, Abigail Seeskin, and Valerie Serenko for their valuable feedback on the work-in-progress. My conversations with them over the years significantly influenced the direction of my dissertation. I’d also like to acknowledge Camila Maroja, Jacqueline Cowan and Allison Curseen for their steadfast friendship and encouragement.

Finally, I am indebted to my father, Joseph Callahan, my siblings, Jane Dornemann, Timothy Callahan, and Hannah Callahan, and my good friend Daniel Aylward, for pushing me to finish what I started in moments of uncertainty.
1. Introduction

1.1. The Dark Bedroom

In his 1890 documentation of urban poverty, *How the Other Half Lives*, Jacob Riis allegorizes the “dark bedroom”—seeing a source of profit in the necessities of the growing population of poor immigrants in New York City, real-estate agents and boarding-house keepers turned the old houses along the East River into tenement dwellings, partitioning their once large rooms into “*several smaller ones, without regard to light or ventilation,*”¹ and which “began the era of tenement building.”² “It was thus the dark bedroom, prolific of untold depravities, came into the world,” Riis writes.³ The dark bedroom, then, signifies the threat of social upheaval at the turn of the century and, by extension, what Riis sees as the need to offset capitalism’s tendency to destroy itself through its production of a large underclass. David Graeber observes that the Victorian Era was “haunted by the dangers of degeneration and decline” and that “Victorians shared the near-universal assumption that capitalism itself would not be around forever. Insurrection seemed imminent. Victorian capitalists operated under the sincere belief that they might, at any moment, find themselves hanging from trees.”⁴ *How the Other Half Lives* advocated for programs that would combat substandard housing and other

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² Ibid., 65. Riis quotes from the report to the Legislature of 1857.
³ Ibid., 64.
injurious living conditions in the slums so as to neutralize this same threat of social upheaval—as well as the threat of contagion—that was felt in early Progressive Era New York City. The use of the new technology of flash photography allowed Riis to call attention to these issues more effectively. Flash photography, first developed in 1887 as a chemical technology, allowed photographers to capture visual representations of spaces that were formerly unrepresentable due to lack of natural light—it made Riis’s attempt to visually capture the dark bedroom possible for the first time. *How the Other Half Lives* enabled Riis’s readership to enter into the spectral geography of the dark bedroom in this way.

Early on in his study, Riis describes a now well-known scene in which he accidentally sets a tenement room on fire as he takes a “flash-light picture of a group of blind beggars.”5 He describes, and almost definitely exaggerates, this incident in order to emphasize the unsanitary conditions of the tenement dwelling in a section called Blind Man’s Alley. Riis writes: “With unpracticed hands I managed to set fire to the house. When the blinding effect of the flash had passed away and I could see once more, I discovered that a lot of paper and rags that hung on the wall were ablaze.”6 Riis managed to stamp the fire out, while the “five blind men and women” he was photographing “knew nothing of their danger.”7 Once he returns to the street below, he

5 Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 82.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
tells a policeman about the mishap. The officer laughs and responds “‘Why, don’t you know,’ he said, ‘that house is the Dirty Spoon? It caught fire six times last winter, but it wouldn’t burn. The dirt was so thick on the walls, it smothered the fire!’”

This anecdote reveals two important realities. First, in his efforts to capture what could not by and large be captured previously due to absence of light, the flash of Riis’s camera does violence to the poor it seeks to represent. It betrays a violence, in other words, that underlies certain forms of representation: some spaces are powerful to the extent that they are unavailable for capture. Second, though Riis wants to demonstrate that the conditions in which the tenants of Blind Man’s Alley live is a health hazard, he also demonstrates that these same conditions—the thickness of the dirt on the walls—prevents the house from burning, in spite of the frequency with which it catches fire.

The unhygienic environment is both an unanticipated means of survival and a problem for public health.

I have introduced this study with the dark bedroom because of what the dark bedroom allows one to think—abandonment and its inhabitation as both an aesthetic that is deeply ambivalent toward representation and also an inquiry into what kind of subject abandonment produces. By abandonment, I mean to designate both a material reality and a conceptual framework; abandonment names what remains unincorporated

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into the governing economic, political, gender and racial logic. It also names those who are literally turned away from or who are left behind to endure in spite of inadequate resources. The ambivalence toward representation expressed in the literature that attempts to address abandoned spaces and the people who inhabit them arises from the double bind of dispossession. On the one hand, representation of the practices of abandonment renders those practices impossible because they are often illicit or considered illegitimate. To represent, for example, the unlicensed settlements in cellars, underground lodging houses, and dumps as seen in *How the Other Half Lives*, is to invite police raids that attempt to clear out these settlements, and by extension, it is to suppress or destroy the alternative forms of sociality and economy to which abandonment gives rise. On the other hand, the dispossessed are compelled to invent alternative forms of being and routes of survival because they already lack the political representation that would grant them access to resources necessary to live aboveboard.

The resistance to the logic of representation, if not to representation itself, confounds Riis as the narrator of *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis’s attempt to shed light, literally, on the conditions of the tenements was intended to encourage efforts to improve these conditions, primarily to neutralize the threat that mob-rule posed to the dominant economic and social order. Riis describes the organization of “the Board of Health and the adoption of the ‘Tenement-House Act’ of 1867” for the purposes of instituting “remedial legislation.” “The dark bedroom,” Riis writes, “fell under the ban
first. In that year the Board ordered the cutting of more than forty-six thousand windows in interior rooms, chiefly for ventilation—for little or no light was to be had from the dark hallways.” But both the tenement owner and the tenants opposed these improvements. Riis recounts that obstacles were thrown in the way of the officials on the one side by the owners of the tenements, who saw in every order to repair or clean up only an item of added expense to diminish their income from rent; on the other side, by the tenants themselves, who had sunk, after a generation of unavailing protest, to the level of their surroundings, and were at last content to remain there. 9

The ban on the dark bedroom and subsequent cutting of windows, it seems, was too little, too late and, as Riis conveys, both the landlords and their tenants saw this ban as an “infringement on personal rights” and a “hardship.” 10

A critical practice that seeks to address habitats of abandonment, then, would begin by approaching literature as an aesthetic form that can address without interpelling the non-representation that is the condition of possibility of abandoned being. This study is, therefore, disinclined to dismiss, as Riis dismisses, the sentiments of the tenement dwellers, as well as the “‘cave-dwellers,’” many of whom lived in cellars “below-tide water, that had been used as living apartments.” In many instances, Riis writes, the police had to drag the tenants out by force.” 11 Rather, this study takes seriously such reluctance to the official interference that sought to bring the benefits of

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9 Ibid., 69.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 70.
ventilation and occasional sunlight into the dark bedroom. Riis describes the project of making the tenements more habitable as constituting a “ban” on the dark bedroom, a term that lays bare a fundamental characteristic of abandonment; the ban proscribes forms of being and modes of survival among the dispossessed but without offering a meaningful redistribution of resources or granting the political or economic agency necessary for repossession. The narratives that this study examines ultimately interrogate and often turn away from the politics of repossession or distributive justice. Riis disparages the fact that the poor who live in the tenements hamper the project of reclamation because they “had sunk, after a generation of unavailing protest, to the level of their surroundings, and were at last content to remain there.”\textsuperscript{12} Whether or not Riis’s understanding of the motives of the tenement inhabitants is fair or accurate is beside the point; his statement inadvertently opens up the possibility of a reading that understands the seeking out of recognition or the desire to repossess as only a secondary concern, if one at all, and that instead gives precedence to the alternative forms of relation to others and to one’s space that accompanies the rejection of self-possession and sovereign subjectivity.

*How the Other Half Lives* documents the various state efforts that sought to make impossible clandestine social life in the tenements and routes of escape within

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
entrapment. The cutting out of windows in rooms and hallways of tenement buildings, as an attempt to make the habitats of abandonment representable to the state, demonstrates that to represent is, in this case, to displace. For example, Riis writes that when Blindman’s Alley—where he had set the walls of the tenement house on fire—“was finally taken in hand by the authorities, and, as a first step toward its reclamation, the entire population was driven out by the police, experience dictated, as one of the first improvements to be made, the putting in of a kind of sewer-grating, so constructed, as the official report patiently puts it, ‘as to prevent the ingress of persons disposed to make a hiding-place’ of the sewer and the cellars into which they opened.”13 The dark bedroom is an intangible space, comprised of secrets, and is therefore the essence of place insofar as it can only be inhabited, and not represented as the dark bedroom. It is echoed in what Lefebvre calls differential space, in that it celebrates the particularity of the bodily and experiential. According to this reading, any form of representation—Riis’s camera’s flash or the state’s attempts to reclaim the tenements, which is to say, to make them recognizable according to the logic of the home—is really just a form of displacement, in that it both disrupts patterns of living and diminishes place itself, which is to say, it diminishes the possibility for practices of abandonment to take place. The aesthetic of habitat, which the narratives in this study examine, express a deep

13 Ibid., 85. Riis is referring to the report given by the inspector of the district to the Board of Health.
ambivalence toward such projects of recovery. The literature of what I am calling abandonment discounts the practice of seeking recognition within a dominant structure of power; rather, abandonment brings to light the spatial practice of the subject’s struggle for re-signification of such structures. These texts suggest that we can begin to conceive of the abandoned subject by asking what one produces when one inhabits a space typically deemed uninhabitable because it is in this act, I argue, that subjectivity for the otherwise abject becomes possible.

An appreciation for this re-signification is secreted in the title of Riis’s own text—the documentary connotation of *How the Other Half Lives* also harbors an attitude of admiration for the living-on of the other half—*how* the other half lives!—and perhaps even harbors regret over the text’s principal project of documentation. According to this reading, *How the Other Half Lives* is a study of its own ambivalence toward representation. Representational practices, according to Riis’s text, interferes with the inhabiting of uninhabitable spaces. For example, the “cleaning up process” of Blind Man’s Alley, Riis writes, “apparently destroyed the home-feeling of the alley; many of the blind people moved away and did not return.”14 In an attempt to make Blind Man’s Alley more legible to the standards of the state, the state makes the inhabitation of the alley more difficult for those who reside there. Throughout *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis

14 Ibid., 82.
expresses curiosity that signals admiration for the ways in which the poor find value or comfort in abandoned things and spaces—in the way, for example, the Italian vagrant who sorts trash makes “his home in the filthy burrows where he works by day, sleeping and eating his meals under the dump” and the fact that this man “can make the ash-barrels yield the food to keep him alive.” Indeed, Riis notes that the poor not only find ways to live in the tenements but find the tenements livable. In a discussion of a woman who got discouraged and threw herself out of the window of her tenement, Riis notes that the neighbors suggested she was “wrong in not taking life philosophically”:

“Philosophy . . . naturally inhabits the tenements,” Riis writes. They theorize the livability of their lives, they produce a “general theory that life is not unbearable in the tenements.”

*How the Other Half Lives* can, along these lines, also be read as a philosophical text in its examination of the practice of inhabiting abandonment as the discovery of forms of being where one’s being is impossible or illicit—such as the unlicensed dump settlements or cellar lodgings—even as it attempts to recover abandonment from itself through the promotion of campaigns against those same settlements. *How the Other Half Lives*, in other words, makes clear the dilemma that to represent either unrepresentable

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15 Ibid., 96.
16 Ibid., 93.
spaces or spaces that do not want to be represented, like the dark bedroom, is to destroy the conditions of possibility of that space.

The driving question of this study, therefore, is how can one address without interpellating abandonment, without attempting to recover abandonment from itself? That is, can we value the abandoned as such, without incorporating it into an injurious system of evaluation or the prevailing neoliberal discourse of recognition? In his writing on abandonment, Jean Luc Nancy discusses literature as a form of non-representation, as a way of knowing that resists appropriative thinking. This study asks, then, more specifically, how literature as an aesthetic practice imagines the production of an abandoned subjectivity and, by extension, alternative social, economic, and political structures. Riis briefly gestures toward such a structure when he acknowledges that the poor are ready “to share what little they have with those who have even less,” not out of sentimentality but because the “instinct of self-preservation impels them to make common cause against the common misery.” In his history of debt, David Graeber refers to this instinct as baseline communism, which he argues continues to underlie existing systems such as capitalism and which becomes more conspicuous as the need to improvise increases. “This is presumably also why,” Graeber writes, “in the immediate wake of great disasters—a flood, a blackout, or an economic collapse—people tend to

\[\text{17} \text{ Jean-Luc Nancy, } \textit{Birth to Presence}, \text{ ed. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, trans. Brian Holmes et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 6.}\]
\[\text{18} \text{ Riis, } \textit{How the Other Half Lives}, \text{ 178.}\]
behave the same way, reverting to a rough-and-ready communism. However briefly, hierarchies and markets and the like become luxuries that no one can afford.”

Graeber asserts that, in fact, “communism is the foundation of all human sociability.” In writing about “habitats of abandonment,” then, I engage the question of community formation, asking how relationships are negotiated within the networks of abandonment of a population and across populations.

This entails asking how these processes are represented as being deeply aesthetic and what the relationship is between literary form and “habitat.” That the fact of abandonment is not quite available for representation, at least not without recovering it from itself, but is available for inhabitation, is illustrated in each of the texts this study examines. In bridging socioeconomic material and thematic readings with a study of literary form, this dissertation argues that literature itself performs the very calling into being and inhabitation of this spectral space; which is to say, literary form lays bare the spatial underpinnings of narrative, allowing us to enter into the currents of dispossession rather than their fixed social positions. Literature, I argue, is in this sense what Jacques Derrida would call an “animated work” that “engineers a habitation without proper inhabiting . . . it inhabits without residing.”

19 Graeber, Debt: The First 5,000 Years, 96.
20 Ibid.
The dark bedroom is threatening to Riis’ sense of social order because it epitomizes the social in the Arendtian sense, as a sphere in which the distinction between public and private life, political and economic life, or the sphere of action and the sphere of survival, has ceased to exist. In “containing, but not sheltering,”\textsuperscript{22} the dark bedroom is not readily available to be made into a recognizable narrative. Rather, Riis must enter blind and feel his way in the dark along the walls, which is what literature asks us to do. But while those elements of the literary are present in \textit{How the Other Half Lives}, the significance of those elements are never quite fully opened up in the text itself because Riis is ultimately looking for an answer to the problem of the tenement, or, as Nancy might it, \textit{How the Other Half Lives} is an act of appropriation.

Riis discovers his answer to the problem of the tenement in the domestic sphere. \textit{How the Other Half Lives} petitions the bourgeoisie to invest in the reform of the tenements so that they can be made to conform to his dream of the domestic village. Riis thus means to subject the tenements to a program of housekeeping, which stands in contrast to a practice of inhabiting that would counter the sovereign subjectivity so invested in the progress narrative Riis is attempting to write. To inhabit is to refuse to make a home —as a space of desired mastery—of any one approach to living. To inhabit, then, speaks to a kind of dislocation, rather than displacement, of the subject.

\textsuperscript{22} Riis, \textit{How the Other Half Lives}, 64.
Riis studies the German population in New York for an example of how the geography of the tenements can be remade to encourage the production of citizen-subjects. Riis writes that the German has a “love for flowers, which not all the tenements on the East Side have power to smother,” and wherever he puts a garden in a tenement block it does the work of a dozen police clubs. In proportion as it spreads the neighborhood takes on a more orderly character. . . . The changing of Tompkins Square from a sand lot into a beautiful park put an end for the good and all to the ‘Bread or Blood’ riots of which it used to be the scene, and transformed a nest of dangerous agitators into a harmless, beer-craving band of Anarchists.23

The garden, which domesticates the geography of the slums, is a more humane form of discipline than police violence or imprisonment. But by transforming agitators into impotent alcoholics, the garden nevertheless appears violent. Derrida, considering the watchward “to learn to live,” captures this relation in The Specters of Marx when he writes:

For from the lips of a master this watchword would always say something about violence. It vibrates like an arrow in the course of an irreversible and asymmetrical address, the one that goes most often from father to son, master to disciple, or master to slave (I’m going to teach you to live). Such an address hesitates, therefore: between address as experience (is not learning to live experience itself?), address as education, and address as taming or training.24

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23 Ibid., 173.
For Derrida, one can only learn to live “from the other and by dead,” echoing the philosophy of the tenements, where people do not take “death as hard.” How the Other Half Lives signals not only the intent to study how the poor survive in unlivable conditions, or the intrusive project of teaching the poor how to live better, but also a regard for the fact that the poor live.

The existence of public parks, playgrounds and gardens have undeniably been a vital component of urban justice, and Riis calls attention to this fact in How the Other Half Lives when he notes the salutary role the presence of these spaces have on tenement life. Even still, the dark bedroom also exists and, I argue, its poetics must be addressed. Riis discusses a philanthropist who fit out the tenement houses he owned with “all the latest improvements.”

He felt that his tenants ought to be grateful for the interest he took in them. They were. They found the boards in the wood-closets fine kindling wood, while the pipes and faucets were as good as cash at the junk shop. In three months the owner had to remove what was left of his improvements. The pipes were cut and the houses running full of water, the stationary tubs were put to all sorts of uses except washing, and of the wood-closets not a trace was left.

The above passage describes the practice of inhabiting abandonment as a resistance not to the home itself but to the ideal of the home, an ideal that, as I will discuss in the first chapter, marginalizes and devalues alternative forms of being in the world that are

25 Ibid.
26 Riis, How the Other Half Lives, 92.
27 Ibid., 250.
uninspired by the promises of uplift. The tenants that Riis describes reject philanthropy and the performance of gratitude it commands and, instead, remake space according to how they actually live in it. This is not to romanticize the slums, but to suggest that there is life worth living within the dark bedroom, and how the other half lives indeed. I believe in public parks, playgrounds, and gardens; yet I also believe in what D.H. Lawrence referred to, conversely, as the dark forest, or the strange and fugitive self.28

1.2 Chapter Summary

In three chapters, this study moves from an examination of how literary works imagine alternative forms of inhabiting abandonment to how they depict the techno-economic development of abandoned landscapes.

Chapter one, Abandoned Publics, argues that Meridel Le Sueur’s The Girl reconceives the “intimate publics” of sentimental literature, a readership that traditionally sought to influence the social sphere through mastery of the middle-class household economy. The Girl is a proletarian feminist novel that is steeped in sentimental language. By the end of The Girl, however, the poor and working-class women of the novel are squatting in an abandoned warehouse, where the protagonist gives birth to a daughter. LeSueur’s novel, I argue, launches a critique of

sentimentalism’s investment in the home by adapting its forms to female labor and motherhood among the poor and the homeless.

Chapter two, *Fugitive Ecologies*, examines the emergence of a black economy out of the cultivation of abandoned landscapes that operates counter to that of the postbellum plantation and northern industrialism in W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Quest for the Silver Fleece*. *Silver Fleece* is a romance that traces Bles and Zora’s cultivation of the swamp for the purposes of growing cotton independently of the local plantation. The production of cotton flourishes in spite and indeed because of Bles’s initial desertion of Zora upon discovering her sexual history. While most writing on social justice envisions the city as the favored space of resistance, this chapter examines how Du Bois sought to restore to this position “forgotten” terrains, such as the Black Belt.

Chapter three considers the narrative of the settling of a hostile Midwestern frontier environment in the first of Willa Cather’s Nebraska novels, *O Pioneers!* (1913). This novel tells the story of an independent female pioneer who establishes a prosperous farm on what others believe is poor land. This chapter examines how the novel’s female protagonist, Alexandra, inhabits debt in order to reconfigure a sociality that exceeds the regulations on how to live that debt imposes. Alexandra mortgages her farm during years of drought, when many of the neighboring farmers are either giving up their homesteads for next to nothing or losing them to the banks, because she believes that eventually the land will produce a rich crop. The debt under which Alexandra and her
brothers labor, I argue, is therefore simultaneously the specter of abandonment, which abides throughout the novel, and a form ofimaginative inhabiting.

These three texts offer a response to the question that my reading of Riis’ *How the Other Half Lives* poses, which is how can one defy Riis’s domestic dream without concomitantly romanticizing the injury of dispossession? I have chosen these three texts because each of them imagines the inhabiting of abandonment to take place within three radically different economies, and the authors write about abandonment from differing political ideologies. In Le Sueur’s *The Girl*, with which this study begins, the practice of inhabiting abandonment is an explicitly socialist project that stands in opposition to the capitalist market. Du Bois’s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* imagines a black economy that is a hybrid of socialist and capitalist structures. The novel settles on the organizing of the black rural working-class in sympathy with socialist principles but in a way that remains compatible with and competitive on the capitalist market. Finally, in *O Pioneers!*, Cather represents the inhabiting of abandonment as a fundamentally capitalist project. This study is organized, therefore, to move from a discussion of the critique of capitalism to a discussion about the embrace of a mythic capitalism, suggesting that “habitats of abandonment” is not limited to a single political agenda but can be imagined within contrasting agendas.

Furthermore, the question of gender is central to each these texts because of the historically disproportionately vulnerable economic and political status of women, as
the traditionally abandoned, left to wait or to domesticate. For the three authors I discuss—Meridel Le Sueur, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Will Cather—inhabiting abandonment is a feminist practice.
2. Abandoned Publics

2.1 To Be (It) Through the Other

2.1.1 The Crisis of Being

Shortly into Meridel Le Sueur’s Depression Era novel *The Girl*, the nameless protagonist of the novel listens uneasily to her lover Butch, a young and ambitious but out-of-work man, talk about his vision of success. “I want to beat everybody down. I want victory, that’s what I want,” he says as though “victory” would compensate him for his fundamental fungibility within the labor market. Butch asks the Girl what she likes to do if not “to beat too.” The Girl replies, “I like to be. I like to feel good that’s what I like,” prompting Butch to gripe that women “never say anything definite.” Later, about half-way into the novel, the Girl finds herself pregnant. In resistance to Butch’s urging her to have an abortion, the Girl thinks, “I don’t know what there is to do. I don’t want success like Butch. I want to be . . . I love to be . . .” The Girl thus raises an important philosophical question: what does it mean, not to be something, but just “to be?” The Girl thinks being in response to Butch’s general resentment about the fact that both he and the Girl are casualties within an unjust economic order, one that is founded on exploitation and impoverishment. The Girl’s expression of her desire “to be” in this context suggests that “being” operates through abundance (and abandon), but

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3 Ibid., 100.
nonetheless within scarcity; that while “being” evokes an openhanded economy insofar as the potential “to be” is, itself, an unlimited resource, it is something the Girl yet struggles to experience in the face of a poverty that artificially constrains it just as work is something Butch strives to obtain.

The Girl brings up this nebulous desire “to be” at multiple points throughout the novel; the occasion of being, it seems, is something about which the Girl is profoundly anxious. In the most basic sense, “I like to be” means “I like to feel good,” phrasings that the Girl uses interchangeably. Being, here, does not merely signify one’s confrontation with his or her injurability as an animate physical entity, one’s being able to be alive; it also signifies one’s participation in an ontological existence, that is, one’s being able to exceed bare life, to inhabit a geography other than the geography of survival. The language of this crisis of being within precarious living conditions, and the understanding of the capacity “to be” as also bound to material distribution, is integral to The Girl.

Written over the course of the 1930s, The Girl chronicles the practices of endurance of a group of women confronting poverty, hunger, rape, and other forms of abuse during the Great Depression. The story is told through the heteroglossic interior monologue of a young woman working at a speakeasy in St. Paul, Minnesota. The first

4 Ibid., 34.
half of the novel follows the Girl as she negotiates her sexuality within a predatory urban landscape beyond the hypothetical protection of the nuclear family, a landscape in which “terrible things could be happening to you.” This negotiation is carried through the second half of the novel, in which all of the male characters, mostly the women’s husbands or lovers, are killed off in a failed bank robbery. The German Village, the speakeasy at which the Girl is employed, closes, and a group of women, the Girl included, begin occupying an abandoned warehouse after their already precarious living conditions deteriorate into homelessness. The Girl gives birth to a daughter in this warehouse.

This chapter constitutes an inquiry into what it means to think being and the effects of its practice within such abandonment, which is manifested in The Girl predominantly in the economic dispossession in and against which the novel’s characters continually strain. Abandonment is further manifest in derelict space itself, particularly the abandoned warehouse in which these dispossessed women come to live as a condition of homelessness. In the following pages, I will further develop my reading of the problem of “being” in poverty, with a focus on homelessness, by situating The Girl’s articulation of this problem within broader socio-geographical and theoretical discussions of ontological dispossession. The argument laid out over the course of this

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6 Le Sueur, The Girl, 1.
chapter is twofold. First, I will argue that in addition to the language of “being” scattered throughout *The Girl*, there is also an abiding concern with the subject. Le Sueur gestures toward the figure of the subject as the corollary of the emergence of gendered-class consciousness and therefore also as the foil to abjection. But these terms—being and subject—while porous in the novel are nevertheless distinct and possibly incongruous; the subject is, by definition, identifiable whereas “being” is affective and ill-defined (hence the need for scare quotes). This slippage, I argue, betrays a deep ambivalence in the novel toward the figure of the subject as a political actor and therefore toward the politics of representation to which the subject is bound. To be sure, Le Sueur places a great deal of value in what succeeds in *not* becoming represented through its dodging interpellation. The Girl describes her successful resistance to both abortion and sterilization in just these terms: “I kept thinking and feeling like I had just outfoxed the cops, the whole shebang, cracked the vault, made my getaway with the loot under my belly. And I am the Treasure.”7 I ask, therefore, what insight the Girl’s expression of the crisis of being might lend to thinking about a specifically and paradoxically dispossessed subjectivity.

This chapter is especially interested in Le Sueur’s turning, in the last twenty pages of *The Girl*, to an abandoned warehouse as a squat for her female characters after

7 Ibid., 165.
the German Village, their means of subsistence, is shut down. The second part of my argument focuses on this occupation of the warehouse and what one might call the events that take place there, namely the delivery of the Girl’s daughter. The warehouse becomes a vital site for the women of the novel as a result of their homelessness. That these women salvage an inoperative warehouse in order to rest from their “living in the streets”\(^8\) in the absence of a home, which is to say, to hide from their essential publicness, necessitates an inquiry into what their status as a public is. I ask how such spatial practices might constitute them not just as subjects but also, by extension, as publics in the strict sense of that term, meaning not simply existing in public but, like subjects, constituting a legible body bound up with the project of representation. I argue that the aesthetic of The Girl works to both resist and demand representation for the dispossessed subjects of the novel. This is an aesthetic of what I am calling habitat. The Girl, I argue, posits habitat in response to the problem of being within poverty that underlies the novel, habitat as the space in which beings inhabit their abandonment as precisely this dilemma of legibility and representation.

This concept of habitat is therefore that which underpins and integrates the various folds and terms, such as being, subjectivity, publics, and representation, in which this chapter presents The Girl. Abandonment as I understand it and as, I argue, Le

\(^8\) Ibid., 148.
Sueur accounts for it, is not merely synonymous with the various forms of dispossession exhibited in *The Girl*; rather it describes both the poverty to which the women of the novel are consigned as well as the practices, especially the spatial practices, that living in poverty compels—what I am calling *being within abandonment*, that is, inhabiting rather than strictly resisting or combatting the fact of one’s destitution. Put another way, such inhabiting, as seen in the Girl’s feelings about her pregnancy, describes an inverse form of fugitivity. Inhabitation does not offer a way out of but constitutes a furtive if not quite a fugitive re-signification of dispossession. It is for this reason, I argue, that the question of representation and the concepts bound up with it are marked by ambivalence for Le Sueur.

The argument of this chapter is that the experimental aesthetics of *The Girl* brings the work of literature in negotiating that ambivalence toward the politics of representation to the foreground because literature is itself ambivalent: it both resists representation at the same time that it seeks or claims to represent. And that negotiation, which in this novel contends especially with the opposition of being and subject, public and private, takes physical form in habitat and practical form in inhabitation. In this way, literature for Le Sueur is a mode of inhabiting rather than merely representing in the traditional sense of that term. Likewise, I use the term abandonment, a more expansive term than dispossession, to encompass this intervention of the literary in the
crisis of being that the Girl intuits and articulates, and to signify the processes by which the abandoned subject is produced.

Writing within the biopolitical tenor that has animated critical theories of material injurability and "embodied potentiality," the cultural anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli argues that "all subjects exist in the variation between . . . modes of being and not being," but that "the intensity of this variation and its zoning are neither uniform nor uniformly distributed." It seems that any theory, any literature or poetics, of abandonment must situate itself in relation to the maldistribution or denial of the resources, including space, necessary for being to flourish. Povinelli works heavily against – as in both alongside and critical of – Giorgio Agamben’s theory of bare life – the life that can be, in its political abandonment, killed but not sacrificed, the life that has neither home nor a right to the city. Bare life lays bare the originary relation of law to life as abandonment, according to Agamben. This means, simply, that sovereignty is sovereign because of its original ability to withhold itself and its insurances from persons or people – those who would be politically abandoned. But more significant to this study is that Povinelli shifts these terms of potentiality from the sovereign to the abandoned themselves. Writing on the dual nature of Agamben’s concept of

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10 Agamben is working from Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophy of “abandoned being.” See Nancy’s *Birth to Presence* (1993).
potentiality, Povinelli iterates that while "the actual can only be, the potential can be or not be. And it is exactly within this ontological duality of the potential that new possibilities of life are sheltered." Povinelli describes dispossessed populations and their social projects not as bare life or as occupying waiting territories but as "persisting in their being," as lying "on the cusp of being." She understands such persistence more specifically in terms of how “the force of existence” maintains itself through “specific organizations of social space.”

Povinelli’s interest in the maintenance of life, in the materiality of what hasn’t yet materialized, or in “those moments, or those conditions in which a social project is neither something nor nothing,” sheds some light on what gives the Girl’s desire not to “do” but to “be” its force. The Girl doesn’t “know what there is to do”; she “doesn’t want success,” but just wants “to be.” Similarly, Povinelli argues that the social projects about which she writes “may not have the force to act in the sense of making anything

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11 Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 9. Agamben writes: “For the sovereign ban, which applies to the exception in no longer applying, corresponds to the structure of potentiality, which maintains itself in relation to actuality precisely through its ability not to be. Potentiality (in its double appearance as potentiality to and as potentiality not to) is that through which Being founds itself sovereignly, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it other than its own ability not to be. And an act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself.” Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 46. It seems as though Povinelli is more faithful than Agamben to the optimistic spirit, as I read it, of Nancy’s essay “Abandoned Being.” Nancy is interested in thinking about our abandonment to each other as the basis for thinking about the politics of community prior to the production of the subject.


13 Ibid., 9.

14 Ibid., 3.
like a definitive event occur in the world (becoming a counterpublic is an achievement),’’ but they nevertheless exist. Povinelli understands the fact of existence beyond or before the event of recognition as providing “a space of potentiality where new forms of life can emerge” along with new political and ethical concerns. Along these lines, the sociographic core of *Economies of Abandonment* is also bound up with temporality. The temporality of being, according to Povinelli, is that of endurance rather than eventfulness. An event specifies something that has positively happened and that is, therefore, legible. Events are representable and, I would argue, becoming representable, acquiring “a certain objective being” (which is the domain of the public and which I would also couch as entering into subjectivity) is an event.

Both *Economies of Abandonment* and *The Girl* tell of the simple fact that the poor cannot take being for granted. Indeed, *The Girl* speaks of that same lack of uniformity and uniformly distributed ”intensity” of the variation between being and not being that we can read about in the biopolitical theories of Foucault, Butler, and Agamben, among others. The terms of this kind of abandonment withhold if not being itself than the right to be: to be abandoned is to have no right to exist.

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15 Ibid., 10.
16 Ibid., 9.
17 Ibid., 13.
18 Hannah Arendt similarly argues that that a being achieves objective status through its publicity, so to speak. “Only where things can be seen by many in a variety of aspects without changing their identity . . . ,” she writes, “can worldly reality truly and reliably appear.” Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 57.
In *The Girl*, the withholding of such rights takes form in homelessness. To be sure, it is from within such a framework that the Marxist geographer Don Mitchell addresses the consequences of anti-homeless laws in *The Right to the City*. Mitchell argues that in a social, economic and political system predicated on the rights of property such as ours, laws that obstruct the homeless in performing necessary and fundamental human functions in public, which include sleeping, urinating, defecating, eating and so on, thereby obstruct the right of homeless people “to be at all.” Mitchell writes: "At the level of basic needs . . . in a society where all property is private, those who own none (or whose interests aren’t otherwise protected by a right to access to private property) simply cannot be, because they would have no place to be." Obstructing the right “to be” constitutes a *genocidal* impulse for Mitchell. He thus testifies to the “exceptional importance” of public space and, what’s more, an ordering of that space derived especially from “the needs of the poorest and most marginalized residents.”

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21 Ibid., 34. Again, Arendt wrote in depth on this subject in *The Human Condition*: “A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow. While it retains its visibility, it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real, non-subjective sense.” The “darker ground” she refers to is alone “private property, a privately owned place to hide in.” Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 71. Because this gulf between the private and public realms has, Arendt argues, disappeared in modern society, homelessness characterizes our general condition.
Mitchell and Povinelli, whatever the divergences in their methods, thus broach what is already a significant question in Le Sueur’s novel, which is how one’s being is bound to the geography she inhabits. Mitchell approaches this question through a discourse of rights that preserves the distinction between public and private space while illuminating the violence that underpins this distinction and especially the latter. Povinelli is less concerned with the question of rights per se than she is with the living economy of abandoned populations themselves, that is, how people persist in their being even in zones where being is or seems to be impossible. These texts impel a reading of The Girl as a narrative about inhabiting – in the strong sense of that term – derelict space as an insistence on being itself if not the right to be, and as a creative act that gives rise to another geography, not of survival but of the embodied inhabitation of one’s own abandonment. Such inhabiting culminates in the Girl’s giving birth to a daughter in the abandoned warehouse, a moment in the novel that I will examine in more depth shortly.

2.1.2 The Bodies of Others

What I’m describing as the embodied inhabitation of one’s own abandonment can first be glimpsed in the Girl’s reflections on and critical sentience of the condition of homelessness. After Butch is shot during the bank robbery, the Girl drives him out to the

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23 Specifically the Australian indigenous population as it endures within the policies of what Povinelli calls late liberalism.
country where she finds a shack near the riverbank. Butch dies lying beside the Girl on a
cot inside the shack. When the Girl returns to St. Paul, she finds that the German Village,
the speakeasy where she worked, is closed. Le Sueur writes:

I sit in a beer joint now, and I feel I’m living day by day, and
understanding some of it. I have no home now. I have no place but the place of
this understanding which is a kind of home too. I feel full and heavy and I am
walking with my eyes on the street, finding it out now.

It slowly gets to be spring and I walk around town. I’m here unknown
to any and all yet known to all. You know what it is to walk in the dark, to have
every step you take going down . . .

You can get so you can go on thinking and living in the streets because
you got no home. The streets used to be only something you walked through to
get someplace else, but now they are home to me, and I walk around, and walk
in stores and look at all the people, or I sit in the relief station waiting to see the
caseworker, and I sit there close to other women and men, and I look, I feed off
their faces. They feed me. I don’t feel scared when I am sitting there and it is
warm and I am close to the bodies of others. I don’t know them but I know them
all. 24

Being in this passage is constituted by an affective knowledge of the bodies of
others to which the Girl is able to gain access through the forms of intimacy she discerns
in the street. The anxiety the Girl feels about having the occasion “to be” surfaces in her
vernacular – “It slowly gets to be spring” and “The streets used to be . . . something” are
merely two examples of her general propensity for such phrasing over arguably less
clumsy alternatives. The foundation for being is not, in this case, economic security or
housing stability but rather a paradoxical affective capacity to take refuge in the very

precariousness of one’s circumstances. The Girl gives herself back to herself only through the bodies of others. I echo Agamben here only in order to distinguish between his and Le Sueur’s conceptions of and frameworks for being. Agamben argues that “an act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself.” The Girl does not give herself to herself but back to herself, so to speak; which is to say, retrieving being in destitution is not a question of sovereignty, of granting oneself the right to exist immediately, but only takes place through relation.

The Girl’s desire to be in this way is a refrain set against the repeatedly expressed appetite for dominance and self-possession among the novel’s men. Butch constantly speaks of “victory,” which, in a capitalist economy, Le Sueur suggests, means beating and robbing others "and then not [giving] them anything."25 If we understand being as also an issue of material distribution within an economy of scarcity, then victory, here, means expropriating the capacity “to be” by banning others from it. Butch scabs during the foundry strike with little consciousness or conscientiousness of workers’ rights, which exemplifies his acquiescence to the same capitalistic social order that has kept him in unemployment. He and his brother Bill, in spite of their fear of the strikers’ retaliation, defend their actions as “patriotic,” but care more about their individual success. When

25 Ibid., 34.
the Girl asks Butch if he thinks he should scab, Butch replies, “It ain’t natural we shouldn’t be winning. I like to beat everybody in the world [. . . ] beating’s everything there is. Do you know winning is better than anything, than anything at all.”

A mode of resentment regulates the conduct of all of the men in this novel. Their banishment from the text suggests that such a mode is unsustainable. It is these attempts to rise within rather than against an injurious social order that leads to Butch’s brother, Bill, being shot while scabbing on the foundry workers. It leads to Butch, Hoinck and Ganz, the latter the Girl’s rapist and organizer of the bank robbery, all shooting and killing each other during the robbery. Similarly, the Girl’s sister, Stasia, portrays their father as wanting “to be king, to boss.” and to see others generally “fail” ”so that they wouldn’t be better than him.” He too dies early on in the novel. The men in this novel engage in a strictly competitive economy in which they imagine that injuring others redeems one from one’s own injuries. "Those words hurt me, father, husband,” thinks the Girl. Their expulsion from the novel through a failed bank robbery plot thus not only suggests that these men are unorganizable, but also makes room for an alternative economy of being to which the Girl aspires, rather than an economy of compulsory production and competition for resources. Something as rudimentary to human existence as the desire “to be,” then, already gestures toward a radical economic and

26 Ibid., 19.
27 Ibid., 44.
28 Ibid., 49.
political structure, one that distributes equitably the material resources that are the condition of possibility for being.

In this way, The Girl imagines inhabiting abandonment as a feminist practice (recall that Butch attributes the indefiniteness of the Girl’s preference for being to her gender), which must also be understood in light of the historically disproportionately vulnerable economic and political status of women, as the traditionally abandoned, left to wait or to domesticate. Heterosexual relationships in The Girl are indeed exemplified by an everyday abandonment. Shortly after having sex with Butch in the hotel room in which she is later raped, the Girl looks at Butch and thinks: “He will always be leaving, getting up from the bed, and going out the door: I saw now in a few minutes he would do this again, get up and go out the door.” The syntax in which this thought is expressed, a syntax that is present throughout the novel, again bares the Girl’s anxiety about her claim to being as she confronts her familiarity with being left. “He will always be leaving” intimates that within a strictly competitive economy, the one who gets to be is the one who abandons—although this is the assumption that Le Sueur ultimately interrogates. But we can also relate this form of daily interpersonal abandonment to broader trends. As Laura Hapke observes in her survey of literary representations of labor, women were historically “left behind in the manless communities to endure and

29 Ibid., 84.
to survive” as male workers sought upward mobility. “It is difficult for [women] to redefine rising with their class,” Hapke writes, “if they are left behind the lines of class struggle.”

The literary historical and masculinist tendency to imagine “the worker through the lens of upward (or selective) mobility” to which Hapke here refers is to imagine the worker through the liberal framework of recognition within an oppressive political structure. Le Sueur offers a critique of such a tendency, reflected in the social conduct of the novel’s male figures, their entrapment within the mentality of a strictly competitive economy, which no doubt contributed to Le Sueur’s fabrication of a “manless solution.”

Not long after Butch leaves the Girl in the hotel room, the Girl is raped by Ganz, the man who organizes the bank robbery, and his accomplice, Hone. The rape prompts the Girl to pick up dirt and eat it, an act that anticipates Amelia’s later promising the Girl that as a mother she will belong to the whole earth. The Girl’s eating dirt discloses an instinct to respond to abuse and exploitation by literally absorbing that which composes habitat. I read this scene as a bare attempt to embody a subjectivity that, as I

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30 Laura Hapke, Labor’s Text: The Worker in American Fiction (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 244.
31 Ibid., 14.
32 Ibid., 232. It’s important to note that men in themselves are not the problem, for Le Sueur. The problem is an ideal of masculinity, exemplified in the ability to labor and provide, that the novel’s men have internalized yet from which they are also excluded as a result of being poor and expendable. It is their inability to meet the imperatives of masculinity that leads to their physically and emotionally abusive behavior in the novel.
33 Le Sueur, The Girl, 89.
34 Ibid., 137.
suggested earlier, might be thought of as ecological insofar as it is engendered through proximity rather than interdiction, similar to the Girl’s description of Amelia’s belly, swollen from past pregnancies, as “still full as though it had live seeds in it." 

At the beginning of this chapter, I described motherhood in *The Girl* as an inverse form of fugitivity that enacts a furtive if not fugitive resignification of dispossession and hunger. Likewise, the Girl’s response to her rape is an attempt to escape from the expropriation of her body, but it’s an escape that is actually a re-grounding. The Girl’s eating dirt and the attitudes in the novel toward natality constitute a seeking out of being against the violence and abandonment, exacerbated in poverty, that Le Sueur suggests is fundamental to heterosexuality. Consequently, though Le Sueur turns to heterosexual reproduction as a source of political power amongst impoverished women, the relationships that lead to reproduction are themselves foredoomed—at least among the poor in this novel. After having sex—for the first time—with Butch, the Girl doesn’t "feel good," which is to say, returning to her earlier correlation of “being” with feeling good, the Girl in this moment, “isn’t.” She cries and Butch slaps her, and then leaves her in "that foul old hotel." The Girl questions, as she walks out of the hotel, "Had I failed?" Framing the encounter in the same terms of success and failure with which Butch thinks about his

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35 Ibid., 66.  
36 Ibid., 34.
own place in a dispossessory economic order, Le Sueur already understands that heterosexual relationships have been induced to operate within the competitive economy of capitalism, of winning and losing, rather than within the counter-economy of being, and, too, that capitalism operates and perpetuates itself through heterosexuality—even though, as the Girl’s bewilderment suggests and as I will argue below, sex doesn’t quite fit within these logics.

Motherhood, however, offers a kind of reparation to this class of women with a history of being left behind, and underlies Le Sueur’s feminism. The Girl describes being in labor in the abandoned warehouse where she and other homeless women are squatting: “The pains got worse so I couldn’t walk . . . I could feel my body like a river inside me, and my breast deep and thigh and womb ready for a new child, and strong labor for it and I liked it.” If what it means “to be,” to the Girl, is in part to “feel good,” then her description of childbirth suggests a peculiar but intense form of embodied being, whereas sex with Butch, I already suggested, is a kind of unbeing. The

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37 There is a great deal of writing on motherhood as it was imagined within the Communist Party, including on the icon of the worker-mother, which I won’t focus on here. I’ll only mention that motherhood was a prominent metaphor in both proletarian discourse and in second-wave feminism during the 1960s and 1970s, the period in which feminist activists and readers rediscovered The Girl and had it published. Paula Rabinowitz has already written on the history of the working-class mother in Labor and Desire: Women’s Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America. It is important to note here, as Rabinowitz observes in her book, that it was primarily as mothers that women could find expression as historical subjects. Paula Rabinowitz, Labor and Desire: Women’s Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 58.
38 Le Sueur, The Girl, 177.
39 Ibid., 34.
Girl’s sentiment that she “could feel [her] body like a river inside [her]” and that she “liked it” must be read as a form of resistance, considering that her caseworker originally had the Girl placed in a maternity home so that the Girl could be sterilized after the child was born. When Mitchell insists on the right of the poor “to inhabit, appropriate, and control” public space, or, more specifically, “to sleep, defecate, eat or relax somewhere,” perhaps he was not also thinking of childbirth as an exercise in the right “to be.” (His discussion of homelessness doesn’t much contend with gender. He doesn’t, for example, explore the specific obstacles homeless women may face as a result of their gender. Rather, Mitchell’s homeless subject is, in contrast to his materialist approach, somewhat disembodied and abstract).

But certainly we can tease out the greater implications of motherhood and sterilization in this novel in light of Mitchell’s suggestion that anti-homeless laws are genocidal. And when Povinelli writes of the alternative forms of life that emerge from the precarity of being perhaps she was not thinking so literally. But nevertheless, this is where Le Sueur takes the logic of being in poverty. That labor hinders the Girl from walking is significant in light of the fact that walking in this novel, as seen in the passage on wandering cited earlier, is a dictate of homelessness as well as of sexual exploitation.

41 Ibid., 28.
42 The idea of genocide is perhaps problematic insofar as it figures the homeless as a legible race unto themselves.
The Girl, for example, sometimes follows and observes Clara who walks the street as a prostitute or walks with Amelia as the latter distributes leaflets from the Workers Alliance. Walking, though also an important occasion for the women in Le Sueur’s novel to tell each other about their lives, is nevertheless a function of hunger or of “hankering,” to use Le Sueur’s vocabulary. And it is, for Mitchell, a stipulation for the homeless who must navigate anti-homeless laws. Conversely, motherhood in *The Girl* seems to offer the promise of a future unabandonability, a promise of a vague permanence that counteracts economic contingency and offers redress to women like Amelia, who lost six children, or Belle, who has had thirteen abortions, owing to that contingency. Recall that after the Girl’s daughter is born, Butch’s mother, who has been suffering from dementia, tells the Girl cogently to keep the umbilical cord so that the child will not wander too far away from home. And it is, furthermore, their identification as mothers, whether actual or potential, that allows the women of Le Sueur’s novel to identify with each other. Motherhood as a form of radical homosociality for Le Sueur is thus a departure, in the dual sense of that word, from the heterosexual relationships, inextricably tangled with abandonment, that precede it.

The Girl’s struggle against the relief’s recommendation that she be sterilized after she gives birth, and the more general threat of compulsory sterilization that the state poses to poor and working-class women, demonstrates the ways in which their bodies are subject to state interdiction, not merely in ideological or affective terms but as a
material reality. Casework seeks “to inspire poise,”⁴³ that is, to dictate bourgeois modes of sociality within environments that are detectable to state relief.⁴⁴ One might think of being in this light in terms of “leaving be,” as in being let alone to live beneath sovereign capture, inaccessible to the politics of care that the relief station and casework exemplify in *The Girl*. Forced sterilization has, of course, historically been performed on racially and economically dispossessed women. As Amelia tells the Girl, “It’s because they don’t need any more children from workers. They don’t need us to reproduce our kind.”⁴⁵

But the poor will continue to reproduce; Le Sueur recasts what might be the reproduction of a dispossessory economic order—the potential heterosexism of the cult of motherhood—as also harboring the revolutionary potential of a surplus population of abandoned subjects. The moment of childbirth in *The Girl* is above all the refusal to be made manageable as a population, if understood in the context of a population’s being subjected to forced sterilization. Natality is a way for Le Sueur to work through the creative possibilities of inhabiting abandonment.⁴⁶ When one woman, Mrs. Rose, talks about what it’s like to wake up in the morning into poverty—“You want a head of lettuce . . . and you feel like making a world where you can have a head of lettuce when

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⁴⁴ Ibid., 158.
⁴⁵ Ibid., 171.
⁴⁶ I use the word natality as a nod to Hannah Arendt, who argued that natality is “the central category of the political” because “the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew . . .” Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9. The human condition of natality is closely related to the human condition of plurality.
you want it” — Belle responds, “you’ll have to just make a baby, not a world.” Belle makes plain, is one of the few political opportunities that poor women have to transform the world by introducing into it more who might act and speak as and for the disenfranchised, and who might thus reconfigure the plurality of the world.

The reproduction of the working-class further destabilizes an already destabilizing economic structure that cannot provide enough work as it is for those who want it, a failure of the market that is especially felt in the midst of a depression. Along these lines, the threat of the sterilization of poor and working-class women in The Girl unites the figure of the mother with the figure of the worker. The Girl, for example, first explicitly recognizes herself as a worker in the relief maternity home. By making this equation, Le Sueur attempts to eschew the exclusionary connotations of the term “worker” as predominantly white and male, but also as employed. In The Girl, the figure of the worker encompasses the wageless and homeless women at the center of her novel, calling attention to other forms of the production of value – including alternative forms of sociality, new geographies, and human life – that have not been recognized as such within the capitalist economic order.

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47 Le Sueur, The Girl, 152.
48 Ibid., 163.
2.1.3 Illegible Subjects

Le Sueur’s novel traces the Girl’s increasing discernment of her desires and the affective world in which she resides within this emerging class-consciousness. What begins as a question of affect, such as is evident in the Girl’s understanding of her homelessness, eventually develops into a political orientation. Here, the affective energy of being is channeled into something succinctly articulated and organized. “We are both workers!” the Girl realizes after passing notes back and forth with her deaf and mute ward mate during her detention in a relief maternity home.50 Later in the novel, as she discusses workers’ unions with her friend Amelia, who had her released from the ward, the Girl thinks to herself, “I knew then I was one of them.”51

This language of class-consciousness at least gestures toward subjectivity in its historical meaning. Historically, the subject has been thought of in two ways: as a being that either possesses itself or possesses property, on the one hand, and as a being that is subjected to something, on the other hand, as a citizen is subject to the state. Le Sueur writes about the production of the subject in both senses; the Girl’s class-consciousness is a product of her awakening to the fact that she is subject to state interdiction, as well as that she is the subject of a new capacity to place her own desire “to be” within a larger narrative of class conflict and women’s rights.

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50 Le Sueur, The Girl, 163.
51 Ibid., 167.
But a traditional account of subjectivity also presupposes the subject’s holding private property, which makes subjectivity a troubling paradigm through which to read *The Girl* or any text about the dispossession of a substantial faction of the nation’s producers. Hannah Arendt, for example, has argued that in antiquity, for one to be a subject capable of action in the political sense, one must lead a public life, but in order for one to lead a public life, one must first have the freedom to enter into the public sphere from outside of it, namely, from the household. If an individual has no home, no household, then there is no way to properly enter into the public realm, no way to properly be a subject. Mitchell recasts this problem of subjectivity in terms of citizenship: "[S]ince citizenship in modern democracy (at least ideologically) rests on a foundation of voluntary association, and since homeless people are involuntarily public, homeless people cannot be, by definition, legitimate citizens," he argues. Still other theories that contend with dispossession often posit the subject as always already oppressed and always already a production of biopolitical power. Nancy’s work on abandoned being (that is, “being-to” or being-in-common) as the underpinning of political community, for example, asserts that the subject negates the potentiality of being. The subject, he argues, is that which will always have become. It is in this sense that representation as closure is “the delimitation for a subject” according to Nancy. Through the subject,


representation appropriates “what ‘in itself’ would be neither represented nor representable.” One can hear echoes of this argument in Povinelli’s *Economies of Abandonment*, as well, a text that privileges potential being over the objective being of events and subjectivity.

Yet the scene in which the Girl gives birth to her daughter in the abandoned warehouse certainly depicts something more than mere persistence in being and the geographies that such persistence engenders. The birth of the Girl’s daughter, I would argue, amounts to an event for Le Sueur, who writes: “I saw the women pressing in to see and I held her up for all to see and heard a kind of sound like AHHHHHHHH of wonder and delight.”

The Girl names her daughter Clara, after her friend, a prostitute who dies in the warehouse after the relief sends her for shock treatment. Clara means light: “Light,” the Girl says, “Claro Clara.” How, then, should one understand the Girl’s becoming a mother, her act of naming and, more importantly, the meaning of the name she bestows, in terms of the problem of legibility and representation? I would argue that this scene indeed establishes the Girl as a subject, and more specifically as the subject of an event, amidst the steady ambivalence that the novel expresses toward such a figure. For the reproduction of human life, the birth of “a new woman,” transpires in an illicit and clandestine squat. It is an event, but one that unfolds in a place that isn’t

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55 Ibid., 182.
56 Ibid., 181.
supposed to exist, in a place that is itself only on “the cusp of being”; the warehouse as a squat is neither there nor not there.

The question, therefore, that The Girl poses for this study is, what kind of subject comes into being within such abandonment, in such a spectral space? This is also to ask, can one talk about a subject that resists legibility? Hapke, as mentioned earlier, problematizes the male proletarian novel’s centering of the heroic subject as, in fact, a latching on to bourgeois individualism. Le Sueur, conversely, is not interested in grasping a subjectivity from which the women about whom she writes have been banned. Le Sueur, I argue, wants to imagine a subjectivity that, produced from within indigence, does not constitute the “self-termination of being” but coincides with being. Le Sueur wants to imagine a subjectivity, in other words, that isn’t itself poor. The Girl posits a subject that transmits and does not destroy or supplant its “being through the other.” For instance, in The Girl, the relief station aims, simply, to make the poor representable without offering real political representation; here subjection aligns itself with abjection. That Amelia manages to have the Girl released from the relief maternity home and therefore to escape sterilization, however, asks us to consider forms

57 Hapke, Labor’s Text, 231.
58 Nancy, Birth to Presence, 37.
59 Recall that for Nancy, being precedes the subject.
of subjectivity that do not take place wholly within forms of capture. It is to imagine a
subjectivity that is not intrinsically oppressed.⁶⁰

And so while an ontological vocabulary structures The Girl, the novel is also
deeply invested in the concept of the subject and, more specifically, the production of a
subjectivity that asserts itself against the abjection and dehumanization of poverty. If
there is slippage here between the expression of being, on the one hand, and that of
subjectivity on the other, it is because that slippage exists in the novel. It is because these
terms are porous and ambivalent. To inquire into what it means to think being within
abandonment with regard to this novel is thus to inquire into how the Girl’s
apprehension of mere being functions to engender something else—an idea of the
subject as a being that has conceded that it is corporate.

In this way, Le Sueur inverts the capitalistic import of the subject as propertied
by envisioning subjectivity through the figure of the propertyless mother. For the
mother, dispossession comes to signify not abjection but the body as a commons; to be a
mother is to “belong to the whole earth.”⁶¹ Le Sueur thus has this figure— the mother,
the worker—embody the passage from being to subject that, I argue, is tethered to the
geographical production of zones in which the homeless quarter themselves. The idea

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⁶⁰ One might also turn to more recent scholarship such as Judith Butler’s Precarious Life, which, drawing
heavily from Emmanuel Levinas, conceives of forms of subjectivity derived from mutual abandonment
rather than self-constitution. Butler stresses the precariousness of life in order to take injurability as a point
of departure for reimagining political life.

⁶¹ Le Sueur, The Girl, 137.
that the mother belongs to the whole earth offers a sense of what is at stake in claiming subjectivity for the dispossessed at all. What is at stake is the possibility of rootedness – by which I mean the possibility of inhabiting a space without possessing it – for those otherwise consigned to being “on the lam.”62 The Girl tells us that Butch’s mother likes to listen to the radio as she and other destitute women spend their days occupying the abandoned warehouse, “but she thinks everyone is alive in it,” Le Sueur writes. “Once she heard a baby crying in the radio and she said, How does a baby grow in that shack? I wouldn’t raise no child of mine in there. How do folks live in a place like that? They must sit on a log.”63

I read this curious idiom, “to sit on a log,” as suggestive of the posture about which I wrote in the beginning of this chapter with regard to the Girl’s pregnancy, of inhabiting as the inverse form of fugitivity. The idiom calls to mind the rejection of a heroic attempt to rise out of or escape poverty, a negation of the Girl’s previously feeling constrained to “better be running, better be on the lam,”64 and the choice to instead occupy, and to take sojourn in, the space of one’s dispossession. The idiom that Butch’s mother formulates, here, rings of obstinacy, further telling of the refusal to work or to seek better work elsewhere, perhaps more along the lines of an informal strike but nevertheless an allusion to the formal strike, with which Butch and Bill, recall, are

62 Ibid., 81.
63 Ibid., 149.
64 Ibid., 81.
unsympathetic. At the same time, the remark frames the problem of inadequate housing not in terms of rights in the legalistic sense, as Mitchell discusses “the right to inhabit,” but in terms of a reluctance to be found, rescued, or uplifted. To “sit on a log” is the coincidence of human and spatial production through the grasping of tenantability within an untenable dispossession; subjectivity for Le Sueur is not the mere being to which the Girl’s imagination is initially limited, but a matter of bringing into being in this way. So to borrow the idiom of the text, this passage from being to subject is tethered to the act of “sitting on a log.” The remark that Butch’s mother makes further suggests that the inhabitation of inoperative or abandoned space is not primarily a matter of demanding rights or seeking uplift, but a matter of simply deciding “to be,” deciding to exist, such that the project of recognition becomes epiphenomenal to that decision. The subject is formed in this decision to be and it is in this sense that subjectivity becomes simultaneous with rather than destructive of being. To “sit on a log” is not about making oneself legible or intelligible in this sense.

2.1.4 Aesthetic Subjectivity

The problem with which Le Sueur struggles, the problem with which this study contends, is how literature can represent subjects in terms of their abandonment without negating the political potentiality of abandonment as a kind of sociality that is itself inaccessible to the logic of the state; or, to put it another way, without co-opting that subject for the dead archive. The Girl’s reflection on what it means to be homeless as
seen in the passage quoted earlier reminds us that the kind of subject one becomes is very much a matter of the kind of knowing one lives out. Subjectivity in *The Girl* as a form of cooperative being is already an alternative epistemology; not a matter of recognition per se but a matter of proximity, a practical ecology, rather than the product of a hailing or of representation. I use the term ecology in part as an allusion to the ecological metaphors that permeate the novel. As Clara says to the Girl, “We are growing, in a field that is cold, bitter, sour, and no chance for life.” To think of subjectivity as a practical ecology is, again, to think of it as the process of making space for oneself where that space is impossible.

As an aesthetic practice, literature stages this process by which the subject is produced. Le Sueur cautions the reader that a person can’t be told anything. One comes to know something only through experiencing it. Correspondingly, the work of literature is not to tell. Literature’s relationship to representation, in other words, is such that it allows us to enter into the currents of dispossession rather than their fixed social positions. Likewise, *The Girl* is an important text because it wants to understand abandonment not as a condition but as a practice, a distinctly spatial practice, and as the primary inroad into class struggle and collective class-consciousness. Le Sueur’s

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65 Ibid., 71.
66 Ibid., 49, 52, 89.
67 For a survey of how Le Sueur negotiated the conflicts between her leftist and feminist politics, see Laura Hapke’s chapter on proletarian writing, “Heroic At Last” in *Labor’s Text*. 

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conception of the ways of knowing and being through which this struggle takes place is coextensive with the function of literature; *The Girl* makes known that a relationship exists between literary form and habitat. The abandoned subject comes into being, as it were, through the unlawful inhabitation of derelict or otherwise uninhabitable space, a process of becoming that is accessible only through a relation to the aesthetic experience that literature, and particularly a novel such as Le Sueur’s, produces. Indeed, it is her understanding in aesthetic terms the inhabitation of her own abandonment that makes possible the Girl’s transition into a political subjectivity rooted in a gendered class-consciousness.

The forms of life that emerge within the homeless women’s occupation of the abandoned warehouse toward the end of the novel comprise not only the reproduction of human life, but, as I will argue in the following pages, also the production of a subjectivity that is thoroughly embodied and bound to the aesthetic production of literature. What is at stake in the Girl’s inkling of what it would mean for her “to be” thus exceeds the solely material conception of being at stake in, for example, Mitchell’s text. Though *The Girl* emerged from within the proletarian literary tradition it also emerged out of, rather than against, the legacy of high modernism. Michael Denning, for example, has notably argued that the literature of “the cultural front” was actually a
“third wave of the modernist movement.” Le Sueur employs an experimental, heteroglossic, interior monologue so as to grasp the affect and sensuality of motherhood as a counterpoint to the modernist dissolution of self, and to modernist alienation and individualism. *The Girl* constitutes a significant aesthetic contribution because it repurposes multiple literary traditions in this way—namely modernism, sentimentalism, and proletarianism—that failed to speak, because of the kinds of subjects they presupposed. Modernism and sentimentalism failed to speak to the regnant disenfranchisement of the 1930s and proletarianism failed to speak to women’s rights. The aesthetic of the novel, then, is coextensive with the mode of being it represents, that of inhabiting a failed market space: that is, its unsuccessful circulation, its not quite belonging to a legitimate or marketable literature. *The Girl* was, in a way, lost for a period of time. It was first published as a series of short stories for the little magazines of the 1930s, magazines that circulated the avant-garde writings of relatively obscure authors. But the novel form of *The Girl* was not published until 1978. Not to be recovered until the tail end of second-wave feminism, the novel was to some degree unmarketable in the late 1930s because of its refusal of generic expectations – not adhering to the strictures of solely sentimentalism, proletarianism, or modernism – and the social and cultural assurances that accompany those expectations.

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The proletarian modernism of *The Girl* betrays a larger trend in women’s working-class and proletarian fiction: representing the political efficacy of publics marked by affective intimacy insofar as they do not seek to move from abandonment to recognition but rather choose to inhabit abandonment (and abandoned places). This chapter bridges the novel’s conception of what I tentatively call “abandoned publics” with the experimental modernism that Le Sueur introduces into the proletarian agenda in order to understand the embrace of abandonment to be deeply aesthetic. Le Sueur’s is an aesthetic that challenges the generic assurances of both sexuality, such as female domesticity, and textuality – sentimentalism, proletarianism and modernism are literary forms the underpinning ideologies of which have traditionally clashed with each other in spite of literary experiments to reconcile them.

### 2.2 Abandoned Publics

#### 2.2.1 Lapsed Market Space

In last quarter of the novel, a group of women, the Girl included, are occupying an abandoned warehouse. The space of the warehouse, once an axis for the distribution of goods, now bespeaks the failure of the capitalist market. Its vacancy is a circumstance of the Great Depression, since fewer goods are being produced and circulated. And the women, having appropriated that failed space as a reproductive space, are the specters of those goods.

I’ll never forget that summer as long as I live. That big old warehouse where we all lived, five floors, mostly women and it was cool too, with thick
brick walls and high windows where sometimes the sun came through like in a
temple. There was no heat and no light, and some women who had lived there in
the winter had built fires on the wood floors and they had burnt through and
made holes, so you could look down or holler down to the floor below. A guy
had run electric wires from the outside to the floor we lived on, the second, so we
could have lights and an electric plate when nobody was looking. Sometimes
cops came, seeing a light, but we had a system of jiggers, it was called, jiggers the
cops are coming. It would start at the bottom and go right up through the
building.

It was said that it was owned by a widow of the lumber maggots, we
called them, and that before the depression when it was rented she went to
Europe every summer, but it had been empty now and had been taken over by
girls and women who had no place to live.69

I am interested in the warehouse where the novel’s women live as a lapsed
market space, one that, before the economic collapse of the depression, functioned as a
physical hub of circulation and of consumption. These women take the place of the
goods that the warehouse would have stored if it were not itself a structure abandoned
in and to poverty. Where there were once commodities awaiting distribution, there are
now destitute women seeking reprieve from the circulation and exchange of their own
bodies. Earlier in the novel, Amelia poses a question to the Girl: “What are we? Just
goods to be bought and sold? Yes, she answered herself cursing, that’s what they think,
buy and sell you and then use your body after you’re dead!”70 It’s perhaps ironic, then,
that the women realize the agency to clear room for themselves and to therefore regulate
their own exposure through their taking over a zone of distribution. Yet it also recalls

70 Ibid., 166.
the suggestion with which I introduced this chapter, which is that being for Le Sueur is bound up with and often limited by material distribution.

In succeeding, or perhaps shadowing, these goods, the women of Le Sueur’s novel convert the warehouse into a space that both offers them reprieve from the circulation of their bodies as poor and working-class and also attests to their ongoing susceptibility to such exploitative exchange. It is a circulation that, returning to Mitchell, is the corollary of their being denied the wherewithal to legitimately be and to be legitimate. The Girl’s sense for being finally suggests itself within a “taking over,” a communal illicit inhabitation of a structure only marginally distinct from the street and barely resembling a domicile. In this way, the novel’s homeless women make an intervention in the spatial logic of a dispossessory economic order.

In The Right to the City, Mitchell suggests that the homeless cannot constitute a proper public because they don’t have access to a private home from which to emerge into public space. Publics, like subjects, are always already the effect of the possession or occupation of realty. Hence the right to the city, for Mitchell, is the right to become public. Le Sueur takes up this problem by imagining the right to the city through the capture of real estate that has failed as such. This tactic raises the question of whether the novel suggests that these women constitute something resembling a public insofar as they intervene in the spatial logic of a dispossessory economic order, even if surreptitiously.
Yet both the subject and the public it generates are historically and semantically concerned with recognition through access to the means of representation. Le Sueur, who is invested in the potentiality of the subject, somewhat paradoxically understands this potentiality through its illegitimacy and generic unintelligibility. The above passage describing the conversion of an abandoned warehouse into a homeless shelter, the production of a space in which the Girl later becomes a mother, the invention of a system of jiggers that allows the homeless women to shelter their shelter from the legitimate, all signifies how literature – and more specifically the literature of abandonment – functions for Le Sueur. Such literature not only troubles the relationship of the subject to representation by imagining the production of a subject who lacks access to the means of representation; it also imagines the production of a(n aggregate) subject for whom representation proper is disempowering precisely through the closure it effects. I mean this literally as well as figuratively, for, as I will expound further, if the state were to find out about these women’s improvised cooperative, it would close the warehouse to them. The Girl suggests that to read literature through abandonment is to read literature as representing its own non-representation.

Similarly, a market structure such as a warehouse is never exactly private or public, and it especially exceeds these terms in its insolvency in The Girl. I will elaborate on this argument throughout this section; for now, I mention it to call attention to what is at stake in a conception of “abandoned publics” and what is at stake, therefore, in a
novel such as *The Girl*. I will argue that, just as representation as such inadequately describes the work of a novel such as *The Girl*, the vocabulary of publics (including counterpublics) inadequately describes the population of women that *The Girl* portrays. A public as an entity is too caught up in issues of representability and visibility for it to present a sufficient model for thinking about practices of abandonment. Later, I will argue that folded into the terminology of abandoned publics is actually an appeal to leave the paradigm of publics behind for one of habitat.

Even so, a brief discussion of publics is important to a reading of *The Girl* for several reasons. Much of the novel is set in public space, especially prior to the Girl’s discovery of the warehouse; Le Sueur appreciates the street, the park, and even the relief station, as crucial sites for the working-class and poor to deliberate with each other, organize, and plot. Similarly, as seen in the passage about homelessness cited earlier, in which the Girl finds herself with “no home” and “no place” to stay, her consciousness of the affect circulating within public space becomes an alternate home, one that intensifies self-understanding. In this way, theories of publics offer a paradigm for thinking through the production of class-consciousness in *The Girl*. Finally, because of its necessary theorization to think about homelessness, the public provides a basis for Le Sueur’s investigation of other possibilities for inhabitation. In other words, habitat in Le Sueur is routed through publics. An examination, therefore, of inhabiting in *The Girl* must also be routed through theories of publics. To propose a preliminary definition: an
abandoned public is characterized by the act of making habitable rather than of becoming public, but it nevertheless constitutes a potential public that, being abandoned, has been denied the right to actually become public in the strict sense of that term; yet by making habitable, that is, by intervening in the spatial logic of a dispossessory economic order, the beings that together compose an abandoned public discover a subjectivity against the bourgeois organization of the private and public spheres, and its politics of representation, to which the subject has traditionally been tethered.

Most theorists of the public sphere after Habermas recognize that socially subordinated groups often lack access to the material means of participation in the bourgeois public sphere. Although the irregular circulation of little magazines, such as those in which Le Sueur published the stories that would eventually develop into The Girl, constituted an attempt to amend this bias, the public that the novel itself summons (generally the public to which the novel is marketed) and the abandoned public (comprised of bodies that are on the market and yet excluded from it) about which Le Sueur writes seem to some degree both incongruous and imbricated with each other. In other words, Le Sueur writes about a demographic that may not itself have had enough access to such literature. The forms of writing represented within The Girl, for example, consist of Amelia’s leaflets that say, in big letters, “Don’t starve—Organize” and

71 I’m especially thinking of Nancy Fraser.
Clara’s lifestyle magazines, a case of cruel optimism if ever there was one. That Clara teasingly tells the Girl that she’s going to join the Book of the Month Club discloses her exclusion and the exclusion of the other women in the novel from the literary market. And so perhaps more important than the public spaces within the novel is that theories of publics are at the heart of the literary traditions of which The Girl makes use; the designation of “abandoned public” is meant to gesture toward a departure from those traditions, in the dual sense of that term.

Warner’s account of publics and counterpublics speaks directly to the problem of the collaboration and competition between the material and the textual present in The Girl. While publics, he argues, generally pivot on the “ideology of reading,” counterpublics “tend to be those in which this ideology of reading does not have the same privilege” and pivot more on “embodied sociability.” My argument, therefore, situates the practices of abandonment glimpsed in The Girl somewhere within or between the incongruity and mutual imbrication of physicality and textuality that the novel stages. The problem with counterpublics is that they still circulate within an economy of representation to the extent that they “exist by virtue of their address.”

Recall Povinelli’s aside that becoming a counterpublic is an achievement. This study

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73 Ibid., 11.
75 Ibid., 73.
76 Povinelli, Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism, 10.
turns to Le Sueur because, I argue, she is concerned with the subject that is produced instead by being turned away from. This is not to say that the securing of recognition by the state or asserting the rights of the poor has no significance in *The Girl*. The Workers Alliance, for which Amelia is an advocate, demands resources from the state, including food and jobs. And outside of the warehouse in which the women are squatting, a demonstration for milk and iron pills for impoverished women can be heard. But we only hear the demonstration or hear about it because Le Sueur keeps the reader in the warehouse with the Girl. The efforts of the Workers Alliance to attain political representation are oblique to the production of habitable space, which seems to be the project in which the novel ultimately believes.

Warner’s remark thus returns me to the question with which this study grapples, which is how a literature might attend to modes of being as well as to the production of subjectivities that take place beneath economies of representation or that, returning to an earlier description, seek to be left to be, within subrepresentational spaces, spaces that cannot be represented without at the same time being destroyed.

The practices and the aesthetic that emerge from this project make possible the circulation of alternative modes of being and knowing that elude the capture and closure of becoming representable, just as the Girl eludes the prescriptions of her caseworker. As I’ve already mentioned, the ability of the women who are living in the warehouse to continue living there depends almost entirely on their not being
represented: they keep the lights on only “when nobody was looking” and contrive a “system of jiggers” in order to remain undetected. One might recognize the cop as the force of subject production in Louis Althusser’s theory of ideological hailing; only in *The Girl* it is the talent for eluding this hailing that makes subjectivity possible for the otherwise abject. We don’t hear “hey, you there!” (except in some manner from the Girl’s sleuthing caseworker), but rather “jiggers the cops are coming.” To be addressed or hailed in this particular instance would mean to be forced to live on the street and thus to be denied the right “to be,” corresponding to Mitchell’s argument in his account of homelessness. Of course, on the other hand, these women are living in an abandoned warehouse in the first place because they’ve been habitually refused political representation. What makes a reading of *The Girl* productive for this study is just this troubled relationship between the way in which, as a work of literature, it somehow claims to offer representation of the subaltern at the same time that it brings to the foreground the non-representation vital to the production of an abandoned subjectivity.

### 2.2.2 Abandoned Publics

The “abandoned publics” to which the title of this chapter refers also invokes, in part, what Lauren Berlant calls the “intimate publics” of 19th-century sentimental literature. Briefly, intimate publics constitute an aesthetic practice of social belonging. That is, they compose a textual mass-mediated identity, one that facilitates the management of female disappointment with the incoherence of romantic fantasy and
lived intimacy.\textsuperscript{77} The aesthetic practice that mediates the identity of an intimate public is one of conventionality that heeds and thus binds both textual and sexual generic expectations. Intimate publics traditionally sought to influence the social sphere through representations of mastery of the middle-class household economy; sentimentalism sought to do so more generally through the imagining of a “family state,” in which women acquire collective economic power over the social order through domestic influence. Intimate publics, argues Berlant, fail to be political to the extent that the sentimentalism that mediates bourgeois women’s identities expresses the desire to move from abandonment to recognition within the conventional household order. The deliberate marginalization of political concerns within intimate publics is further manifested in their “turn to sentimental rhetoric at moments of social anxiety” as constituting “a generic wish for an unconflicted world, one wherein structural inequities, not emotions and intimacies, are epiphenomenal.”\textsuperscript{78} I read intimate publics, therefore, as not only a genre of speech that wants to appeal to indefinite strangers, but that is in fact mobilized toward the infinite accessibility of language that Warner claims not to exist,\textsuperscript{79} and, too, the possibility and desirability of which Le Sueur challenges. Underlying this desire for infinite accessibility is, I would argue, a deeper desire for

\textsuperscript{77} Lauren Berlant, \textit{The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{79} Warner, \textit{Publics and Counterpublics}, 108.
infinite unabandonability; for both accessibility and unabandonability, it seems, are questions of the aspiration to become infinitely representable. I trope Berlant’s language, then, in order to enter into a consideration of forms of intimacy addressed within an alternative aesthetic practice that nevertheless borrows from the sentimental literary tradition, though in such a way as to protest its traditional use.\(^{80}\)

The Girl’s description of the women’s inhabitation of the warehouse, their inquiries throughout the novel into their own status as goods, reminds one that Le Sueur’s novel produces meaning and engenders publics through its own circulation. It does so in the same manner as, for example, the Book of the Month Club but with respect to a population dispossessed by and within that very same market. To be more specific, the women that The Girl portrays are on the market as objects, but are excluded from participating in that market as subjects. So when the Girl tells Clara that she and Butch hope to own their own service station one day, Clara half teases, “Say no kiddin’. Ain’t love grand. I’m going to join the Book of the Month Club.”\(^{81}\) The market rather markedly does not frame belonging for this public, which cannot pass as conventional within market terms. Indeed, the very commission of proletarian literature is to theorize what it means to labor on the market and to be abandoned by it. The literature of abandoned publics does not fantasize about a promise of the un-abandonability of these

\(^{80}\) Laura Hapke notes that American proletarian literature would have a much more sentimental ring than classics of social realism produced in the Soviet Union. Hapke, Labor’s Text, 223.

\(^{81}\) Le Sueur, The Girl, 11.
figures by the capitalist market or bourgeois state. Rather, it stages the inhabitation of abandonment itself as a way to abide the precarity of the market. I want to understand "habitats" and "inhabiting," then, as an aesthetic practice that has embedded within it a critique of private property.

My troping of Berlant’s language in this essay, to lead into a discussion of literary representations of abandonment, derives from Berlant’s argument that the aesthetic that mediates intimate publics mobilizes “fantasies of what black and working class interiority based on suffering must feel like in order to find a language for their own more privileged suffering . . .”82 Therefore, as I understand it, intimate publics issue from something like an affect of reified or commodified abandonment, what other critics of sentimentalism have called sympathy. This issuance is the case even though such an affinity depends upon the privileged ignorance of the material realities of abandonment, such as those realities just detailed in the Girl’s account of the occupation of the warehouse. Indeed, it is these economically and politically abandoned populations upon which bourgeois intimate publics are sustained both affectively and materially. Insofar as they work within the capitalist logic of private property, intimate publics are sustained by the violent erasure of those left unincorporated into the governing economic, political, racial and gender logic – what I mean by “abandonment.”

82 Berlant, The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture, 6.
In *The Girl*, for example, Amelia, an organizer for the Workers’ Alliance, disrupts the women’s sentimental working-class fantasies of inclusion into a proper domestic sphere by exposing this injurious relation to private property. Walking through a middle-class neighborhood, distributing leaflets, Amelia tells the Girl about the 1919 lynching of Wesley Everest, an IWW member. The “best houses,” she tells the Girl, hold a piece of that rope as a souvenir. Feminist proletarian literature launches a critique of sentimentalism’s investment in the home by adapting its forms to representations of the poor and the homeless. By the end of *The Girl*, the female protagonist is squatting in an abandoned warehouse where she gives birth to a daughter in the company of other destitute women. “Abandoned publics” thus also invokes Mitchell’s claim that “the right to inhabit the city must always be asserted not within, but against, the rights of property. The right to housing needs to be dissociated from the right to property and return to the right to inhabit.” Mitchell is primarily concerned with the illicit modes of being among the homeless who are both constrained to and restricted from performing private functions in public. Le Sueur speaks to this social concern through the Girl’s account of the women who are squatting in the warehouse. The women who inhabit its five floors must perform domesticity “when nobody was

83 For some reason, Le Sueur has Amelia refer to this historical figure as Wesley Everett.
looking,” thus bringing the language of intimacy and publics to bear on unlawful
domestic practice.

A novel such as The Girl hails an abandoned public through an account and
critique of working-class women’s aspirations to normativity, but it mobilizes fantasies
of political subjectivity. For example, Clara can be said to embody the ideologies and
affect that keep women “attached to disaffirming scenarios of necessity and optimism in
their personal and political lives.” At one point living with Clara, the Girl tells us:
“Clara is very cheerful, cutting out pictures from the magazines showing elegant houses
and drapes and furniture and stuff for the baby room and maid’s room, all the best stuff,
but at night she cries thinking she is going to hell because of what she does with men . .
." The fantasy of bourgeois domesticity is performed repeatedly, in fact, compulsively,
throughout The Girl. Clara’s compulsive fantasizing allows her to endure her acts of
prostitution. These acts, she tells herself, will be the occasion of a finally romantic
encounter. And it is these representations of the compulsion to fantasy that finally
expose such a scenario as disaffirming. Clara’s desire to partake of the economy of
representation celebrated by middle-class sentimentality is so delusional that it amounts
in this novel to mental illness. The compulsiveness itself is signified in the passage I just
quoted by the mourning for aborted pregnancies suppressed by the possibilities of

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86 Berlant, The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture, 2.
87 Le Sueur, The Girl, 12.
consumption from which Clara herself is barred. The account and critique of the aspiration to normativity in proletarian women’s fiction lays the groundwork for precisely the disenchantment and refusal that intimate publics evade.

2.2.3 Failed Worlds

Belle’s statement, “you’ll just have to make a baby, not a world,” which I discussed in the first section of this chapter, frames successful, rather than aborted, child-bearing as taking place within a failure of world-making (or an alternative vision of it) and the powerlessness to immediately revolutionize structural inequities. I understand world-making, in this particular context, in terms of the hermetically-sealed worlds, such as those of Clara’s magazines, with their pictures of “elegant houses and drapes and furniture and stuff for the baby room and maid’s room.”88 There is a closure about these representations and Mrs. Rose’s vision of a world without precarity, where one can wake up in the morning and buy a head of lettuce if she wants it,89 which echoes the closure of the bourgeois subject, delimited by what is representable, according to Nancy’s critique. Worlds, in the sense spoken of here, do not tremble. They are, as Butch says, “made to order.”90 But having a child, both as a result of and in spite of living in poverty, enacts a refusal of the closure of these worlds that have, in turn, failed the

88 Ibid., 12.
89 Ibid., 152.
90 Ibid., 92.
specifically abandoned subjects of *The Girl*; it refuses the attempted closure of the abandoned subject through her sterilization, and embraces a natality that is, by definition, less manageable and more indeterminate. This reading also offers an explanation for why Le Sueur has Clara suffer the same fate as all of the men in the novel. The men in the novel get killed off because their attachment to an economy of winning and losing interferes with the cultivation of an alternative economy of being. I would argue that Clara dies because of her attachment to worlds, specifically the middle-class world of sentimentalism about which she is always dreaming.

Several characters in the novel discuss abortion, especially Belle who almost boasts about her abortions: “It’s rotten, stinking, covered with slime! Men after you, the welfare workers after you, people living off each other like rats. I told you I would have no kids to bring into it. Thirteen abortions I had, got ‘em out of me.”[^91] Belle publicizes the fact of her abortions at least twice in *The Girl*, and tells the Girl the story of her first abortion after the Girl admits to having missed a period. Clara, however, never talks about having had any abortions, although she admits to the Girl, “if you got a kid you got to get rid of it.”[^92] One might guess that as a prostitute in the 1930s without access to family planning resources and as a woman who has suffered sexual abuse, like both Belle and the Girl, Clara has had to terminate a pregnancy; her silence on this matter,

[^91]: Ibid., 171.
[^92]: Ibid., 94.
however, only corroborates her attachment to the “made to order” world of middle-class sentimentalism and her desire to conform to the imperatives of national heterosexuality. Belle can tout her history of abortions because she has no faith in the narrative of pure citizenship, an incredulity seen in her resentment of welfare workers, and because she seems to recognize the structural inequities that underlie that narrative. Clara, I would argue, is silent about any history of pregnancy she might have because that history would disqualify her from entering into the world of Irish tablecloths, elegant houses and bridge on Sundays to which she desperately wants to belong. She barely withstands prostituting herself—and in fact, in the end, she does not withstand it at all—by telling herself that it will allow her to save money and get married someday. The Girl describes Belle as “a great tomb,”93 and yet Clara is the only woman in the novel to die; perhaps Le Sueur saw her death as necessary to the flourishing of a sociality that exists within abandonment yet neither longs for inclusion into nor is bound to the economy of representation.

Warner and Berlant have termed the alliance between heterosexism, reproduction, and capitalism manifest in Clara’s fantasies “national heterosexuality.”94 National heterosexuality is a familial model that understands intimate relations to belong primarily if not solely to the private sphere and functions to displace “the

93 Ibid., 93.
94 Warner, Publics and Counterpublics, 189.
recognition . . . of systemic inequalities.” The sentimental publics that I addressed earlier are a consummate manifestation of national heterosexuality, as are anti-homeless laws that bar those who exist solely in public from practicing intimate acts, which Mitchell articulates as the denial of the right to “be.” National heterosexuality is, therefore, thoroughly entwined with the structural (economic and political) division between the private and public spheres and with the exclusions that that division produces—a division that the practices of abandonment, and its habitats, exceed. In “Sex in Public,” Warner and Berlant argue: "National heterosexuality is the mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, the space of pure citizenship.” Yet, while the chimera of pure citizenship impregnates much of the novel, by the end of The Girl, the women care much less about being citizens than they care about just being. Le Sueur’s critique of the relationship between heterosexuality and the national economy, and the way in which heterosexual structures are dispossessory, is brought to the foreground when the Girl drives Butch, who is bleeding to death after having been shot during the bank robbery, into the countryside and into Iowa. The Girl and Butch had planned to buy a service station, which is to say, they had plans to establish a sentimental relationship to capital, one that would allow them to control and "sanitize"

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95 Ibid., 189.
96 Ibid., 189.
(to borrow from Warner and Berlant) the conditions of their reproduction; the dream of buying a service station is shorthand for all that is encompassed by Clara’s imperative to “think how someday you will have Irish tablecloths and peasant pottery and a pew in church and dress up and go every Sunday because you haven’t had to hustle on Saturday nights”⁹⁷—an image of pure citizenship. When, after the failed robbery, however, the Girl stops at just such a service station for gas, she and Butch have a brief exchange with the owner and attendant of the station:

I put everything me and my wife had into this place . . . and now the Standard Oil is going to take it away from me.

How can they do that, Butch said, didn’t you get a lease on it?

O sure, he said, that’s a racket, they make you feel like you got your place, like you’re going to be the boss, a big shot. They take all your dough and they got it fixed so you can’t make good. You could work twenty-eight hours out of twenty-four, you could starve your wife and kids and throw them in with it. They got you milked from both ends. It’s a racket. They hold the cards, you can’t win. And when you give up, when they’ve sucked you dry, they get another sucker.⁹⁸

This moment in the novel acts as an acknowledgment that national heterosexuality works to provide a continuous supply of “suckers,” or surplus labor, to capitalist interests, and is a recognition of the lack of discrimination between owning and being owned for the working-class and poor. The women’s cooperative that forms, shortly after the above scene, in the abandoned warehouse, is a direct result of the failed

⁹⁷ Le Sueur, The Girl, 11.
⁹⁸ Ibid., 122.
bank robbery that, had it been successful, would have allowed Butch and the Girl to buy their own service station and to perhaps better envision themselves as members of the intimate publics that sentimental print culture, of which Clara’s catalogues is an example, calls into being. The Girl and other women are pushed to occupy the warehouse, and come to inadvertently constitute what I am calling an abandoned public, because the speakeasy where many of them previously lived and worked is forced to close, as the robbery and shoot-out triggers unwelcome attention from the police.

In *The Girl*, the routes of refusal – refusal, for example, of the ready-made worlds of intimate publics – become synonymous with a specifically unsanctioned motherhood. “Remember . . . the breasts of your mothers,” Amelia says, as Clara dies in the warehouse beside the Girl, who is giving birth to a daughter in the same moment. Childbirth, motherhood, work – these corporeal states of being politicize in *The Girl* what is otherwise displaced from the political about intimate publics. Le Sueur’s aesthetic foregrounds the materiality of bodies and spaces and in doing so foregrounds, in a number of ways, the materiality of the language used to describe those bodies and spaces and vice versa. To begin with, the poetic leaning of Le Sueur’s writing, apparent in almost any of the passages cited above, exposes the narrative as a production. Furthermore, the elements of free indirect speech that merge with the Girl’s first-person narration allow the words spoken in the novel to bear a more immediate relation to the
bodies that generated them. Constance Coiner has pointed out that narrative tags like “he said” “provide occasional reminders that the Girl is reporting, but the absence of quotation marks and the often extended speech of any given voice leave the impression of voices speaking for themselves.” And indeed, much of Le Sueur’s writing reproduced the actual words of real people with whom she had spoken or conducted interviews.

2.2.4 Testimony

*The Girl* began life as testimony. The mode of testimony specific to *The Girl* – the differing texture of the textuality of the feminist proletarian mode of testimony – departs from that of sentimental literature. Le Sueur wrote *The Girl* from interviews she conducted with the poor and working-class women that populate the novel, engendering both a heteroglossic and a polyvocal text in which a multiplicity of voices speak through the novel’s unnamed protagonist. The Girl has no name because she is, in fact, a population. Often a nameless or generic protagonist, particularly in novels working within the sentimental tradition, is meant to be infinitely graspable to a broad readership—ininitely accessible, even, to borrow Warner’s language. But the unspecified nature of the Girl turns this tradition upside down; as a population, the Girl is incoherent. The polyvocality of the text returns us to Nancy’s description of

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abandoned being as “the spoken-in-multiple-ways” and reminds us that “‘abandon’ can evoke ‘abundance.’” There is always, Nancy argues, “an abundance . . . in abandon” that “opens on a profusion of possibilities.” In this way, being in abandonment might only be divulged within an experimental aesthetic. More specifically, The Girl speaks to an abandoned public by making public the conditions of and material for its own production, printing the very words, phrasings and idioms of the voices that exist prior to the text’s circulation. The common sense vernacular of intimate publics affords, Berlant argues, a relief from the political. And this relief from the political presupposes and works through a functional market. But in seeking a language for homelessness and abandonment, Le Sueur, I have already argued, foregrounds the materiality of the language itself. In doing so, she imagines an arrangement in which subjects and objects can circulate outside of the normative economies, including the economy of representation, from which they are always already barred.

In this light, I would argue that Le Sueur’s stylistic strategies, including her appropriation of sentimental rhetoric to dramatize the power of the aspiration to normativity within dispossession, works to frustrate intimate publics’ “unknowing” of structural inequities. But such an aesthetics is also an appeal to dwell in the fissures, like those produced through the merging of incompatible, sometimes hostile, aesthetic

100 Nancy, Birth to Presence, 36.
101 Berlant, The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture, 10.
practices that are nevertheless critical, Le Sueur suggests, to rendering abandonment’s affect. In other words, just as Le Sueur takes an aesthetic rubric of sentimentality, one that is antagonistic to, in its very identification with, dispossession, and re inhabits it, the novel’s characters and presumably the women on which the novel is based are shown annexing a derelict home and occupying it in an improper, indeed unlawful, way. As I have been arguing, the abandoned publics of feminist proletarian literature such as The Girl do not imagine their movement from abandonment to recognition but imagine modes of inhabiting their own abandonment in politically and aesthetically productive ways. Indeed, by situating the ethnographic process within a modernist experimentalist prose, Le Sueur makes public what she perceives as the aesthetic and textual dimension already existing within the voices of the women who spoke to her of their dispossession and sometimes their very literal abandonment.

Perhaps this attention to the materiality of language by staging the production of its form as arising out of ethnography – what I referred to earlier as the texture of its testimony – is the only language available for abandonment because abandonment and other such spectral spaces don’t translate into representation as such. I argue this in light of the fact that The Girl was written over the course of the decade that followed the emergence, in the 1920s, of an ethnographic mode of urban sociology known as the Chicago School. The Chicago School perceived impoverished communities’ resistance to middle-class modes of sociality “as a sign of social disorganization rather than political
agency.”¹⁰² While still doing important work, reform during this period sought to reclaim impoverished communities through assimilating them to middle-class modes of conduct, however impractical such modes of conduct might be for the urban poor and however “bottom-up” the school’s approach to community organization might have been. The Chicago School was thus a clear successor to Progressive Era reform in more than one way. Notwithstanding the shift from the progressive focus on employment and exploitative wage labor to a more dynamic or “ecological” focus on racial and ethnic identity, the Chicago School sought to represent urban space through zoning, which is to say, through its reification.¹⁰³

Le Sueur’s aesthetic, then, challenges the ethnographic process as one that speaks “on behalf of rather than in concert with the impoverished working class.”¹⁰⁴ The relationship of abandoned publics to representation is especially troubled once we understand representation as a form of legitimation. In other words, to write about abandonment – to attempt to represent its spaces and its subjects – is already to attempt to rescue it from itself. Literature is a powerful medium in this respect because there is

¹⁰³ Alice O’Connor writes: “Dividing the city into a series of concentric ‘zones,’ what Burgess outlines as the ecological base map was meant to reflect not the constructed hierarchies of power, wealth, and poverty but the natural logic of urban growth and residential distribution.” Ibid., 49–50. In other words, the Chicago School was still invested in what LeFebvre has referred to as “representational space.” It’s ecological approach thus diverges from the ecology that I argue is present in The Girl.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 42. O’Connor makes this argument with regard to the reform efforts during the Progressive Era, but it also holds true for the Chicago School, even though the Chicago School was, according to O’Connor, more strictly bottom-up.
no ethical imperative in literature to be true or verifiable, just as an aesthetic of abandonment as seen in Le Sueur depends on the unverifiability of its practices. The literature of abandonment, in not wanting to validate, calls to mind the “quasi-events that saturate potential worlds and social projects” that, Povinelli argues, have no objective being insofar as they “never quite achieve the status of having occurred or taken place.”

In The Girl, however, the inhabitation of the warehouse becomes an event, becomes an occupation, with the birth of the Girl’s daughter; but this is an event caught in the interstices of potentiality and actuality as much as it is not exactly public and the literature that relates it cannot, and would not, authenticate it. While there is, to be sure, an ethnographical element in The Girl, the novel is not ethnography as such insofar as it banks on the literary observation of the apocryphal.

2.2.5 The Poïesis of Habitat

As many public sphere theorists concede, socially subordinated groups usually lack access to the material means of participation in the public sphere. And as Don Mitchell has pointed out, disenfranchised populations such as the homeless often lack permission to inhabit the very public to which they are consigned. I have already mentioned, for example, the illicit domesticity seen in The Girl, manifest in the “system of jiggers” the women develop to shirk the police. But, Mitchell argues, the “right to the

105 Povinelli, Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism, 14.
city implies the right to the uses of city spaces, the right to inhabit,” and “the right to inhabit implies a right to housing . . . from which to venture forth.” Mitchell characterizes this practice of the right to physically inhabit public space as a “wrenching free” of “the use-value that is the necessary bedrock of urban life . . . from its domination by exchange-value.” 106 Housing, in this sense, is undermining of private property to the extent that housing, for Mitchell, is a use-value. The capacity of the female figures in The Girl to inhabit the abandoned warehouse is a manifestation of precisely this tension between emergent use-value and folding exchange-value.

In The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel De Certeau rearticulates the significance of thinking in terms of use-value; he argues that subversive consumption can be understood as another form of production. “The ‘making’ in question,” he writes

is a production, a poiēsis—but a hidden one, because it is scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of “production” (television, urban development, commerce, etc.), and because the steadily increasing expansion of these systems no longer leaves “consumers” any place in which they can indicate what they make or do with the products of these systems.107

Squatting, according to this logic, constitutes a secondary production hidden in the process of a more specifically illegal utilization,108 one that must literally remain

108 Ibid., xiii.
hidden to persist. The women’s act of squatting in a warehouse, of all structures, bears out that their act does indeed take place in an area defined by systems of production, but in this case only to the extent that the incapacity to sustain production is already written into those systems. In this way, I would argue that squatting is a ποίησις that is not simply “scattered” over these areas but one that occupies them in turn. That is to say, the making or doing in question that has no place is precisely the making of place, the assertion of the right to housing.

The way in which I employ the concept of "abandoned publics," then, is as a spatial practice that, in fact, surrenders the entire language of public and private for an alternative language of habitat. The Girl ends with two converging events: the Workers’ Alliance demonstration, in which men and women gather in the street to demand milk and iron pills for Clara, who is dying from state-administered shock treatment, and the Girl’s giving birth to a daughter in the abandoned warehouse. Often in proletarian or socialist working-class literature, we see a central figure, having achieved class-consciousness, conscripted into a political project, ready to organize. In The Girl, however, the street enters the warehouse; it enters the scene of reproduction, not vice versa. The demonstration demands milk and iron pills from the state, but mothers produce their own milk, and afterbirth, Amelia tells the Girl, “has more protein in it
than any living thing.” Their bodies gesture toward the possibility of a more sustainable economy liberated from the dominant (and failing) dispossessory economic order. *The Girl*, I would argue, is not about women’s conscription into the labor movement or even the venturing forth into the public, political sphere in order to demand recognition from the state. (As an aside, Paula Rabinowitz observes that women were not seen as typically joining working-class organizations in the 1930s [2].) While making such demands is a critical project, in *The Girl* the question of being eclipses the urge to act, whether to act with regard to the state as seen with the Workers Alliance or to act for oneself as seen with Butch and the other men in the novel. Rather, it is through the question of being that Le Sueur imagines a political subjectivity within a space that is not public and is not private, that is not the market but is also not not-the-market, but a provisional space that comes into being in its inhabitation, in its misappropriation.

The relationship between abandonment and modernism arises from the incongruity of practices of abandonment and representational practices. Here I mean representational practices in both their literary and political senses. Le Sueur draws on a modernist aesthetic to explore not only the limitations of representational language but also to question the aspiration to representation so vital to the social realist project. What I perceive as the collective inhabitation of abandonment—a kind of reserve intimate

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is the alternative that Le Sueur’s proletarian modernism makes available. That abandonment is perhaps not quite available for representation, but is available for inhabitation, is illustrated at the end of The Girl when the Workers’ Alliance protest files into the warehouse to be present for the birth of the Girl’s daughter, rather than the women living there spilling out into the street to join the protest. Earlier in this section, I mentioned that intimate publics are mediated through both sexual and literary generic expectations. Berlant writes that to call “a sexual identity a genre” is to understand it in “its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations. For femininity to be a genre like an aesthetic one means that it is a structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide . . . assurances.”

To think of a population in terms of its abandonment—whether economic, social, or political—is to imagine the proliferation of generic unintelligibility; which is to say, the aesthetic illegitimacy of the novel itself as well as and in relation to the sexual illegitimacy of homeless women and their improvised domesticity.

### 2.2.6 The Crisis of Unbeing

This aesthetic of sexual illegitimacy of The Girl—which includes prostitution, the publicity of intimate acts resulting from poor housing structures, and more specifically, the giving birth to an already illegitimate child in an abandoned warehouse—pervades

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100 Berlant, The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture, 4.
The novel. *The Girl* presents itself as a feminist text working within and against the highly masculinist political ideology of proletarianism, and it has predominantly been read as such. Feminist readings of the novel have focused on its language of desire as offering a way for women to enter into historical narrative. But queer theory, such as those arguments put forth by Warner, Berlant, and Halberstam, is also material here because it has already worked through many of the questions and issues regarding legibility, legitimacy, and the politics of representation, as well as politics and practices of space—queer publics, for example, are especially vulnerable to zoning.111

Judith Halberstam, for instance, describes the embrace of failure, such as the failure to realize economic security seen in *The Girl*, as a queer "art" or aesthetic. She argues that although "success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation," the collapse of financial markets and the rise in divorce rates have lately attenuated these logics.112 Halberstam refers specifically to the 2008 financial market collapse, which has been exhaustively compared to the market collapse that initiated the Great Depression, during which *The Girl* was written and takes place. The discourse of success and failure, and the kinship of that discourse with national heterosexuality, is, in *The Girl*, similarly

111 Queer public culture appears, Warner and Berlant argue, “when the heterosexual couple is no longer the referent or privileged example of sexual culture,” as it is in *The Girl*. One direction to take, here, would be a reading of how abandonment and its inhabitation “queers” the space of what would be an intimate public, but that analysis is beyond the scope of this study. Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 187.
enfeebled by an unsustainable capitalist market. The women of the novel ensconce themselves within the spaces of that failing capitalist market in the afterlife of their equally unsustainable romantic relationships—giving material form to Halberstam’s call to work with failure and inhabit the darkness, \(^\text{113}\) which is the activity of the queer artist. Le Sueur, like Halberstam, uses the experience of failure to confront inequalities in everyday life. \(^\text{114}\) Likewise, the generic unintelligibility of The Girl, and the novel’s own unmarketability, lies in part in its forgoing the discourse of success and failure in order to adopt a vocabulary of being.

This is not to say that Le Sueur is a queer artist; nor is she what Halberstam refers to as a shadow feminist who fails at womanhood by in part refusing to privilege the bond between mother and child because that privileging, if not the bond itself, reproduces patriarchal structures. Halberstam’s critique is more specifically of womanhood only as it has been defined within Western philosophy, \(^\text{115}\) and such a critique could similarly be found in The Girl. But Le Sueur nevertheless represents womanhood as embodied through the mother-child bond, both figurative-potential and actual, and as bourgeoning within the “model of ‘passing down’ knowledge from mother to daughter that is,” Halberstam argues, “quite clearly invested in white,

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 96.
\(^{114}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^{115}\) Ibid., 124.
gendered, and hetero normativity."¹¹⁶ Indeed, the opening paragraph of the *The Girl* establishes this narrative structure with the words “Mama had told me,”¹¹⁷ a structure that is reinforced when the Girl’s father dies, prompting her mother to recount to her what she knows about physical intimacy,¹¹⁸ and a structure that is constantly being erected throughout the novel by mother figures such as Belle and Amelia, who also pass down their knowledge about heterosexual intimacy to the Girl. I mention Le Sueur’s variety of feminism here to highlight that although there may exist an affinity between Halberstam’s call to inhabit the darkness and what I am arguing is Le Sueur’s call to inhabit abandonment, there also exists essential differences that undermine the confluence of queer failure and abandonment in *The Girl*.

Furthermore, the figures of queer failure present in Halberstam’s text stage “unbeing” and “unbecoming” as a critique of dominant narratives of success and successful self-constitution. But when Halberstam speaks of “being” as antithetical to “unbeing,” she means something different from and narrower than what the Girl means when she talks about not wanting success but just wanting to “be.” Halberstam defines being more strictly as “the self-activating, self-knowing liberal subject”; to be sure, the same subject that antagonizes the abandoned subject of *The Girl*.¹¹⁹ Yet *The Girl* brings

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¹¹⁷ Ibid., 1.
¹¹⁸ Ibid., 49; 54.
¹¹⁹ Halberstam understands “unbeing” as a form of radical passivity, which admittedly chafes against my earlier use of Arendt’s concept of “natality” as a lens through which to read motherhood in *The Girl*;
together a vocabulary of *bildung*—class-consciousness, subjectivity—with a narrative of bodies and voices that nevertheless fail to cohere, such that what is being and unbeing is ambiguous—an ambiguity (and an ambivalence) that the abandoned subject exemplifies. “Being” itself is a term, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, that refuses to cohere; it is, as Butch remarks, indefinite. The Girl understands being in terms of feeling good or “liking it”; this sense of being that fails to materialize when she first has sex with Butch finally presents itself in reproductive labor. “I could feel my blood like a river inside me, and my breast deep and thigh and womb ready for a new child, and strong labor for it and I liked it,”¹²⁰ she thinks. The Girl “is” at the same moment that she ruptures, literally and metaphorically: “I felt all the river broke in me and poured and gave and opened.”¹²¹ In the moment of childbirth, being and unbeing, or being and unbecoming, are the same.

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¹²¹ Ibid., 181.
3. Fugitive Ecologies

3.1 The Promise of Becoming

3.1.1 Fugitive Ecologies

The aesthetic of Meridel Le Sueur’s *The Girl* works, I have argued, to both resist and demand representation for the dispossessed subjects of the novel. Although the women in *The Girl* are already socially and economically marginalized, they further descend through the course of the novel into homelessness, and by the end of the novel, they are squatting in an abandoned warehouse. I described this squat, in my last chapter, as neither there nor not there in the sense that it exists outside of public awareness, beneath the economy of representation, but still constitutes an intervention into a dispossessory economic order. The women of *The Girl*, as I have argued, don’t want uplift; they just want to “be,” to inhabit the warehouse and, in that being, that inhabitation, they come to embody a social and economic practice counter to the logic of capitalism. In this way, Le Sueur tenders no resolution to the problem of representation; rather, the abandoned subjects of her novel remain paradoxically spectral in their being.

This aesthetic of what I’m calling habitat—the ambivalence toward representation, the geographies and the subject to which it is tethered—also operates, I will argue, in W.E.B. Du Bois’s first novel, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*. Published in 1911 but drafted as early as 1905, *Silver Fleece* tells the story of the development of black
capital in the Jim Crow South at the turn of the century. The story that Du Bois tells of this development begins in the swamp, on an island located beyond and obscured by what appears to be a dead end,¹ but an island which is nevertheless presented in the novel as a critical economic force. In other words, the swamp island, or hammock, in *Silver Fleece* and the warehouse squat in *The Girl* are sites that only abandoned subjects are able to perceive as habitats. ² Indeed, in *Silver Fleece*, only the abandoned subject is able to perceive this site at all.

*Silver Fleece* converges on two black youths, Bles and Zora, who, in order to grow their own cotton crop—the Silver Fleece—cultivate an unfarmed swamp hammock at the southern edge of the Cresswell cotton plantation. The Silver Fleece becomes the finest cotton crop in the fictional Tooms County, Alabama, in which the majority of the novel is set. The 50,000 acres of the Cresswell plantation make up the largest plantation in Tooms County, and Colonel Cresswell is the head of and force behind the Farmer’s League and one of the most influential planters in the Cotton Belt. The Cresswell plantation eclipses the neighboring plantations, as well as the adjoining Negro School that Miss Smith, a white New England woman, superintends. But on the hidden island in the Cresswell swamp—a hammock that lies within the plantation and yet is

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² Hammocks are isolated patches of land that protrude from watery environments and that withstand periodic inundation. Hammock soil is especially fertile. The island in the swamp where Bles and Zora grow their cotton would be a hammock. Although Du Bois does not use this terminology in *Silver Fleece*, I will use it here for the sake of descriptive efficiency.
inaccessible to the planters—a (mythic) economy counter to that of the debt and peonage of a powerful postbellum plantation system takes form. By the end of the novel, the young female protagonist, Zora, has emerged from her “wayward” years to become the title-holder of 200 acres of the Cresswell swamp, 20 acres of which she has cleared; she has built and resides in a settlement in that clearing, a settlement that functions in partnership with Miss Smith’s school and one that also boards several young girls. Her status as a subject is born out by the county court, which concedes her ownership of the settlement land when Col. Cresswell, from whom she purchased the land, at one point challenges the sale.

_Silver Fleece_ thus culminates with a markedly engineered and documented landscape, one that emerges through the intensive labor of the tenant farmers that come to inhabit it. This process of engineering in _Silver Fleece_ diverges radically from the quality of physical transformation of the warehouse squat in _The Girl_. This latter transformation is a consequence of, not groundwork for, the homeless women’s inhabitation of the abandoned warehouse. For instance, Le Sueur describes the holes that are burnt into the wood floors of the warehouse as a result of the fires that the women built on the floors to stay warm. I quoted this passage and discussed it at length in my last chapter. In this chapter, I will argue that the engineered environment that

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3 Du Bois, _Silver Fleece_, 27.
comes to sustain black capital in *Silver Fleece* is concomitant with and tied to the production of black subjectivity as an emergence both of and from black fugitivity.

Specifically, the transformation of a tract of swampland into a farmable and habitable landscape in *Silver Fleece* must be read in light of the environmental history of the region, a history that imagines the relationship between swampland and self-determination for African Americans to be grounded in the fundamental *uninhabitability* of the environment. The southeastern swamplands historically presented opportunities for escape from slavery and for the formation of temporary maroon communities that began “the progression to free Black settlements and the Underground Railroad.”

Tracing the natural history of these swamps, Monique Allewaert observes that swamps were regarded as navigable only for Africans and Indians but “described as unnavigable terrains” for “colonial armies and cartographers.” *Silver Fleece* is embedded within this discourse of the swamp as a specifically black geography, even if it affords only

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4 Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, *Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance* (Urbana; Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 103.


6 Much has already been written on both the symbolic and historical import of the southeastern swamplands for African Americans. European Americans introduced black labor to the swamp with the idea that Africans had more immunities to that environment than whites; Nelson observes that Africans often did, in fact, have more immunities, which they were able to use to their advantage in order to subvert European American intentions of subjugation by inhabiting the swamp as a site of refuge “where they could potentially lead independent lives.” Megan Kate Nelson, “Hidden Away in the Woods and Swamps: Slavery, Fugitive Slaves, and Swamplands in the Southeastern Borderlands, 1739-1845,” in “We Shall Independent Be”: *African American Place Making and the Struggle to Claim Space in The United States* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2008), 252.
provisional shelter. The watery and mercurial path through the Cresswell plantation swamp (prior to its being cleared), for example, allows Zora, who has an intimate knowledge of how, why, from and to what the swamp will change,\(^7\) to evade the exploitation of her white “master,”\(^8\) Harry Cresswell, by hiding from him “in the field of the Fleece”\(^9\) on the hidden hammock. Du Bois thus represents the swamp in its original unmappability as, more specifically, an asylum for the black female. Even Bles, entering the swamp for the first time, “toils in mad haste, struggling toward the road and losing it”\(^10\). And Zora, who later shows Bles the path through the swamp that leads to the hidden island, teases him for becoming anxious about the fickleness, or the “becoming” of the path itself, a path he cannot discern, in his masculinist disposition toward spatial organization, on his own.\(^11\)

Megan Kate Nelson argues that it was this “promise of alteration, of ‘becoming,’” that “Africans and African Americans embraced in their interaction with southeastern swamplands”\(^12\). Zora likewise takes refuge in the uncertainty, even the unreality,\(^13\) of

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\(^7\) *Silver Fleece*, 188.
\(^8\) Ibid., 127.
\(^9\) Ibid., 69.
\(^10\) Ibid., 3.
\(^11\) Ibid., 53.
\(^13\) I say “unreality” because Du Bois, as I will show later in this chapter, ultimately suggests that in order for something to be real or actual, it must hold some kind of common or commercial value, that is, value on a scale large enough to bind disparate and even antagonistic populations together. Cotton, for example, holds global value as a product, and as the fulfilled promise, of agricultural labor. A deeper examination of the “actual” here might consult Hannah Arendt, who, I would argue, defines “worldly reality” essentially as a
her environment. Her unique capacity to take refuge in becoming and her capacity, by extension, to navigate the way through the swamp legitimizes her as the heroine of *Silver Fleece* because, historically, to be able to navigate one’s way through the swamp is to be able to navigate what Du Bois calls “the Way” out of slavery.

Du Bois thus unambiguously evokes in *Silver Fleece* a history of fugitive action within the southeastern swamplands, action that was viable for slaves and peons largely because of their ability to traverse, in contrast to Anglo-Europeans, the fugitivity, or the becoming, of the ecosystem itself. In this way, Du Bois also illustrates that the fugitive actions that took place within these environments, though having their origins for the black population in slavery, persisted in the post-Reconstruction south because, as Saidiya Hartman points out, the postbellum economy was merely “the reorganization of the plantation system” rather than “self-possession, citizenship or liberty for the ‘freed’” 14. To be sure, Zora’s initial efforts in *Silver Fleece* toward economic self-determination only leave her, as I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter, indebted to the Cresswells, and she is made to choose between going “‘to the fields or to the chain-

form of commerce, although she does not actually use this latter term. Returning to a citation of Arendt in my second chapter, for something to be real, it must be able to “be seen in a variety of aspects without changing [its] identity.” Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 57. In other words, Zora’s watery environment, while no doubt real to her, still poses a problem of representation, where I understand representation as having exchange-value.

gang’” 15. But through her efforts, the swamp continues to function for Zora in its historical role as a chance for refuge and freedom from exploitation.

Considering the strategic intimacies with the swamp that an environment intractable to the enfranchised made possible to the subjugated, there is a note of regret in Du Bois’s narration of Zora’s consciousness as she sits and observes the swamp after 20 acres of its forest has been felled in order to accommodate tenant farms meant to sustain, rather than crush, black life in a way that is also economically competitive on the global market. Sustainability, then, is a term the meaning of which I am setting specifically against the historical backdrop of extemporized and short-lived black fugitive communities that formed in the swamp prior to emancipation, as well as of many other conditional modes of inhabitation that endured among debt peons during Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction. And so in Silver Fleece, the felling of the swamp forest, this becoming-geographical, marks a departure, in the dual sense of that word, from the history of fugitivity that the swamp calls up. The materialization in Silver Fleece of the relationship between resistance of and demand for representation, which, this study argues, is fundamental to the formation of habitats of abandonment, thus takes a conspicuously different form from that of The Girl.16 Primarily, although Du Bois shares

15 Du Bois, Silver Fleece, 163.
16 Silver Fleece, contending with black labor in the Jim Crow south, arose out of and sought to transform a racial and economic history of dispossession that lies outside of the scope of Le Sueur’s feminist proletarian novel as discussed in the previous chapter.
Le Sueur’s ambivalence toward the economy of representation, the stakes of representation for a disenfranchised black working-class in \textit{Silver Fleece} nevertheless, Du Bois suggests, calls for a verdict; Du Bois ultimately decides in favor of the uplift project, albeit one that does not further displace blacks but rather takes place within a black geography. Consistent with the uplift project, \textit{Silver Fleece} commits itself to a narrative trajectory that ends with the formation of the citizen-subject in heterosexual union.

Whereas the squat in \textit{The Girl} is both there and not there insofar as it remains illicit, Zora’s settlement in \textit{Silver Fleece} establishes a representable and, indeed, a formally represented landscape out of what was previously secreted, unmappable swampland.

Zora’s settlement thus transforms the swamp, a historically fugitive zone that offered escape routes and opportunities for petit-marronage precisely because it “stymied the cartographer,” which is to say, it existed beneath the economy of representation, into “a swamp in name only” \textsuperscript{17}, or a representation of the swamp as the obliteration of the swamp itself. To exist in name only is to exist as only a representation. This is the predicament that \textit{Silver Fleece} takes up. The swamp offered the promise of becoming, as Nelson formulates it, to African Americans seeking refuge from exploitative labor and sexual abuse, yet such refuge was characteristically provisional. Even Zora must occasionally return to her mother Elspeth’s cabin “for talking and

\textsuperscript{17} Du Bois, \textit{Silver Fleece}, 330.
eating.” In *Silver Fleece*, Du Bois hails the significance of but wants to surpass such provisional, non-representational practices. *Silver Fleece* submits that in the post-Reconstruction era, black resistance must ultimately embrace representative practices. Specifically, a group economy based on sustainable farming—conversant with and yet quite literally destructive of the fugitive ecologies of prior black resistance—is necessary to challenge structural dispossession.

Elizabeth Povinelli argues in *Economies of Abandonment* that those who have been abandoned by the state “lie on the cusp of being,” a persistence in being that constitutes an economy of its own. To persist in one’s being is to embody potentiality, exclusive of subjectivity, which is to say, one’s being is nevertheless unrepresented, at least not along the dominant channels of legibility. Zora’s tendency to wander and her strategic relationship to the swamp might offer an example of what Povinelli would call an economy of abandonment. Zora is often present within the arena of action of the novel, but cannot quite be “placed.” Wandering is an embodiment of potentiality in this way, and as a mode of evasion, it also signals Zora’s resistance to exploitative labor, which is to say, wage labor in general. Shortly after Zora becomes indebted to the Cresswells and is left with the choice between working in the fields or on the chain-gang, Mrs. Vanderpool, an acquaintance of the Cresswells and potential investor in Miss

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18 Ibid., 27.
Smith’s Negro School, coincidentally asks Miss Smith if she would be able to hire Zora as her maid. Miss Smith sees in this request a chance for Zora to escape her slavery to the Cresswells, explaining to Mrs. Vanderpool: “‘Slavery of soul and body awaits her’ and that Zora “must go away” 21. But when Mrs. Vanderpool asks Miss Smith where Zora is at that moment, Miss Smith can only guess about where she might be, could be, but does not know where Zora, who in her wandering enacts “the irregular rhythms of ordinary movements” 22, is. Miss Smith responds, “I do not know . . . She’s given to wandering” 23. Zora’s is a way of being there and not there at the same time, destabilizing the spatial logic of the plantation, which is landscaped to maximize order and, therefore, control insofar as that uncompromising order makes everything traceable and locatable, leaving potential sites of resistance exposed and therefore neutralized.

Zora’s wandering in Silver Fleece is like wandering in The Girl; what the Girl describes as a form of “being,” Zora describes as living that “just comes free” 24, in opposition to Miss Taylor’s efforts to regulate her through labor. Again, this kind of being operates through abundance (it costs nothing) but within scarcity (debt peonage and the economic realities of sharecropping preclude it).

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21 Ibid., 167.
23 Du Bois, Silver Fleece, 167.
24 Ibid., 51.
These economies give rise, Povinelli argues, to alternative projects, such as the alternative geographies that emerge from the efforts of the disenfranchised to inhabit what is uninhabitable. Yet, while Du Bois celebrates the potentiality harbored within dispossession, as both an idea and a reality, he is also concerned with the realization of such projects. *Silver Fleece* is fruitful for this study because through it Du Bois inhabits a dilemma that has informed recent scholarly debates within critical race theory, debates about whether a critical race methodology should address political potentiality, concerned with the daily tactics of not-quite publics and the “infrapolitical”\(^{25}\) dimension of resistance that is not easily discernable, or actuality, concerned with long-term strategy and the public engagement with recognized political institutions. When I say that Du Bois inhabits this dilemma in *Silver Fleece*, I mean that, although his novel is about the process of becoming a subject—taking one’s place within the economy of representation—*Silver Fleece* is just as much about the ambivalence and even regret over what is surrendered upon such actualization, as a result of the hermetic and hermeneutic nature of subjectivity.

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\(^{25}\) In *Race Rebels*, Robin Kelley borrows this term from James Scott, who defines the infrapolitical as “the circumspect struggle waged daily by subordinate groups” and which is, “like infrared rays, beyond the visible end of the spectrum. That it should be invisible . . . is in large part by design - a tactical choice born of a prudent awareness of the balance of power.” James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1990), 183.
This chapter focuses on two crucial moments in *Silver Fleece* in which Zora attempts to exploit the “motile, invisible infrastructures” of historically fugitive swampland in order to liberate herself from the local plantation economy. In other words, these moments capture the problem of trying to become represented or representative, to become a subject, by inhabiting a space that stands in opposition to representational projects. The two scenes in *Silver Fleece* that this chapter examines are characterized, more specifically, by moments in which Zora’s activity in the swamp gets entered into the written record. The written record is a significant medium because it is antagonistic to the disenfranchised as long as Zora and the majority of black tenant farmers in the county cannot read or write. This record further makes Zora’s activity legible to the archive and therefore available for historical reconstruction, if not actually stored in the archive itself.

The first moment takes place after Zora and Bles have secretly planted cotton seed in the swamp hammock; when Zora later attempts, as a tenant farmer, to sell the cotton to the Cresswells, Harry Cresswell uses the opportunity to fabricate numbers in his written account to indebt her, binding her as a peon to the plantation. Here, Du Bois inverts the formula I identified in *The Girl*, in which practices of abandonment exist largely outside of and against the economy of representation. In *Silver Fleece*, economic

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and political abandonment is in fact an effect of representation, of the written record, and it takes place when fugitive actions encounter the archival logic of written records.

The second moment comes near the end of the novel, when Zora buys 200 acres of swampland from Col. Cresswell. Despite writing Zora a receipt for the purchase, Col. Cresswell later refutes in court her claim that he sold her the land, testifying that he only leased the land to her as a tenant farmer. Their initial transaction consequently becomes court record, with the receipt of sale presented to the court, which upholds Zora’s title to the 200 acres of swampland. In both of these watersheds in Silver Fleece, Zora’s autonomy is jeopardized when her participation in an informal economy and inhabitation of non-representational spaces become incorporated into the official, public record. For Du Bois, I will argue, one has to traverse such moments of dispossession—of abandonment—in order to repossess. In other words, the object—the Fleece or the swamp, for example—has to be represented as possessable in the first place, which is to say it has to become an object, and this becoming involves a stage of further dispossession.

This chapter argues, first, that in their encounter with archival logic, the historically fugitive spaces of black geographies (a term I will trouble) become politically abandoned spaces. By archival logic, I mean, briefly, white practices of documentation, which should be distinguished from, though it encompasses, the archive itself, that is, public records and planned systems of historical preservation. Yet for Du Bois, it is also
only through this encounter and in this moment of abandonment that dispossession is
either re-inscribed or resisted (similar to Miss Smith’s opinion that Zora’s going away
with Mrs. Vanderpool to escape peonage “may make or ruin her”), and, in the latter
case, more sustainable agricultural and therefore economic practices can be introduced.
Second, this chapter argues that sustainable development in Silver Fleece problematically
functions according to archival logic, which has historically sought to preserve and
sustain objects through, as Hartman observes, a racially motivated process of exclusion.
This process also unfolds in the colonial history of the region: colonization of the U.S.
South operated through the disenfranchisement enabled by definitions of property and
productivity, which were rooted in a conception of sustainable development. The regret
that Zora feels over the (necessary) destruction of fugitivity through its incorporation
into a representational and specifically archival logic reflects Du Bois’s deep
ambivalence toward the stakes of both sustainability and the racial uplift that
sustainable agricultural development facilitates.

When Bles and Zora decide that they will secretly grow the Silver Fleece in
Cresswell’s swamp in order to earn enough money to send Zora to school, they agree
they won’t actually try to sell the crop without the Cresswell’s knowing. They decide
that when it is time to sell their cotton, they will ”just take it to [the Cresswells] and give

27 Du Bois, Silver Fleece, 167.
them half, like the other tenants.” But when Bles discovers that Zora was prostituted as a child and is not “pure,” he abandons her before the cotton is ready to pick, and Zora reaps and sells the cotton by herself. The moment of the swamp’s integration into an archival (and I will later argue geographical) logic arrives when Zora delivers the Fleece—a crop that will come to signify the potential for the latent power of the black working-class to be organized—to the Cresswell store to sell. She expects to give the Cresswells half, which is what the other tenant farmers give of their crop. Harry Cresswell enters the transaction into his “great ledger,” comparing the check for the weight of Zora’s cotton against numbers he has fabricated, leaving Zora twenty-five dollars in the Cresswells’ debt. Harry effectively steals the Silver Fleece from Zora by arbitrarily charging her “five years’ back debt” on Zora’s mother Elspeth’s cabin and rations. The archive gives Zora away, both in the sense that it makes her a “peon bound to her master’s bidding” and in the sense that a representational logic exposes her to abandonment.

A small detail about this turning point in the narrative—that the novel doesn’t make known that Elspeth pays no rent until this moment, when Zora attempts to sell her fleece—colors the import of the transaction. Elspeth’s cabin in mid-swamp—the

28 Ibid., 52.
29 Ibid., 143.
30 Ibid., 142.
"cabin crouched ragged and black at the edge of black waters"\textsuperscript{31}—in which Zora lives with Elspeth is in effect a squat—it literally squats "in the centre [sic] of the wilderness"\textsuperscript{32}—because Elspeth doesn't pay rent to the Cresswells, who own that land. Elspeth uses the cabin as a brothel, offering up young girls and women, including Zora, as sex workers to Harry Cresswell and his friends. This service explains why the Cresswells don't require Elspeth to pay rent. The sexual economy in which Elspeth participates is entirely informal and unreported, and its operations are carried out in the darkness, as Elspeth's cabin comes alive only at night.

Du Bois's description of the cabin as "crouched ragged"\textsuperscript{33} dramatizes its conditional and makeshift being—crouched as if attempting to conceal itself; to be crouched is a mode of transition. As an "old hut,"\textsuperscript{34} it shelters its squatters from the outdoors without quite constituting a discrete interior. Likewise, Zora, whose true home is out of doors, treats Elspeth's cabin merely as a "port of calling for talking and eating."\textsuperscript{35} But not until Zora introduces the swamp's harvest into the formal economy does Elspeth's cabin become codified as a squat. I would argue that prior to Harry Cresswell's charging Zora back debt on rent, it could be said that Elspeth's cabin squatted, that it

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 154.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 2.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 27.
was "squat"—indicating its becoming—but it could not have been reified as a squat—already having become. Harry Cresswell retroactively codifies the cabin as a squat by bringing it, paradoxically, into the formal economy as a tenant farmer’s cabin. This new designation binds Zora’s swamp hammock and the cotton that it yields, an independent project, to Elspeth’s cabin and the sexual exploitation of young black women that takes place there. In this case, representation—the disclosure of a formerly covert agricultural project and the entry of its product into the written record—reinscribes Zora as a debtor.

That Harry Cresswell captures the agricultural potential of the Cresswell swamp in his ledger functions to document the resistance that Zora practices through her inhabitation of the swamp, but without returning to her the resources she needs to leave it. This stage of further dispossession, effected by an injurious form of representation that gives Zora away in the dual sense of the phrase, and which is bound up with and, indeed, stems from Bles’s desertion of Zora directly resulting from her rape and former circulation within a sexual economy, is the manifestation, in Silver Fleece, of what I am calling abandonment. Furthermore, Harry Cresswell’s response to Zora’s undermining of the dispossessory spatial logic of the U.S. South reveals abandonment as simultaneously an effect of representation yet preceding representation, that which circumscribes becoming. Or put another way, abandonment precedes the archive only as

36 Ibid., 154.
an effect of the archive. Through the retroactive classification of Elspeth’s cabin as a squat, the hammock upon which Zora grew the Silver Fleece shifts from a fugitive—an attempt to smuggle “the Way” to personal freedom—to an abandoned space. For Du Bois, however, the entanglement of economic, political, and interpersonal dispossession that characterizes this moment also establishes the position from which the abandoned black female can assert her historical role as a champion for the uplift of her race.

3.1.2 Becoming-Geographical

I have argued that the swamp hammock on which Bles and Zora grow the fleece exists, borrowing Povinelli’s words, on the cusp of being. An alternate formulation might be found in Hortense Spiller’s description of “not-quite spaces,” a formulation that has been further developed by multiple African-Americanist scholars to underpin a theory of black geography. Spillers’ concept of “not-quite spaces” comes from her analysis of Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative, specifically of the garret in which Jacobs hid for nearly a decade. Spillers describes the garret as a not-quite space because its existence and its function as a hideaway are unknown to the planter from whom Jacobs hides, thus facilitating a fugitivity that lives in the heart of and is antagonistic to the plantation. Like the warehouse squat in The Girl and like the hammock in Silver Fleece, the garret, as part of a hidden geography of resistance, is both there and not there. In

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I draw mostly on Katherine McKittrick’s response, in Demonic Grounds, to Spiller’s writing on this topic.
Silver Fleece the swamp is also a geography claimed by black life, especially the lives of
black women, for sojourn precisely because of the resistance that its ephemerality and its obscurity enable.

Among the forms of such resistant and spectral geographies in the novel are what Zora calls “dreams.” The hidden hammock, Zora tells a puzzled Bles, is “where the dreams lives.” As a dream geography, difficult to comprehend, murky, thorny and constantly shifting, the swamp remains obscure to the logic of transparency—overt boundaries and fixed sites that betray an assumption that geography is “readily knowable”—that characterizes the dominant spatial practices and landscape of a plantation economy. As Katherine McKittrick and many others have pointed out, these transparent geographies reiterate racist and sexist hierarchies by giving “a coherency and rationality to uneven geographic processes and arrangements” that privilege and mirror “white, heterosexual, capitalist, and patriarchal geopolitical needs.” The Cresswell swamp, which lies on the edge of the plantation, is a not-quite space insofar as it is never the same space but is, rather, “always moving . . . always restless and

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38 Du Bois, Silver Fleece, 54.
39 Katherine McKittrick, Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 5.
40 Ibid., 6. A great deal has been written on plantation geographies; it is not within the scope of this project to review that scholarship here.
changing” 41, betraying the dissolution that continually threatens the spatial logic of the plantation and its borders.

Similarly, all of the black women in Silver Fleece who reside in the swamp (which includes almost all of the black women in the novel) are illegitimate figures. Zora is impure, Elspeth is a conjure woman, Bertie is a prostitute, and Bertie’s daughter, Emma, is Harry Cresswell’s illegitimate child and, for most of the novel, unacknowledged heir of the Cresswell plantation. As such, Du Bois understands black women as sites of an alternative form of knowing, and associates black femininity both with the unintelligible landscapes they inhabit and with the geographical negotiation integral to that inhabitation. Zora’s understanding of geography as negotiable is clear in her propensity to discover hidden paths through the swamp, paths that those who assume geography is transparent, which includes Bles, could never identify. The field of the Fleece, for example, is secreted deep within "the half-dead forest" of the swamp, on the other side of "a great silent lake of slimy ooze," and is accessible only by climbing across the "dead trunk of a fallen tree" that serves as a bridge to the island. 42 When Bles approaches the fallen tree, he sees only “the end,” 43 or, a dead-end, until Zora shows him how to scramble “upon the tree trunk” to reach the other side. 44

41 Du Bois, Silver Fleece, 188.
42 Ibid., 54.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
In *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick clandestine spaces and the practices that form those spaces have unfairly been perceived as "non-geographic." McKittrick’s critique of the perception of some spaces and some beings as non-geographic is thus bound to her critique of transparent space; to consider the subaltern spatial practices of a disenfranchised population as non-geographic is to already assume that geography is always transparent, "readily knowable, bound up with ideologies and activities that work to maintain a safe socioeconomic clarity."\(^{45}\) Black geographies, in other words, render what qualifies as geographical contestable. Likewise, Bles and Zora’s guerilla farming in *Silver Fleece* constitutes a spatial practice that undermines the dominant geographic and therefore socioeconomic logic, one that upholds and is produced by a dispossessory economic order. The Cresswells react to this contest by using Zora’s disclosure of this alternative geography to re-subjugate the land and the dispossessed people who inhabit it.

McKittrick’s assertion that the black population in the U.S. south had their *own* geographies and their *own* sense of place insists on a conception of ownership that is unconstrained by the market, one that’s based on spatial strategies rather than socioeconomic possession or political-economic representation. Geography is a form of practical knowing for McKittrick. *Silver Fleece*, however, troubles the use of the term

\(^{45}\) McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, 5.
“geography” to describe subaltern spatialities. There is a qualitative difference between the black geographies characterized by clandestine spatial tactics that preclude representation, undoing its own status as writing (the “graphy” or geography), and geography that is bound to formal ownership, substantiated by the archive.

The swamp is a space of black resistance and fugitivity precisely because it is uninhabitable and unmappable, and that Du Bois represents the swamp in Silver Fleece as, specifically, a hideaway for the black female—Zora. Essays like Allewaert’s “Swamp Sublime” and Nelson’s “Hidden Away in the Woods and Swamps” describe the natural conditions of the swamplands—primarily its variability and apparent disorganization—that let it become a site of black and native resistance to white domination. But on a theoretical level, what made the swamp such an uninhabitable or unlivable space for the white population, Allewaert argues, was its hostility to a mode of being, importantly one grounded in print culture, that differentiated the subject from the object. The swamplands challenge one’s ability to distinguish between subject and object, according to Allewaert. This orientation is born out in Silver Fleece, in which the swamp is a topography not of people and things but of “dreams” and “devils” amongst which Zora “creeps.”46 "One night" she tells Bles, "a devil come to me on blue fire out of a big red

46 Du Bois, Silver Fleece, 6.
flower that grows in the south swamp.”47 Zora’s refusal, in this manner, to consign the swampland and its ecology to the status of an object initially scares Bles away.

This “political and aesthetic tradition distinguishing persons—in particular, white colonial subjects—from the objects and terrains they surveyed”48 has, of course, disenfranchised and objectified those who are not counted among persons—non-white colonized subjects. The swamp, as a counter-aesthetic, disables these “taxonomies distinguishing the human from the animal from the vegetable from the atmospheric.”49 Allewaert argues that this ecological practice was closely linked to marronage. For example, in Silver Fleece, Zora’s hiding out is motivated by and imbued with her understanding of all life in the swamp as occupying the status of persons, not things—“little people,”50 she calls them. Allewaert calls this non-hierarchical “assemblage of interpenetrating forces”51 “ecology.”

Silver Fleece prompts me to question the project of recovering what has been perceived as non-geographic for geography because, I argue, the latter is bound to mappability and thus to the archive. Even McKittrick’s project is ultimately one of recovery—recovery for the sake of making public the very spaces that existed only by virtue of their obscurity, unclaimed by the archive. For instance, historians attempting to

47 Ibid., 28.
49 Ibid.
50 Du Bois, Silver Fleece, 188.
write about the spatial practices of slaves who used their knowledge of the swamp to escape have difficulty determining precise routes because, as Megan Kate Nelson observes,

silence kept anyone who aided in the escape alive and cleared the path for those who would subsequently run. Silence also served to obfuscate the path to freedom itself; Georgia officials suspected that fugitives utilized swamplands as escape routes, but without concrete information, they could not possibly pinpoint particular swamplands and thus could not hope to prevent their appropriation by runaways.52

The swamp as a site of unrepresentability, or as an anarchive, calls into question its status as a geography proper, if one understands geography not merely as synonymous with the specificities of place, but as, more specifically, writing about and representations of space; which is to say, geography is born archival. Indeed, the problem of both representation (what gets and doesn’t get to be represented) and representability (what can and cannot be represented) is general to any discussion of dispossession because being in dispossession is bound to illegitimacy and criminality.

Fugitive actions based in ecological knowledge, such as marronage and petite-marronage, still derive from systematic violence and disenfranchisement. In Silver Fleece, specifically, fugitivity is a condition of the sexual exploitation and objectification of young black women, the locus of which is Elspeth’s cabin, squatting in center of, making possible, the wilderness of the swamp. This problem of fugitivity and the ecological

matters for thinking about why in *Silver Fleece* one needs to pass through abandonment in the first place, and why in abandonment, dispossession is either reinscribed or broken. In *Silver Fleece*, to become abandoned is to become possessable, if not possessed. Zora, sexually exploited as a child but still unbehendon to the plantation, is thus abandoned the moment she sells her labor and Harry Cresswell makes her a peon. The swamp, property of the Cresswells but inaccessible and inassessable to them, becomes an abandoned space the moment Harry records its cotton yield in his ledger, immediately transforming the swamp from an idle wilderness to a tenant farm.

This cooption of the ecological into the hierarchal relationships built on a possessive dichotomy between subject and object is a becoming-geographical. *Silver Fleece* represents the stages of becoming-geographical—the formation, for example, of a cooperative tenant farming system\(^53\)—as the precondition of African-American economic and political self-enfranchisement.

*Silver Fleece*, portrays the burgeoning of the subject, which is, I’m arguing, inextricably linked to becoming-geographical in the novel, as a dilemma, notably when Zora and Bles first begin to hoe their first cotton crop. Du Bois writes of the Silver Fleece:

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\(^53\) The economic model that Bles and Zora develop is both cooperative and hierarchical. The swampland will partially be worked on shares, and the board of trustees will be made up of the farmers who buy the few available 20 acre farms. In *Sitting in the Darkness*, Peter Schmidt describes Zora’s settlement as “an attempt at capitalist vertical organization and economics of scale so as to be competitive in larger markets.” Peter Schmidt, *Sitting in the Darkness: New South Fiction, Education, and the Rise of Jim Crow Colonialism, 1865-1920* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2008), 198.
“It had seemingly bounded forward in a night and it must be hoed forthwith. Yet, hoeing was murder—the ruthless cutting away of tenderer plants that the sturdier might thrive the more and grow.”\textsuperscript{54} Zora expresses regret for this fact, telling Bles, “‘But it shouldn’t be so; everything ought to have a chance to be beautiful and useful,’” to which Bles responds, also with regret, that “‘[d]eath and pain pay for all good things.’”\textsuperscript{55} This kind of making habitable in \textit{The Quest} is a question of tractability and seems to necessitate regulating the capacity of the terrain to change on its own and limiting its overabundance of resources. To clear the swamp, to make it farmable and not just habitable but livable in a sustainable way rather than as temporary shelter for \textit{marronage}, entails an act of circumscription that limits the terrain’s abandon.

I use “abandon” here in the sense that Jean-Luc Nancy uses the word, as an overabundance and as the "profusion of possibilities"\textsuperscript{56} to which abandoned being opens itself. The swamp originally exemplifies this mode of being; when Zora first meets Bles, both still children, she tells him that "‘. . . behind the swamps is great fields full of dreams, piled high and burning.’”\textsuperscript{57} Zora’s pluralization of the swamp as “swamps” and her report of the profusion of “dreams,” that is, “profusion of possibilities,” attests to the abundance and abandon of swamp life. Bles and Zora’s spading and bedding of the

\textsuperscript{54} Du Bois, \textit{Silver Fleece}, 93.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{56} Nancy, \textit{Birth to Presence}, 37.
\textsuperscript{57} Du Bois, \textit{Silver Fleece}, 6.
swamp hammock and, later, hoeing the crop, are geographical acts because they are attempts at the realization of one possibility from a profusion of possibilities. These acts also clear the path for self-realization in the novel, which Du Bois describes in Silver Fleece as a “self-mastery; a veiling of the self even in intimate talk.” Bles expresses the same ambivalence toward Zora’s self-mastery as Zora expresses toward agricultural processes. When Bles returns to Tooms County from Washington D.C. later in the novel, he finds Zora has changed physically and mentally. He perceives Zora’s transformation “with a pang,” as “the innocence and wonder of the child . . .” had gone.

The geographical acts that lead to the cultivation of the Cresswell swamp are qualitatively distinct from other forms of black environmental resistance and mark a significant shift in the novel from environmental tactics to geographical strategy. Megan Kate Nelson, for example, discusses running away as “an act of environmental knowledge and use” for slaves, who depended on the “varying water levels and rapid vegetative growth” of swamplands for “both concealment and abundance of resources.” The constantly shifting boundaries of this terrain, however, also made it difficult “for gangs of runaways to subsist for long periods of time in swampy places.”

58 Ibid., 294.
59 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 258.
62 Ibid., 259.
Whatever independence the southeastern swamplands afforded slaves and peons was, therefore, transitory and insecure, with “pillaging or looting of local plantations” supplementing the economy of these maroon communities.

While Bles and Zora rely on the rising of the “black still waters” to conceal their undertaking, and though Zora steals a mule from the Cresswells after dark in order to clear the hammock, their efforts to grow their own cotton crop are ultimately efforts to, for instance, regulate water levels. They construct dykes around the hammock and Zora drains the swamp “in its deepest fastness” in order to protect the crop from ruin. This process and the bloody and painful labor it calls for only make sense as a long-term venture that will result in some form of advancement. Indeed, Bles and Zora carry out this labor in order to pay for Zora to attend Miss Smith’s school. The planting and growing of the Silver Fleece is markedly not the foraging of a provisional society but is, rather, a fundamental transformation of the object material of nature and a commitment not only to making an uninhabitable space habitable but also geographical, which is to say, ultimately mappable. Putting the agricultural potential of the Cresswell swamp on the map is precisely what Bles and Zora’s growing and selling of the cotton accomplishes—an early, partial mapping bound up with Bles’s desertion of Zora and the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{63}}\text{Ibid.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{64}}\text{Du Bois, Silver Fleece, 66.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{65}}\text{Ibid., 114.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{66}}\text{Ibid., 64.}\]
Cresswell’s indebting her. But it is also this early abandonment that provides the necessary conditions toward later self-actualization and economic liberation.

Du Bois’s fiction attempts not to solve but to inhabit the dilemma at the heart of becoming-geographical: that while these populations sought out and drew agency from unrepresentable spaces and relied on unrepresented practices, this seeking out and this reliance was compulsory to the extent that such populations were already politically unrepresented. This dilemma informs what is at stake, for Du Bois, in the clearing of the swamp and building of Zora’s settlement. My critique of McKittrick is only that in her efforts to recover black spatialities, she does not fully account for this dilemma—that geography seems to inevitably circle back to, specifically, writing about space, or representations of space, and that the desire to make geographical the ungeographic risks rendering those very spaces and practices one seeks to recover impossible. Habitat and inhabiting, concepts at the core of this study, are, as geography is for McKittrick, concepts through which to identify spatial practice and strategy as the basis for “owning” or claiming that space. But in the context of Silver Fleece, they are also concepts through which to examine the potentially destructive implications of thinking geographically. This study asks how the concept of habitat might bump up against efforts, such as McKittrick’s and Du Bois’s in Silver Fleece, to recover people and places as geographical.
3.1.3 Wasted Land

Col. Cresswell begins to take the potential value of his swampland into account only after it yields Zora the finest bales of cotton that Tooms County has seen. The assessment that John Taylor delivers one day to Col. Cresswell that the swampland is "going to waste" is an effect of its becoming incorporated into a geographical logic, which is to say, valued within a colonial economy. Waste or wasted-land, in this context, seems to be the remainder of fugitivity’s encounter with the archive, of the swamp hammock that yields the Silver Fleece being put on the map without the swamp having been made mappable (cleared and cultivated) or having been “settled.”

*The Silver Fleece* imagines that the particular relationship between blackness and abandonment in the U.S. south has its origins in swamp life. Black abandon, within disenfranchisement and expropriation, underpins this relationship. The discourse around blackness has commonly linked it to abandon through, for example, the grievance of white planters that, as Col. Cresswell asserts, "[n]iggers won’t work" — that their slaves, peons or hired laborers dodge work for play and must, therefore, be forced to work or tricked into working. Col. Cresswell only agrees to sell Zora 200 acres of swampland because, though he has come to realize that it is “prime cotton-land,” he believes that the only way “‘to get decent work out of some niggers’” to clear the swamp

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67 Ibid., 281.
68 Ibid.
“is to let them believe they’re buying land. In nine cases out of ten,” he tells his son-in-law John Taylor, “he works hard a while and then throws up the job. We get back our land and he makes good wages for his work.”

This association of blackness and abandon is not merely part of a racist discourse on black labor. Many black writers and scholars have understood black abandon—a form, I’d argue, of inhabiting abandonment—as also a form of resistance to white domination. When Mary Taylor attempts to lecture Zora that her people must learn to work harder, Zora responds:

"Do you know my people? They don’t never work; they plays. They is all little, funny dark people. They flies and creeps and crawls, slippery-like; and they cries and calls. Ah, my people! my poor little people! they misses me these days, because they is shadowy things that sing and smell and bloom in dark and terrible nights—"

The language of the above passage presents blackness as both faunal—"[t]hey flies and creeps and crawls"—and floral—they "smell and bloom." For Zora, blackness as abandon, rather than subduing the constantly shifting terrain of the southeast, and against the exertion of control over space and people that the hierarchical plantation landscape stages, constitutes an inhabiting rather than settling of the swamp.

John Taylor’s configuration of the Cresswell swamp as a wasteland because it is fertile but not yet farmable occurs around the same time that Zora resolves to buy the

69 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 51.
swamp. Zora, too, realizes that the swamp is going to waste, not as a site of accumulation but as a site of resistance to white domination. Zora had never thought of the swamp as wasted land earlier in the novel, even when she and Bles cultivated a small patch of it, because she still valued it in its “abandon.” The articulation of the swamp as wasted, or abandoned, land accompanies a conception of property, which Zora doesn’t acquire until she travels north in Mrs. Vanderpool’s service. Abandonment is an effect of the archive in the same way that wasted land is an articulation of formal possession, upheld by the public record. In order to recover the abandoned land for the black community, then, Zora’s agricultural project must be legitimized (which is to say, institutionalized) and must be extended to the full 200 acres that she purchases from Col. Cresswell.

Taylor’s argument that the Cresswell swamp is going to waste, embedded within the themes in the novel around property, labor, and “Jim Crow Colonialism,” draws from John Locke’s definition of property in his Second Treatise. In his chapter “On Property,” Locke argues that private property is generated through labor such that labor creates “a distinction between [the laborer] and common.” This definition of property

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71 Peter Schmidt defines Jim Crow Colonialism in terms of the uplift projects that were used to justify both Jim Crow policies in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction U.S. South and also U.S. colonial projects abroad. Silver Fleece, Schmidt argues, “marks a key phase in Du Bois’s thinking as he begins to conceptualize the U.S. South’s economic and racial problems in transnational terms, as symptoms of a great global struggle to make multinational capitalism more democratic and less monopolistic.” Schmidt, Sitting in the Darkness: New South Fiction, Education, and the Rise of Jim Crow Colonialism, 1865-1920, 194.

72 “The Second Treatise: An Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government,” in Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration, ed. Ian Shapiro, Rethinking the Western
bolstered the colonial practice of theft and disenfranchisement of peoples charged with having failed to cultivate the land. Colonel Cresswell thus borrows Taylor’s words in order to justify his plan to sell the swamp to Zora with the intention of stealing it back once, he assumes, she fails to properly cultivate it. The same notion of property, however, also reinforced Reconstructionist arguments that the black working-class had a right to repossess land in the U.S. South, since the same African Americans had labored on and therefore increased the value of that land. Zora’s new consciousness that the political, as well as economic, potentiality of the swamp is being neglected signals her having adopted a liberal conception of property, one that was absent or left unarticulated prior to her travels north.

Zora’s logic poses the question of how what I am calling habitat and the practice of inhabiting, as defined at the beginning of this chapter and throughout this study, fits within the colonial framework of the southern plantation economy as portrayed in Silver Fleece. The moments of inhabitation in this novel are, with a few exceptions, not usually, moments of cultivation but rather moments, as Zora describes it to Miss Smith, of flying,

Tradition (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2003), 112. This enclosure (Ibid. 113) from the common further anticipates Nancy’s vocabulary in Birth to Presence of the production of subjectivity via representation as a form of enclosure.

73 To be sure, uplift in the postbellum south concentrated on two major mutually reinforcing projects: facilitating land redistribution and black education. For example, though underfunded, understaffed, short-lived, and though the success of its efforts were uneven across territories, the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (aka the Freedmen’s Bureau) built, between 1865 and 1872, thousands of schools for black children and attempted to settle former slaves on lands that had been confiscated or abandoned during the war.
creeping, and crawling, or moments of abandon—wandering, hiding, squatting, and resting beneath oak trees. The colonial imagination and definition of property to which *Silver Fleece* ultimately nods come to overshadow these practices of inhabitation in the novel. Earlier in the novel, Zora related to the swampland as to a habitat; by the point she resolves to purchase 200 of its acres, she relates to it as to a geography. I have argued that Du Bois portrays the recovery of abandoned lands as, at first, resulting in further dispossession—specifically, a dispossession that compels one who has operated within the non-proprietary mode of the ecological to re-approach land as possessable. The colonial vocabulary of settlement and the ideal of the creation of property through cultivation comes to replace the vocabulary of habitat in *Silver Fleece*, marking the dislocation of the enclosure of the peasant on private-land by the enclosure that accompanies the formation of the (black) subject. At the center of this simultaneous dislocation and reproduction of the colonial project is the black female.

### 3.1.4 Archival Failure

The history of the marginalization of black interests has rightly motivated scholarship that seeks to recover the hidden histories and practices of African Americans. In *Scenes of Subjection*, for example, Saidiya Hartman argues that efforts to reconstruct marginalized histories require "turning to forms of knowledge and practice

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not generally considered legitimate objects of historical inquiry or appropriate or adequate sources for history making.” The problem of the adequacy of historical objects that might contribute to the reconstruction of marginalized histories—a problem, for instance, present in scholarly efforts to retrieve the details of black life in the swamp—is inevitable when it comes to the attempt to recover fugitive and abandoned spaces and people for historical knowledge because fugitivity and even abandonment have no history proper. For example, Bles and Zora’s sewing of the Fleece only “happens,” speaking historically, because Zora, announcing herself as a tenant farmer, gathers her cotton from the swamp and takes the bales to the Cresswell store to sell. I do not mean to suggest that African American practices of resistance or alternative forms of sociality and of knowing did not impact the structure and functioning of dominant historical institutions; we know that they did. But *Silver Fleece* suggests that fugitivity exists beyond and resists the archive, an archive that, as Hartman and others illustrate and condemn, structures the historical. Hartman writes of the entanglement of the "documents, fragments, and accounts" that inform her study with "the politics of domination," arguing that the effort to reconstruct the history of the dominated is a struggle within and against the constraints and silences imposed by the nature of the

archive—the system that governs the appearance of statements and generates social meaning.  

Historians who have sought to reconstruct both ante- and post-bellum black resistance have grappled, therefore, with a method for writing about the anarchival dimension of fugitivity and other such resistance. In *Race Rebels*, Robin Kelley addresses the problem of recovering "hidden transcripts," the traces of black working-class resistance and the struggle to survive that exist outside of established organizations and social movements; traces, in other words, that exist beneath the economy of representation. "Most black working-class resistance," Kelley argues, "has remained unorganized, clandestine, and evasive." Hidden transcripts, not unlike the hidden island in the swamp on which Zora and Bles grow the Fleece, are "places of rest, relaxation, recreation, and restoration"—places of abandon—that "rarely maintained archives." *Silver Fleece* recognizes, primarily through its female heroine, the important role that these hidden transcripts play in black resistance to white domination. But, as seen in the narrative trajectory of Zora’s quest for a way out of poverty and labor peonage, *Silver Fleece* also suggests that if the black population is to resist exploitation on a national and even global scale, their resistance must be institutionalized, which is to say, it must let itself be captured, delimited, by the archive.

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76 Ibid., 11.
78 Ibid., 44.
This delimitation, or this (en)closure, makes intelligible, as Nancy argues, what “in itself’ would be neither represented nor representable,” and occurs in *Silver Fleece* most tangibly as the black congregation of Tooms County help Zora to clear the swamp long after Elspeth’s death. At the culmination of this clearing, Elspeth’s cabin mysteriously collapses. That Du Bois offers no agent of this collapse in his description sheds some light on the processes underlying the linked projects of the construction of the archive and the production of the subject function. Du Bois writes, "Amid a silence [Zora] saw in the little grove that still stood, the cabin of Elspeth tremble, sigh, and disappear, and with it flew some spirit of evil." Du Bois withholds information from the reader about whether black labor dismantled the cabin or if the cutting down of the surrounding swamp forest destabilized its foundation, or if its trembling and disappearance is occult. Du Bois similarly offers no agent of the construction of the settlement house erected in the cabin’s place, and in which Zora comes to live and harbor "a half-dozen orphan girls" who are too young to board at Miss Smith’s school. "Down in the swamp, at the edge of the cleared space, had risen a log cabin; long, low, spacious, overhung with oak and pine," Du Bois writes. Black labor is central to Du

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Bois’s narrative of African-American economic independence, and yet there is no subject or worker to occupy the language of uplift, here.

This erasure of black labor at the site of Zora’s settlement lays bare two things. First, it demonstrates that the construction of the archive and, by extension, the production of subjects take place in something like a black box. Zora’s status as a subject isn’t fully realized until Elspeth’s cabin is demolished during the clearing away of 200 acres of swampland for tenant farming. Subjectivity in Silver Fleece, though born of abandoned being, is nevertheless based the privileging of what is accessible and assessable, like the settlement house, over what is secretive and secreted, like Elspeth’s cabin. Unlike the subject of Le Sueur’s The Girl, Du Bois’s subject seeks to be legible, as what Allewaert refers to as the citizen-subject of print culture, and to what I am referring to as the archive. In the scenes above, Zora is established as a representative of the black working-class, which is to say, simultaneously as a subject and as an individual both legible to and able to shape the economy of representation of which the archive is a concrete expression. Not only does Zora’s settlement visibly alter the geography of Tooms County in a way that her cultivation of the swamp hammock did not, but she also shapes the archive when she later sues Col. Cresswell, who has challenged her ownership of the 200 acres of swampland, for her title to it, and in doing so, she authenticates, which is to say, she has preserved, the written receipt of sale. Yet the
passages from *Silver Fleece* above have no agent because the archive itself, and the processes by which it is constructed, is agentless.

Second, this erasure of the black worker from such a decisive moment gestures toward an irreconcilability between a politics of representation, on one hand, and attention to the labor that underpins it on the other hand. It is black labor, for example, that makes the cotton industry profitable for the Cresswells, who act as representatives of southern white planters, with Col. Cresswell at head of the Farmer’s League and his son, Harry, a congressman. And it is his knowledge of “the world’s nakedness and of black men’s toil” that allows John Taylor “to bring himself wealth”\(^83\) and to later, corner the market. In *Silver Fleece*, regimes of representation are made possible not only through capture and exclusion (as seen with Zora’s sale of the fleece to Harry Cresswell), but also through Du Bois’s attempt to resignify what he calls “representative types.” In the first, dispossessive scenario, representatives fail by definition to stand in for non-representatives. Col. Cresswell, for example, uses his status as head of the Farmer’s League to scheme with John Taylor to form a two-billion-dollar All-Cotton combine that would exclude and disempower the majority of his fellow southern white planters. In the second, repossessive scenario that follows both Zora’s and Bles’s abandonment, Du Bois attempts to imagine a true representation founded on a scheme of cooperative land...
buying. Yet, the absence of an agent in the above passages shows that Du Bois doesn’t always succeed at unbinding the subject from its history of subjection. In his description of the collapse of Elspeth’s cabin and the erection of Zora’s settlement house, one can see Du Bois coming up against the limits of his ability to imagine a truly liberated black subjectivity.

What makes *Silver Fleece* such an interesting text for this study is that Du Bois is equally interested in the dark side of representation, in the shadows that acts of representation cast. This underbelly is sensed in the bleaker of the terms that Nancy proposes to describe representation: "appropriation" a simultaneous act of preservation and obliteration that is a function of the archive. The turn from Zora’s inhabiting the swamp to Zora’s settling it, the transformation of the swamp into, Zora concedes, “a swamp in name only,” at the very least signifies a problematic relationship to sustainability, one that echoes precisely this dual and simultaneous function of the archive of preservation and obliteration. McKittrick, I argued, is working toward a representational project reminiscent of that of Du Bois. My critique of *Demonic Grounds*, however, a critique that comes via *Silver Fleece*, arises from what I see as McKittrick’s failure to dwell, as Du Bois dwells, within the underbelly of representation.

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Many theorists have addressed the fundamentally contradictory function of the archive,\(^6\) which is to represent the world outside of it. Indeed, Nancy similarly argues, more generally, that the “characteristic of representational thought,” in which I would include the archive, “is to represent, for itself, both itself and its outside, the outside of its limit.”\(^7\) Yet because archived things are perceived as valuable and worth preserving, argues Boris Groys in *Under Suspicion*, they are fundamentally different from the objects that have not yet been collected.\(^8\) The material production processes and networks that support the archive remain “constitutively hidden behind the archive and thus inaccessible to direct contemplation.”\(^9\) This same structure of constitution through concealment is mirrored, as I discussed earlier, in the acts of abandonment, both literal and figurative, in *Silver Fleece*, such as in the theft of Zora’s cotton, as well as in Hartman’s account of the archive; only, Hartman emphasizes that the inaccessibility of these objects are more specifically imposed by the archive. In the passages from *Silver Fleece* discussed above, Du Bois similarly struggles with the difficulty (and for Groys the impossibility) of making visible the archival sign and its carrier, the settlement and the labor that raised it, at the same time.\(^{10}\)

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\(^6\) I’m thinking specifically of Boris Groys; media theory has contributed especially fascinating work on the problem of archives.

\(^7\) Nancy, *Birth to Presence*, 2.


\(^{10}\) Vocabulary taken from Groys
Groys writes about that which is constitutively hidden in the context of digital media, but his assessment of the archive nevertheless resonates with the same predicament with which historians of disenfranchised populations have struggled; that is, the problem of virtual presences and spectral life that both haunts and is concealed by representational practices. In *Silver Fleece*, Zora becomes witness to this spectral life only after she returns to Tooms County from Washington D.C. As she visits the desolate areas of the Cresswell manor, Zora sees the “men and women of her childhood” who “had hitherto walked by her like shadows” as, for the first time, living “for her in flesh and blood.”\(^91\) Zora thus becomes witness to the exploitation of black tenant farmers in a way that, although Zora grew up in the midst of this exploitation, she was unable to act as a witness to it in her youth because she didn’t have the language to articulate it as a specifically structural dispossession. In other words, Zora’s witnessing spectral life for the first time upon her return to the south from Washington D.C. is an effect of a newly formed class-consciousness, one that calls for her to exchange the tactics she once used to resist her own exploitation with a new form of resistance equal to combatting systematic dispossession. She consequently senses “the vast unorganized power”\(^92\) in the black masses and the need for and real possibility of a farming cooperative sustained through black education.

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\(^91\) Du Bois, *Silver Fleece*, 274.  
\(^92\) Ibid., 274.
3.2 The Promise of Being

3.2.1 A Swamp in Name Only

Toward the end of the novel, Zora develops her and Bles’s original dream of a single crop that could secure their economic independence into a more extensive scheme of cooperative land buying, one that entails organizing the local population of black tenant farmers into a group economy. Zora buys two hundred acres of swampland on which to build her settlement from Col. Cresswell, and after several attempts she finally induces the mistrustful local black congregation to assist her with the task of clearing twenty of these two hundred acres so that it may be farmable and habitable. Du Bois describes the clearing of the swampland as a violent transformation:

. . . the ringing of axes and grating of saws and tugging of mules was heard. The forest trembled as by some mighty magic, swaying and falling with crash on crash. Huge bonfires blazed and crackled, until at last a wide black scar appeared in the thick south side of the swamp, which widened and widened to full twenty acres.93

Echoing his description of Bles and Zora’s earlier efforts to clear the hammock on which they surreptitiously grow the Silver Fleece, Du Bois represents the act of making habitable as an injurious intervention into the ecological landscape that is nonetheless beneficial to its human inhabitants. The “wide black scar” that forms on the southern edge of the swamp represents the territory from a cartographer’s perspective. Before Zora and the local black tenant farmers affected its transformation, the geographical

93 Ibid., 290.
specificities of this patch of swampland were known only to those who lived and habitually moved through there. Du Bois makes this fact of limited access known in the first chapter of the novel, when Bles, having arrived in Tooms County and on his way to Miss Smith’s Negro School, wanders into the swamp at night and becomes lost.

Throughout most of the novel, the only perspective on the swamp that Du Bois can proffer is from within it, via the consciousnesses of those, like Zora, who are of it.

In the above passage, Du Bois pans out to the forest’s “trembling,” suggesting that this newly farmable landscape also emerges as newly representable, which is to say, legible to those who have never made their homes there. The appearance of the wide black scar thus stages a becoming–geographical of twenty acres of swampland. I use the term geographical, here, in a deliberately narrow sense to emphasize that the boundaries of the transformed plot of swampland can, suddenly, be clearly, immediately, defined on a map. The ecological processes and the crop production of the settlement land also become “mappable” insofar as they can be easily surveyed and quantified even before they are introduced into the market (or perhaps they are always already on the market).

The cooperative action of the local black congregation’s clearing the swamp in order to build a settlement of tenant farmers seems to mark a shift in the novel from the predominance and political potential of black ecological cultures to that of a black, specifically cartographic, geography. The former constitutes a strategic intimacy of the subjugated with shifting boundaries, the “always restless and changing” relationship
between living things, and indeed the knowledge of these living things, including animal and plant life, as persons. In her youth, for example, Zora is a “child of the swamp” who “had dreamed her life away in wilful [sic] wandering through her dark and somber kingdom until she was one with it in all its moods; mischievous, secretive, brooding; full of great and awful visions, steeped body and soul in wood lore.” 

When I say that, for Du Bois, the story of the formation of black capital begins in the swamp, I am arguing that Silver Fleece understands this formation as deriving from the singularly ecological culture that slaves developed and that, as Du Bois illustrates, persisted through reconstruction. This ecological mode of being and knowing energizes Zora’s conceptualization of the farming settlement and her clearing of the swamp in order to build the settlement, even though the demolition of twenty acres of forest near the end of the novel marks a shift to the carto-geographical mode of being and knowing. This latter mode is concerned with stabilizing boundaries, with settling unsettled (in the dual sense of that word) landscapes, and making inhabitable terrain durably habitable. Making habitable (distinct from inhabiting) in Silver Fleece is about tractability and, as seen in Du Bois’ description of the clearing of the swamp, necessitates regulating the capacity of the terrain to change on its own, to harbor secrets, and limiting its

94 Ibid., 27.
overabundance all so as to curtail the unpredictability already characteristic of agricultural production, so as to make the land more valuable to the farmers.

The circumscription, or closure, that we see with the swaying and crashing of the forest and the appearance of the wide black scar on the south side of the swamp would therefore denote a transition from the “not-quite there” of abandoned being to the “there” of subjectivity, from that which eludes or crouches beneath representation to that which is demarcated and representable. No longer a dream-geography inhabited by devils, the swamp comes to function according to a mode of sustainability that determines Zora’s ability to become a proper subject. This particular mode of thinking about settlement also accounts for both the violence and reminiscence that shadows Du Bois’s portrayal of uplift and the naissance of “the transformed swamp—now a swamp in name only.” In “name only,” Du Bois gestures toward the underlying poverty of representation and by extension the poverty of the subject. The passages in Silver Fleece discussed above further speak to what Nancy has described as “the impossibility of fixing abandonment and settling into it”—hence the problem of representation that abandonment poses for literature. I argued that in Le Sueur’s The Girl, being and subjectivity inform each other and exist side by side in the act of squatting, and specifically giving birth while squatting. But in Du Bois, subjectivity necessitates the

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95 Nancy, Birth to Presence, 42.
destruction of being. Zora can no longer squat, which is, I argued, a transitional posture, once she becomes an architect, and a settler, of space.

Du Bois’s narrative about the creation of black capital through his protagonists’ return to and settlement of the cotton belt is in some ways counterintuitive. *Silver Fleece* was written in the first decade of the twentieth-century and published when the number of African-Americans abandoning the south for the north was peaking. Black migration and its facilitation of working-class resistance and upward mobility is a question at the heart of *Silver Fleece*—quite literally, Bles and Zora’s travels north occupy the middle pages of the novel, bridging their initial, spoiled efforts at profiting from their own cotton crop with their later successful efforts to establish a farming cooperative. The Great Migration, during which *Silver Fleece* was both published and is set, yet toward which the novel only obliquely gestures, constituted the mass abandonment of the southern plantation by black farmers for Northern cities in search of better labor conditions and to escape the formal and informal violence of the Jim Crow south—an abandonment that made black plantation labor “scarcer and dearer,” as Col. Cresswell declares.66 The trajectory of *Silver Fleece’s* protagonists’ paths is counterintuitive in this light because the migration narrative that provides the backdrop for Du Bois’s novel fails to materialize. Bles and Zora both abort their attempts to settle in Washington, D.C.

and they seek out the means by which they can establish themselves as self-possessed subjects on the very plantation on which they once labored, and among the tenant farmers who have remained in the region because they are unable or unwilling to migrate north in search of work in the factories.

Indeed, one reason Colonel Cresswell is persuaded to partner with John Taylor to establish a two-billion dollar cotton-combine that controls both production and manufacture of cotton, is because the cotton-growing business is in an increasingly “tight pinch” due to labor shortages. As the Cresswells consider John Taylor’s proposal, Colonel Cresswell tells his son, “’We simply can’t keep the cost of cotton down to a remunerative figure with niggers getting scarcer and dearer.’”97 The scarcity of black labor on the southern plantation in this case is a consequence of two social phenomena—the threat that black education poses to an exploitative labor system still shored up by the practices of slavery, and black migration north as rural black laborers sought out a place in the industrial economy as a route out of poverty. Many scholars, such as Cedric Robinson and Robin Kelley, have, therefore, characterized the Great Migration as a general strike,98 one demonstrating the organizability of black labor at a time when it was thought to be unorganizable. The background story of Silver Fleece is

97 Ibid.
98 Labor conditions in the north were still often extremely exploitative. Many African-American novelists who wrote in the context of the Great Migration, such as William Attaway, explored these labors conditions.
about the pathways that enabled the first free black settlements prior to emancipation\textsuperscript{99} and led into the more conspicuous abandonments that characterized the Great Migration. Yet Silver Fleece, published fully in the midst of this surge north, tells a story about returning to and settling the very swampland that historically provided the fugitive pathways north.

Bles’s desertion of Zora is, therefore, imbricated with the mass historical migration of African Americans around the turn of the century. Bles’s decision to leave the Alabama Black Belt arrives when he discovers that Zora was prostituted to Harry Cresswell and other white planters as a child, and is therefore not “pure,” as he expects a marraigable woman to be. Bles meets Zora in the field of the Fleece to say goodbye before he departs:

\begin{quote}
[Zora] did not look up, but knelt there silent, dry-eyed, till the last rustle of his going died in the night. And then, like a waiting storm, the torrent of her grief swept down upon her; she stretched herself upon the black and fleece-strewn earth, and writhed.\textsuperscript{100}
\end{quote}

Bles abandons Zora because his expectations of female sexuality have been broken (and recall that Berlant, whom I discussed in the chapter on Le Sueur, asks us to think of sexuality as a genre, that is, as a set of expectations). Specifically, Bles’s abandonment of Zora is a reaction to her rape. Though his discovery of Zora’s sexual history prompts Bles’s departure, Bles is more generally motivated to travel to

\begin{quote}
LaRoche, \textit{Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad: The Geography of Resistance}, 103.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}
Washington D.C. by his own ambition and desire “to do and thereby to be” a subject, a desire that motivated many African-Americans to migrate north during this period. His reaction to Zora’s rape is, in this way, set against an historical background of mass black migration north in pursuit of greater economic and political representation.

Du Bois furthermore chose to describe this scene from Zora’s point of view, in a novel the point of view of which flutters among several of its characters, including Bles’s. The above scene represents migration north as part of a masculinist narrative of upward mobility. That’s not to say that black women did not also go north; Zora, like Bles, travels north (although she does not go independently as Bles does but in the somewhat compulsory service of Mrs. Vanderpool). In Silver Fleece, however, the political landscape of the north and especially of Washington D.C. conforms to a regime of representation that the novel associates with the abandonment of the economic and political potentiality embodied by the illegitimate black female. The southeastern swampland, on the other hand, is productive of an alternative ideal of representation that is feminist and that is echoed in the concept of “habitats of abandonment.” What remains in Silver Fleece is the black female. The insistence that economic self-determination for African Americans might be imbricated with migration to northern cities but must ultimately begin with a return to and settlement of the spaces in which

101 Ibid., 293.
black activism and organization emerged prior to emancipation, and specifically the vision of the economic restructuring of tenant farming, stems from this remainder, this abandonment.

### 3.2.2 Occupying the Farm, or, Inverse Fugitivity

*Silver Fleece* thus reclaims rural space as a site of resistance at a time when, for instance, black sociology was heavily focused on the urban environment. Du Bois has his protagonists return to the south, and to the swamp specifically, because he understands that space, as both the residue of the insolvent plantation and a negation of the structure of plantation labor, to be able to produce an economy of representation that works to enfranchise those who have been disenfranchised; which is to say, an economy of representation that comprehends and counters its own historical failure to represent, a failure that both the white planter class and the middle-class African American leadership in Washington reproduce in the novel. That Du Bois imagines a counter economy to develop in the swamp, the very space which slaves once sought out for flight and refuge, and land hitherto neglected by the Cresswells even though it is the most fertile, seems to suggest that it is from within the knowledge of the Black Diaspora—the swamp being an historical conduit for and a persisting image of black mobility—that we can begin to imagine not only an alternative subjectivity but also Black capital.
This almost paradoxical settlement of a terrain that, acting primarily as a passageway, has been inhabitable for extended periods of time, is what I think of as an inverse form of fugitivity. I briefly introduced this concept in my previous chapter on *The Girl*. The Girl describes herself as a fugitive when she successfully resists both the pressure from her partner to abort her pregnancy and the city ward’s attempt to sterilize her. She compares her pregnancy to a successful bank robbery, in contrast to the failed bank robbery that provides the turning point of Le Sueur’s novel. In light of this description, I argued that the Girl’s need to forge out a livable space under unlivable conditions in order to have the child becomes an inverse form of fugitivity in the sense that, while this inhabitation does not offer an escape from poverty or from the criminalization of being poor, it does constitute a furtive if not quite a fugitive re-signification of dispossession. *Silver Fleece*, grappling with the history of chattel slavery in the U.S. South, brings this concept of inverse fugitivity into the foreground. The swamp, no longer being used as a natural escape route for fugitive slaves and maroon communities, nevertheless provides an alternative route to economic independence through its being settled, its being made livable. For Du Bois, what comes after the “general strikes” that fueled the Civil War and the Great Migration, and which began the reconstruction of American democracy, is this inverse fugitivity—a return to forgotten or abandoned terrains through the linked projects of mobility and settlement,
the latter re-purposing the spaces of the former in a way capable of sustaining the rural black population.

The projects of mobility and settlement are linked, I argue, not only because Zora’s settling of the swamp is a settling of a formerly fugitive zone, but also because this inhabitation in *Silver Fleece* is, for both Zora and Bles, a *return* to the cotton belt after their movement north, and for Zora, only after she has been exposed to ideas about settlement work and reform during her travels to New York and Washington. Du Bois observes the significance of the history of African-American migration north in *Black Reconstruction*, arguing that fugitive slaves “furnished the leadership for the mass of black workers” in the pre- and post-bellum periods. *Silver Fleece*, however, contends with an unambiguous mistrust of the ability of the black leadership in Washington to represent the interests of black workers in the south. Zora’s return to and settlement of the fugitive zones that contributed to the growth of black leadership in the north is a seeking out of a new form of representation for black agricultural laborers, one that responds to the failure of the archive to represent anything outside of it and which reimagines the economy of representation from within abandonment.

Indeed, a critique of the economy of representation underpins Du Bois’s narrative. Early in *Silver Fleece*, for example, Mary Taylor asks Mr. Caldwell, a Tooms

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County shop owner, who the leading landowners in Tooms County are. Mr. Caldwell tells her that he considers the Cresswells as the “representative types” of the landowner because they are “highbred gentlemen of the old school.”¹⁰³ Yet they have achieved their status as representatives because they own almost five times more land than the next two largest landowners in Tooms County combined. In other words, although Col. Cresswell is the head of the Farmer’s League, what actually qualifies him as a representative is not his common interests with the surrounding white population—mostly poor planters and cotton mill workers—but the fact that he stands apart from and above them, and, indeed, in opposition to them. That one of the narratives at the center of Silver Fleece’s plot develops from Colonel Cresswell’s choice (not to mention his power) to betray the other planters’ economic interests to further his own as a partner in the Taylor-Cresswell All-Cotton Combine speaks to the contradictions of the representative. The status of the representative stands upon ill-gotten gains in Silver Fleece such that to represent someone or something is an act of displacement—the same problem that I have argued is posed by the concept of the archive.¹⁰⁴ Colonel Cresswell’s wealth is the product of his exploitation of his black workers and, later, of his

¹⁰³ Du Bois, Silver Fleece, 24.
¹⁰⁴ In the Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts, the Golden Fleece is also an ill-gotten gain. Jason steals the Fleece because it is symbol of sovereignty and will restore to him his birthright of the kingship, binding theft to sovereignty.
undermining the wealth of the majority of southern planters, who are disempowered by the cotton corner.

*Silver Fleece* similarly expresses suspicion of the “representative men” of the black middle-class, who, Robin Kelley argues, earned their status as representatives by “overlooking or playing down class and gender differences”105—in other words, by failing to speak for the black working-class, with black working-class women being the most often left behind by this economy of representation. Indeed, Bles literally leaves Zora behind in his pursuit of entry into representative politics, which I call an economy because representation is tied to who or what groups of people have access to vital resources.

In Washington D.C., Bles becomes active in national politics, hoping to be a voice for black interests, but as the novel eventually proves, he cannot fulfill this role without the lead of the black working-class female. Bles is appointed to a clerkship in the Treasury Department. He also meets Caroline Wynn, a light-skinned black schoolteacher who introduces him to other similarly light-skinned men and women who claim to be and whom other local politicians perceive as representatives of their race. Bles gains leverage as a spokesman for the Republican Party and is later nominated by the President as Treasurer, which would be the highest office held by an African American

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in the United States. Around the same time, he becomes engaged to Miss Wynn. While Bles is in D.C., two Republican bills are being prepared, an education bill and a child labor bill, both of which threaten the Cresswell-Taylor Cotton Combine. As a young and promising orator, Bles enthusiastically begins to work in support of the Education Bill. But for complex political reasons, the Republican Party drops the bill, and Bles must chose between continuing to support it, a censure of his own party that would cost him his appointment as Treasurer, or defending the party’s choice to drop the bill, thus clinching his appointment as Treasurer. Bles decides to speak in support of the Education Bill. He loses his appointment as Treasurer, as expected, and Miss Wynn ends her engagement to him because, although the bill would have benefited her work as a schoolteacher and her students, she is more concerned with her own political gain and wants to be partnered with someone who will be successful in politics.

Bles’s refusal to defend the Republican party is both a challenge to the economy of representation and also creates the necessary condition of abandonment that one must inhabit, I have argued, in order to meaningfully oppose one’s dispossession, to imagine alternative and unexpected routes to repossession, and to become a full-fledged subject. “The world had suddenly left him as the vision of Carrie Wynn had left him,” Du Bois writes, “alone, a mere clerk, an insignificant cog in the great grinding wheel of
humdrum drudgery. His chance to do and thereby to be had not come.”\textsuperscript{106} He returns to
the “marshy borderland” that Carolyn Wynn, speaking figuratively of Bles’s “primitive”
idealism, once claims she would hate to see Bles lost in \textsuperscript{107}. Within the perspective of
Washington D.C., Bles fails at becoming a subject and a “representative type.” Bles’s
return to the south, however, is an act of inhabiting his abandonment by those same
types. In this act, he rediscovers his chance “to be,” which is to say, to become a subject,
but it is a becoming based in the form of representation arising from working-class
labor, specifically black agricultural labor, that \textit{Silver Fleece} tries to imagine.

Zora similarly presents a challenge to the economy of representation when she
abandons Mrs. Vanderpool. Mrs. Vanderpool had promised Zora that she would use her
political leverage to help Bles become Treasurer of the United States “without sacrificing
his manhood or betraying his people” \textsuperscript{108}. But Mrs. Vanderpool instead expends her
influence to have her husband promoted as ambassador to France. As a result of this
betrayal, Zora tells Mrs. Vanderpool that she cannot continue to work for her. Mrs.
Vanderpool asks Zora, “will you leave me?” to which Zora regretfully replies, “‘Yes’”
\textsuperscript{109}. Du Bois formulates this break as an abandonment not only of Mrs. Vanderpool but of
the entire economy of representation that branded Zora as illegitimate and compelled

\textsuperscript{106} Du Bois, \textit{Silver Fleece}, 293.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 213.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 230.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 254.
Bles to leave her “on her knees in the dirt with outstretched hands.”

Zora leaves Washington and returns to the scene of her own abandonment with the purpose of making it a livable space, and where she can begin the work of resignifying what it means to be a subject so as to untether it from the subjection that Silver Fleece shows to underpin the representative.

Working from a similar suspicion of the economy of representation, Robin Kelley emphasizes the significance of the resistance that took place outside of established organizations and institutions; he brings the “hidden transcripts” (what I consider part of the anarchival) of aggrieved communities to the foreground. While Silver Fleece imagines the formal establishment of a free community that has been granted a place in the archive as essential to black liberation, the novel imagines this establishment as nevertheless built upon what Kelley might call hidden transcripts, and one that positions such economically and politically abandoned terrain as the southeastern swamplands as the birthplace of a new mode of production and the autonomous black subject.

Du Bois discovers the possibility of a collective Black resistance, then, on the farm, in the very spaces and through the labor that underwrote the emergence of modern capitalism and yet which has so frequently been excluded from the narrative of

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110 Ibid., 294.
modernization. Frantz Fanon also perceives the farm, what he calls Land – with a capital ‘L’ — as the beginning of a free community for the colonized poor and as the true global center. For Fanon, the colonizer and the colonized intellectual both belong to the city, not the Land. He describes the colonized intellectual as an individualist who is, in that very individualism, locked within his own subjectivity — a description that resonates in the portrayal in Silver Fleece of the black elite in Washington D.C. Recall, for example, that Carolyn Wynn votes against her own economic interests and those of her people in order to preserve her status as a subject, as she understands subjectivity. Against the colonized intellectual, Fanon situates the colonized masses, those who, he describes, demand not the colonist’s status but his farm. “For a colonized people,” writes Fanon, “the most essential value, because it is the most meaningful, is first and foremost the land: the land, which must provide bread and, naturally, dignity.” Du Bois remains invested in the concept of the subject, but he reimagines its production from within abandonment and from within the quest to make uninhabitable land inhabitable.

Once Zora returns to Tooms County, for example, she concludes that in order for her people to escape from the slavery and oppression of the Jim Crow South, “We must have land — our own farm with our own tenants — to be the beginning of a free

113 Ibid., 9.
community.”¹¹⁴ In this way, subjectivity in Silver Fleece is contingent on landownership, and is therefore still rooted in, even while attempting to rework, a traditional conception of the subject, one that has historically been tied to the dispossession of, for example, tenant farmers, the working-classes, and other landless populations. As I discussed in my chapter on The Girl, Le Sueur imagines a subject that, by inhabiting abandonment, disrupts ownership, literally and figuratively. In the U.S. South, black laborers had farmed but not owned the cotton that, Du Bois argues in Black Reconstruction in America, made the modern global economy possible. In the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction south, furthermore, the “quest for territory” among African-Americans, most of whom were landless and facing debt peonage as another form of slavery, offered a means of resisting white aggression¹¹⁵ and what many have described as a form of colonization.

The migration narrative in Silver Fleece is tied, I have argued, to the abandonment of the illegitimate black female. What I have described as inverse fugitivity is, conversely, a project that the illegitimate black female envisions and guides. Zora provides the vision of the economic restructuring of cotton farming necessary to ensure former slaves their freedom by taking up the “wasted” land of the swamp, which places Du Bois’s novel at the intersection of two aspects of racial uplift in the Reconstruction

¹¹⁴ Du Bois, Silver Fleece, 280.
and post-Reconstruction South: the larger historical effort to recover abandoned lands for black ownership and the historical work of black women as “central figures” in retraining the race and redefining citizenship through the acquisition of land.116

Lawrie Balfour observes that Du Bois’s 1920 essay “The Damnation of Women,” in attempting to revalue which black women are eligible to be representative and, as I read it, to therefore reimagine what it means to represent, is “torn between a radical conception of freedom and a conventional idea of ‘uplift.’”117 Similarly, *Silver Fleece* is expressive of an underlying ambivalence toward regimes of representation and subjectivity. Du Bois upholds, for example, the centrality of black labor and the working-class to their own liberation from debt peonage and other forms of enslavement that persisted after 1865; yet, at a crucial moment in the novel in which he describes the clearing of the swamp, he omits black labor as an agent—as discussed earlier, Elspeth’s cabin inexplicably disappears and Zora’s settlement house simply appears after a lapse of time. Du Bois struggles to resolve the contradictions and failures of the representative and the attendant underlying poverty of subjectivity throughout

Silver Fleece; the illegitimate, or “damned,” or abandoned black female is the site of this struggle in his novel.

One way in which Silver Fleece attempts to reconcile the denial of being that seems to accompany representation with what Du Bois understands as the necessity of entering into its economy as a subject is by having Zora, the first character in the novel to recognize the capacity of black workers to organize, become “a half-taught black girl.” 118 Zora is educated enough to be literate and to therefore both lead and defend in court the creation of a sustainable swamp settlement, but she has not been educated out of the ability to speak for the interests of the tenant farmers of Tooms County who are, at the time her settlement is established, by and large uneducated and illiterate—unable, for example, to write or read a receipt of sale for 200 acres of swampland. Zora’s status as half-taught corresponds to what Balfour has characterized in Du Bois as a vacillation between two agenda: first, the “admiration for the resistance of the enslaved and poor woman,” 119 which, in the context of Silver Fleece, is the woman abandoned by the economy of representation exemplified by the archive; and, second, a “lingering attachment to ‘politics of respectability,’” 120 embodied, for instance, by Carolyn Wynn.

Through the idea of a half-taught black girl, Before Zora can successfully organize the black workers of Tooms County, she must “sit and listen” to her people.

118 Du Bois, Silver Fleece, 258.
120 Ibid., 102.
She flits “through the countryside” until “the black folk came to know her and, in silent deference to some subtle difference, they gave her the title of white folk, calling her ‘Miss’ Zora.” Through her research, Zora comes to “sense the vast unorganized power” of the black masses.”\textsuperscript{121} Du Bois’s description of Zora’s early efforts to organize resonates with Le Sueur’s ethnographic project in writing \textit{The Girl}, in which the Girl is, in fact, a multiplicity of voices that Le Sueur collected in her research. In a similar way, Du Bois attempts to resignify the representative as, somehow, embodying both a multiplicity of the subjected and abandoned—tenant farmers whose capture by and exclusion from the archive manifests itself in debt—and what Nancy describes as “an irreducible kernel of self-constitution,”\textsuperscript{122} which is to say, a subject that represents and is therefore fundamentally distinct from the multiplicity—the abandoned—it seeks to represent.

3.2.3 Clothes

Land ownership among African-Americans in the U.S. South was vital to economic restructuring and enfranchisement. In \textit{Silver Fleece}, however, the occupation of the farm (to borrow Fanon’s vocabulary) does not alone allow the poor black community to combat oppression and the sexual exploitation of black women. Rather, where the farm produces cotton, which is not a sustenance crop, its farmers must have access to the prevailing market in order to subsist. Zora fails to successfully enter the

\textsuperscript{121} Du Bois, \textit{Silver Fleece}, 274.
\textsuperscript{122} Nancy, \textit{Birth to Presence}, 9.
cotton market when she first attempts to sell the *Silver Fleece* because marketability depends to a degree on legibility, which I have argued throughout this chapter is demarcated by the archive. Zora’s labor of secretly growing the Silver Fleece on a swamp hammock is a fugitive act; it is anarchival, which is to say, it is illegible to the archive, and consequently Zora is barred access to the market when she attempts to sell the Fleece early in the novel. The initial encounter of this fugitive act with Harry Cresswell’s ledger leaves her abandoned, a peon, without any formal recourse, especially because she cannot yet read or write, and she is obliged to accept Mrs. Vanderpool’s offer to hire her as a servant and take her north. Zora’s second attempt to sell cotton grown in the swamp is successful because by that point in the novel she has made three intertwined developments: she has learned to read and write, she has become conscious of how the economy of representation functions, and she has made herself and her project, which includes transforming the fugitive space of the swamp into a geographical one, legible to the archival logic underlying representation and subjectivity.

In other words, Zora develops the ability to map the local, national, and global social and economic terrain. Upon her return to Tooms County, Zora’s new consciousness—one might consider it class-consciousness—allows her to imagine and to make imaginable to others the organization of southern black farmers against the wealthy landlords of the region. For instance, shortly after Zora returns to Alabama
from Washington, John Taylor introduces a new cotton mill to Toomsville as part of his scheme to control both the production and manufacture of cotton, and consequently the face of Tooms County transforms rapidly. The new mill attracts poor white labor to Toomsville and the mill workers, whose interests are opposed to those of the landlords of the county, become the political majority even while they are economically exploited. Around the same time, Zora’s settlement has produced its first cotton crop. Col. Cresswell has attempted to appropriate that crop as the product of a tenant farm rather than recognize it as a product of an independent farming cooperative on the swampland that Zora had purchased from him. Zora, divulging to Bles her intent to sue Cresswell for both the new cotton crop and the 200 acres of swampland on which it was farmed, argues that she has a chance of winning the suit because, she observes, the “‘Judge and sheriff were both elected by mill-hands who hate Cresswell and Taylor.’”

Zora’s empowerment in this case hinges on her exploitation of the shared economic interests among the poor black and poor white populations, which, she hopes, will undermine that racial hostility between the two groups, a hostility manufactured by the aristocracy in order to maintain its own power. By mapping the shifting social and economic terrain in which Zora founds her settlement, *Silver Fleece* presents the settlement project not

only as a realistic, if arduous, undertaking but also as an economically sustainable and legible one.

Returning to the main point of this chapter, I have argued that in *Silver Fleece* the encounter of the informal economy and non-representational spaces elemental to fugitivity with the written record risks further subjugation because one has, in this encounter, exposed her hiding place and given herself away. Earlier in the novel, the swamp thus initially becomes classed as wasted land, abandoned land, existing somewhere in between its miscarried use-value as a fugitive space claimed through cultivation and its potential exchange-value—only potential because Zora is barred access to the market through which she could profit from the land’s yield and also because the Cresswells are unable to clear the swamp themselves for agricultural development without black labor. More specifically, the Cresswell swamp becomes abandoned land when Zora initially tries to sell the Silver Fleece to the Cresswells because its yield gets entered into the written record—a ledger, which is something like a fragment of or item for the archive—without being entered into the archive itself, which is to say, without being entered into the public record. To be sure, historians such as Angel David Nieves have made arguments for turning to the study of literature in the historical reconstruction of black women’s work in racial uplift because that work is not sufficiently represented in official records or primary documentation. That Zora sues Col. Cresswell in court for her right to the swampland she had purchased from him is an
important moment in the novel in this light because her settlement work becomes documented and preserved in the public record (a manifestation of the archive) as soon as she places an injunction on the cotton that she and her tenants produced from twenty acres of that swampland.

The scene in which Zora buys the swamp from Col. Cresswell, with John Taylor witnessing the transaction, exemplifies a similar configuration. The receipt of sale, which Zora writes up and Col. Cresswell signs, is a written record the legitimacy of which is contestable. The receipt of sale becomes a legitimate legal document only once the court rules in Zora’s favor and her ownership of the 200 acres of swampland becomes a matter of public record. One of the primary functions of the public record is that, as a manifestation of the archive, it flags items for preservation, as worth preserving, making these records available to historians who today cite the difficulty of reconstructing the past precisely because transactions such as that between Zora and Col. Cresswell were never formalized, or were never risked in the first place. In Silver Fleece, it seems, only this traversal of the risk of giving oneself away and becoming abandoned can produce the kind of black subject capable of envisioning more sustainable agricultural and therefore economic practices that are liberating of African American agricultural workers.

Zora’s settlement, then, ultimately makes itself legible to the archive in order to gain access to the prevailing capitalist market. In this sense, Du Bois is more concerned
with the sustainability of the project than with radical being—radical in both of its contradictory meanings; first, as the anarchive that is the hidden root of and that underpins the geography of the plantation and the archive itself and, second, as extremity, as the “marshy borderlands” that undermine the concept of geography in general. To read Silver Fleece in terms of sustainability through its entrance into the archive in this way is also to understand Zora’s farming cooperative as truly a settlement in the legal, colonial, and pragmatic implications of the term.

Du Bois further emphasizes the sustainability of such a settlement project by having Bles and Zora present a concrete economic model to the black tenant farmers of Tooms County in order to obtain their buy-in. Bles and Zora propose to sell five “twenty-acre farms” of the 200 acres Zora purchased from Col. Cresswell, but they will “keep one central plantation of one hundred acres for the school” and other industries, including a hospital and supply store, for the public good. They will deed the central plantation to a board of trustees “to be chosen from the ones who buy the small farms.” Du Bois imagines, therefore, a small alternative economic base that nevertheless incorporates elements of the plantation system (it still has tenants which Zora must first “buy” from the Cresswells). In spite of the continuities of Zora’s settlement with the system of tenant farming that was central to the post-bellum

124 Ibid., 313.
planted plantation economy, the success of Zora’s second attempt to grow and sell cotton hinges on a promise to and the involvement of an entire community of black workers, who were not a consideration in her initial efforts. She succeeds, in other words, because her organization of black tenant farmers is not the individual act of fugitivity that marks her initial planting and selling of the Silver Fleece but rather it is a product of class-consciousness, which is to say, an attempt to establish an alternative economic base resulting from her emergent consciousness of a global economy founded on the exploitation of the working-classes. *Silver Fleece* posits that the origin of this global economy can be found in the Black Belt, a region that intersects with the cotton belt, and that, therefore, the Black Belt is where exploitation of the working-classes can most effectively be resisted.\(^{125}\)

Although *Silver Fleece* is a novel about the envisioning and establishment of agricultural and economic practices that allow black agricultural workers to flourish, the cotton crop referenced in the title of the novel is, nevertheless, not a subsistence crop as

\(^{125}\) In his chapter on “The Black Worker” from *Black Reconstruction in America*, Du Bois argues: Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale; new cities were built on the results of black labor, and a new labor problem, involving all white labor, arose both in Europe and America.” Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*, 5. Du Bois’s argument that “it was thus the black worker.” who was the “founding stone of a new economic system in the nineteenth century and for the modern world” Ibid., 16. does not necessarily conflict with historical arguments, such as that made by Jacqueline Jones, that the process of modernization excluded black workers, who remained confined to the cotton fields or in service in the North. Jacqueline Jones, *A Social History of the Laboring Classes: From Colonial Times to Present* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999), 175. As seen in theories of the archive discussed in this chapter, it is very possible for something to both act as the condition of possibility of and be excluded from a historical and social phenomenon.
is, for example, the corn that also grows in Tooms County. Cotton is a market crop, a circumstance that presents a greater risk to Zora’s settlement because she must be able to sell the cotton in order for her settlement to succeed. Yet she herself admits to Bles that even once the cooperative has produced the cotton, she may not be able to sell it “without a white creditor’s consent,” an extralegal practice designed to prevent the emergence of an independent black economy. If Zora’s settlement is supported by the production of a crop the value of which lies primarily in manufacture and commerce with the rest of the world, then her ability to participate in the prevailing market is, therefore, as important as her publically documented ownership of the land, to the extent that the latter means nothing without the former.

The ecological in Silver Fleece is a concept at first most visible in the swamp. But as the swamp shifts transforms into a geographical space, the ecological becomes visible again as the ecology of the global capitalist market, a market that Du Bois shows to both thwart the development of subjects through economic exploitation but also to enable the production of the subject through the provision of the material and labor necessary for clothing the abject, or the “naked.” Clothing, made accessible by cotton production, allows one to give fuller expression “to the inner deeper self,” which is to say, to

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126 Du Bois, Silver Fleece, 317.
127 Ibid., 90.
become a subject through self-representation, especially important where formal representation is otherwise withheld.

The black worker is, in this sense, a double origin—that of modern economic and material production as well as that of the production of subjectivity among the dispossessed and abandoned. Du Bois describes cotton-picking season in Alabama:

The cry of the naked was sweeping the world . . . ‘Clothes, clothes!’ Far away . . . the dense black land sensed the cry and heard the bound of answering life within the vast dark breast. All that dark earth heaved in mighty travail with the bursting bolls of cotton . . . 128

Cotton is a significant crop because its exchange-value re-introduces the black-working class in the U.S. South that produces it into the currents of a global economy as agents, and reveals the intersections of the economic interests between, for example, the Russian peasantry and the black peasantry. Cotton, in Silver Fleece, provides the raw material for increasing the awareness of the organizability of the working-classes on an international scale. Peter Schmidt similarly argues that the anti-colonial struggle of sharecroppers and small landowners in the U.S. South “meant the farmers’ fight to be able to compete in international markets on fair and equitable terms, as free agents.” 129

Silver Fleece, Schmidt argues, thus “marks a key phase in Du Bois’s thinking as he begins to conceptualize the U.S. South’s economic and racial problems in transnational terms,

128 Ibid., 35.
as symptoms of a great global struggle to make multinational capitalism more
democratic and less monopolistic.”

3.2.4 Afraid of the Dark

When Bles and Zora first meet at the beginning of the novel, the morning after
Bles had fainted in the swamp forest the night before, Zora teases Bles ‘‘Who’se a-feared
of the dark? I love night.’’ This passage in Silver Fleece evokes Judith Halberstam’s
idea, discussed in the previous chapter, of inhabiting the darkness as a form of resisting
(heterosexist) regimes of representation and the constraints of subjectivity. Silver Fleece is
ultimately less about learning to inhabit the darkness in which Zora originally lives than
it is about finding a romantic resolution between the affordances of the darkness and the
affordances of enlightened subjectivity. Du Bois establishes the initial opposition
between these two states of being in the first two chapters of his novel. The first chapter
opens with the words “Night fell,” and recounts Bles getting lost in the dark swamp.
The following chapter opens on Miss Smith’s school, with the words “Day was breaking
. . .” The abandoned subject, for Du Bois, is a product of the romantic resolution of
enlightened self-mastery—manifest in the ability to represent oneself through veiling,
bringing to the light the additional significance of the cotton crop as that which makes

130 Ibid.
131 Du Bois, Silver Fleece, 4.
132 Ibid., 1.
133 Ibid., 8.
available the raw material for this practice to the dispossessed—and the illegibility centered in black womanhood. Likewise, the settlement is built, near the end of the novel, within cleared swampland, having become geographical remaining in proximity to the ecological.

I opened this chapter with the suggestion that there is a deep ambivalence to projects that seek to represent abandonment in some way, and that Du Bois, specifically, seeks to reconcile the uplift project with the inhabitation of abandoned spaces. This reconciliation of “the discourse of social uplift” on the one hand and the discourse that rejects a system “of economic exploitation”134 on the other is integral to the black romantic project,135 and to the structure of Silver Fleece. The romance is central to the black literary tradition, especially as “an instrument of social examination and critique.”136 For Du Bois, Rossetti argues, “romanticism is at the foundation of African American writing and cultural critique” to the extent that “determining, material forces come to be revealed via a reliance on the romantic project”137 The romantic structure of Silver Fleece and the occasionally fantastic plot points it makes possible call attention to the role of literature in addressing abandonment in its potentiality, beyond the secondary project of the novel as sociological documentation of conditions for African-American.

135 Ibid., 40.
136 Ibid., 39.
137 Ibid., 43.
Americans in the Jim Crow south. *Silver Fleece* exceeds what is representationally possible if it does not succeed as a marketable novel.
4. The Foreclosing of the Frontier

4.1 Specters of Debt

The preceding chapters have examined novels that, in their attempt to address the spectral being of abandoned spaces and the subjects who inhabit those spaces, theorize that literature more broadly has a central role in grappling with the impossibility of representing abandonment as such. In Le Sueur’s *The Girl*, the abandoned warehouse that the homeless women occupy is visible to the public only as a structure. Its function of housing an illegal colony of homeless women is both hidden from and unimagined by the public. Only through remaining unseen, can the group of women occupying the warehouse can endure there. In this sense, abandonment, by which I mean both the realities of dispossession and the call to inhabit the uninhabitable space of the warehouse, is unrepresentable to the extent representing it, showing it to exist, would necessarily coincide with the displacement of its inhabitants and the dismantling their modifications. In Du Bois’s *Silver Fleece*, the island upon which the two protagonists of that novel grow their first cotton crop is hidden deep in the swamp, and it is because it is both concealed and difficult to access that the Silver Fleece can flourish, without the crop being stolen or sabotaged before it can be harvested. Both Le Sueur’s warehouse and Du Bois’s swamp produce feminist geographies that resist representation and, specifically, documentation. The Girl, the protagonist of Le Sueur’s
novel, attempts to evade the social workers who track her movements, looking for
dissolute behavioral patterns that will allow them to recommend her sterilization or will
justify refusing her resources. Similarly, the plantation landlord’s weighing of the cotton
crop that Zora, the protagonist of Silver Fleece, secretly grew on their land leaves her
indebted to them.

This chapter explores the ways in which Willa Cather’s 1913 Nebraska novel, O
Pioneers!, similarly imagines the practice of inhabiting abandonment as a grappling with
its own spectrality. Taking up the question of debt introduced in the previous chapter on
Du Bois’s Silver Fleece, this chapter argues that the practice of inhabiting abandonment in
O Pioneers! is a matter of both experiencing its potentiality through assuming debt,
where indebtedness betrays one’s confidence in the ability to prosper in “sombre
wastes,”¹ and actively living with the specters of debt—the physical, emotional, and
psychological injuries that the debt economy produces—by organizing one’s prosperity
around the remembrance of those who failed to prosper. In O Pioneers!, to inhabit one’s
abandonment is to observe the ethical injunction to make room for such ghosts.

O Pioneers! tells a story about the settling and economic development of the
Nebraska Divide, a high plateau in western Nebraska characterized by a tough sod that
was difficult to break up and farm. The novel focuses on a cluster of farming

communities on the Divide, of which Alexandra Bergson, the eldest child of John Bergson’s four children, is both foundational in the way she subsidizes and organizes the development of these communities and peripheral in that she is poor in intimate relationships. Indeed, the novel concludes with her admission, “I have been very lonely.”

O Pioneers! opens in the 1880s, when the farmers on the Divide are struggling to survive and most of who are indebted due to a combination of drought and crop failure, exacerbated by their lack of knowledge of how to farm the high land. During the “three years of drouth [sic] and failure,” about which Cather writes in the first section of her novel, Lou and Oscar Bergson, Alexandra’s brothers, lose everything they invested in their corn crop, a loss that is representative of a widespread struggle. Cather writes:

The whole country was discouraged. Farmers who were already in debt had to give up their land. A few foreclosures demoralized the country. The settlers sat about on the wooden sidewalks in the little town and told each other that the country was never meant for men to live in; the thing to do was to get back to Iowa, to Illinois, to any place that had been proved habitable.

The novel follows the consequences of Alexandra’s decision to remain on the Divide when many of her neighbors are losing faith in the land’s capacity to grow anything. Alexandra convinces her brothers to mortgage the homestead their father bequeathed them and to use the money from that mortgage to buy up the literally abandoned farms surrounding them. Through indebting themselves, the Bergsons are able to weather “the

\[\text{\textsuperscript{2}}\] Ibid., 161.
\[\text{\textsuperscript{3}}\] Ibid., 17.
storm,” and more than a decade after the drought, the Bergsons are reintroduced as wealthy farmers, and Alexandra is one of the wealthiest farmers on the Divide. What I am calling the specters of debt includes, first, the injuries of the debt economy, such as those dispossessed of their farms—a dispossession from which Alexandra profits even as she laments the depopulation of the Divide. It includes, second, the condition of indebtedness as itself a specter, one that at once hangs over the novel’s characters and underwrites their subjectivity. *O Pioneers!,* I argue, is as much a story about upward mobility and the accumulation of wealth for those able to survive hard economic and environmental conditions as it is a story about the disenfranchisement of the pioneer farmers that made such conspicuous accumulation of wealth possible but that also continues in Cather’s novel to haunt the country in its prosperity, to remind its inhabitants that their prosperity arose from abandonment. To inhabit abandonment in this sense is not about embracing one’s poverty but is, rather, about allowing the injuries that remain from the debt economy to unsettle ways in which that economy continues to inform the organization of the community.

The historical scholarship on the settlement of the Midwestern United States has, indeed, been widely framed in terms of the relationship between debtor and creditor. In his history of debt, David Graeber notes the series of recessions in the late 19th century

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that led to a “massive wave of foreclosures”\textsuperscript{5} in the Midwest. Likewise, debtors comprised a large portion of the constituencies of the emergent Populist movement and the Free Silver platform.\textsuperscript{6} The Populist movement, for example, was directed against the banks, furnishing merchants, and railroads that were able to keep farmers “in a state of indebtedness, poverty, and near peonage,”\textsuperscript{7} in part because of the Midwestern farmer’s dependence “on outside markets and prices” the they could not control.\textsuperscript{8} As Douglas Hurt similarly recounts in \textit{The Big Empty}, “bankers charged usurious interest rates of 10 percent or more, and with local merchants charging even higher rates, farmers could not afford to borrow money for improvements, whether to buildings, crops, or livestock . . .”\textsuperscript{9} It is not within the scope of this project to recount all of the exploitative practices of the frontier economy that buried pioneer farmers in debt or that resulted in foreclosures of their homesteads. Cather passes over the specific practices and structure of the debt economy in \textit{O Pioneers!} anyway. Rather, I offer a brief account of the economic history of the Plains to suggest that a debt-based economic reading of Cather understands what many literary scholars have observed to be a celebration and idealization of capitalism

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  \item \textsuperscript{5} David Graeber, \textit{Debt: The First 5,000 Years} (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2011), 53.
  \item \textsuperscript{6} The Free Silver platform, on which William Jennings Bryan campaigned in 1896 and 1900, “vowed to replace the gold standard with a bimetallic system that would allow the free creation of silver money alongside gold.” Ibid., 52. This monetary policy would inflate the value of silver, redistributing wealth to the indebted and making it easier for them to pay off their debts.
  \item \textsuperscript{7} David Wrobel, \textit{The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal} (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 18.
  \item \textsuperscript{8} Ibid., xiv.
\end{itemize}
to also be accompanied by a grieving for those who were not rewarded but injured by such an economy, as well as for the potential selves, desires, and actions on which indebtedness forecloses. This grieving functions as a critique of the debt economy through the specters of injury it produces—a sort of residue or remains that persist, similar to Cather’s description of Alexandra’s personal life and self-consciousness, “like an underground river that [comes] to the surface only here and there.”10 A debt-based economic reading of Cather, then, underscores issues of foreclosure and spectrality in her novel, the murmurs of which contradict her assertion in “Nebraska” that the “country has no secrets.”11

In “Nebraska,” Cather argues that the arrest of agricultural production from 1893-1897 caused by “a succession of crop failures and by the financial depression,” and which buried so many yeoman in debt, had “a salutary effect upon the new state.” These years are glimpsed in the first section of O Pioneers! as the hard times “that brought everyone on the Divide to the brink of despair.”12 They “winnowed out the settlers with a purpose from the drifting malcontents . . . The slack farmer moved on. Superfluous banks failed, and money-lenders who drove hard bargains with desperate men came to grief.”13 Whether or not Cather’s assessment of the depression is historically accurate is

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10 Cather, O Pioneers!, 105.
11 Cather, “Nebraska,” 6. Cather describes the noise Marie makes as she is dying from a gunshot wound: “Again the murmur, like water welling out of the ground.” Cather, O Pioneers!, 138.
12 Cather, O Pioneers!, 27.
13 Ibid., 6.
beside the point at the moment. Credit generated by superfluous banks and usurious money-lenders functioned, according to Cather, to weed out both creditors and debtors who lacked the credibility and moral sensibility to become one of the great economic facts. But in “Nebraska,” Cather represents those who abandoned their farms as ultimately irrelevant—“drifting malcontents.” This is an expression of an ideology that O Pioneers!, as a literary work and, therefore, as I’ve argued throughout this study, as a form of writing capable of addressing without objectifying abandonment, interrogates. As a work of literature, O Pioneers! certainly entertains the belief that those who failed to make permanent homes on the prairie were figures of “frontier restlessness, wastefulness, and shiftless irresponsibility”\(^\text{14}\) or, for Cather, those who simply lacked imagination and fortitude. Alexandra laments that poor people can’t seem to learn from rich people, and explains to her brothers, those who are “‘running off are bad farmers . . . They couldn’t get ahead even in the good years.’”\(^\text{15}\)

Yet, in spite of Alexandra’s dismissal of failed farmers O Pioneers!, as a work of literature capable of addressing the spectral elements of abandonment that is unique to the literary mode of representation also lets specters speak; those “bad” farmers that, according to Cather’s narrative, were culled from the Prairie by the debt economy,


\(^{15}\) Cather, O Pioneers!, 32.
continue to haunt or return to the Divide in Cather’s first Nebraska novel.\textsuperscript{16} The resistance of \textit{O Pioneers!} to fully discredit these figures works to reimagine the sociality that gets formed at “the end of the earth”\textsuperscript{17} in terms of the value, or credibility, of what remains \textit{after} that sociality has been organized and exploited by the debt economy. In crediting these insolvent figures, the specters of debt in the novel, Cather imagines the inhabiting of abandonment as an attempt to reconstitute the forms of relation or possibilities for action that indebtedness forecloses.

Literary scholars have described Cather as a conservative author precisely because she tells the story of empire, colonization, and the capitalist market in the U.S. through the lens of prosperity rather than and, indeed, exclusive of exploitation and violence. Hence, Alexandra attributes foreclosures on the Divide and the abandonment of homesteads to poor farming and mismanagement rather than to “inadequately regulated land speculation” that “served to increase mortgage or loan debt”\textsuperscript{18} over the course of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, when the novel opens. This chapter is not interested in doing a revisionist reading of Cather, focusing on who or what she leaves out from her narrative of the settling of the Midwest, but rather seeks to shift focus to the predominance of indebtedness in \textit{O Pioneers!}, and the relationship of her characters to their indebtedness as that from which her narrative proceeds. It is in this relationship to

\textsuperscript{16} Borrowing the phrase of letting specters speak from Derrida’s \textit{Specters of Marx} (1994).
\textsuperscript{17} Cather, \textit{O Pioneers!}, 18.
\textsuperscript{18} Marshall, \textit{Land Fever}, 93.
indebtedness that one can begin to see that the figures of dispossession Cather leaves out in fact inhabit or haunt the Divide as what Derrida would refer to as an absent presence, and that _O Pioneers!_ understands this haunting as having ethical implications.

The literature I examine in this study imagines the inhabiting of abandonment not as seeking recognition within dispospossessory structures but as resignifying those structures. Yet, _O Pioneers!_ celebrates not only the ways in which American capitalism provided the opportunity for upward mobility to the nation’s poor immigrants, but also the role of credit in allowing a population without capital to make investments in their property and to thereby increase their chances of success and, by extension, recognition. Although Cather, and _O Pioneers!_ specifically, envisioned American capitalism from the late 19th-century to early 20th-century as having enfranchised a great number of immigrants and poor whites, her first Nebraska novel, in spite of its exclusion of race and the working-class, further envisions the practice of ethical relation towards those whom American capitalism injured or failed. This attempt to inhabit a sociality built around the specters of debt is an important narrative within _O Pioneers!_ that risks getting lost in readings of Cather that seek to rectify her tendency to misrepresent or evade the actual conditions of violence and exploitation on the frontier. Alexandra’s ability to inhabit her abandonment, through a certain understanding of or comfort with debt—
“the apparition of the bodiless body of money”\textsuperscript{19}—is the same ability that allows her to live, borrowing from Derrida, in companionship with ghosts,\textsuperscript{20} those to whom, Derrida argues, we owe our subjectivity.

“For thousands of years,” David Graeber argues, “the struggle between rich and poor has largely taken the form of conflicts between creditors and debtors—arguments about the rights and wrongs of interest payments, debt peonage, amnesty, repossession, restitution” and so forth.\textsuperscript{21} Alexandra’s indebting herself by mortgaging her homestead in order to buy up, as I already mentioned, the abandoned farms that surround her is an act of imaginative inhabiting because it signifies her ability to see what is not yet realized, the potential richness of the high land that is only pretending to be poor.\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, the abandonment of or foreclosure on farms on the high land of the Divide in \textit{O Pioneers!} makes Alexandra’s purchasing of them and consequent wealth possible. In other words, abandonment, not just of the Plains but of Alexandra herself, as she is left behind during the drought to “face the worst of it,”\textsuperscript{23} is the condition that makes possible both her wealth and the ability of other pioneers to profit from the inhabiting of abandonment,

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\item Ibid., xviii.
\item Graeber, \textit{Debt: The First 5,000 Years}, 8.
\item Cather, \textit{O Pioneers!}, 61.
\item Ibid., 28.
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4.2 Buried in Debt

*O Pioneers!* opens in the early 1880s on the Nebraska Divide, which, as Cather describes it, hasn’t yet been domesticated or proved farmable, unlike the valley to the East, which has already been populated with affluent river farms.24 At the opening of the novel, in other words, the economic future of the Divide is still uncertain and precarious, as “the little beginnings of human society” struggle in the “sombre wastes” of the land,25 upon which human landmarks or any significant “record of the plow”26 is still absent. Alexandra Bergson, the novel’s protagonist, has just been visiting the doctor in the nearest town of Hanover, and she confides in her friend and neighbor, Carl Linstrum, that she has learned from the doctor that her father, John Bergson, “‘can’t get well’”27—that he is dying. As Carl drives Alexandra and her younger brother, Emil, back to the Bergson homestead, Alexandra tells Carl, “‘I don’t know what is to become of us, Carl, if father has to die. I don’t dare to think about it. I wish we could all go with him and let the grass grow back over everything.’”28 As Carl and Alexandra pass the Norwegian graveyard, itself overgrown with grass yet among the little evidence of human inhabitation on the Divide, Alexandra expresses a feeling to Carl that is echoed

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24 William Barillas identifies this timeline in *Midwestern Pastoral*. He suggests that Carl Linstrum’s family leaves the Divide in 1887 during the drought, which began two years earlier in 1885. Cather writes that the affairs of the Bergsons prospered for three years after John Bergson’s death, until the drought brought “the hard times.” *Ibid.* 27. This would place the opening of the novel around 1882.


28 Cather, “Nebraska,” 11.
among several other characters throughout the novel, the feeling that there is “nothing to go ahead for”\textsuperscript{29}—something like a death drive, what Cather characterizes as “that simple doorway into forgetfulness” and an aching “for that brown earth.”\textsuperscript{30} This aching is performed in the pioneer mode of inhabitation of the prairie itself: “The houses on the Divide were small and were usually tucked away in low places; you did not see them until you came directly upon them. Most of them were built of the sod itself, and were only the unescapable ground in another form.”\textsuperscript{31} That is, many of the pioneer houses were perhaps less noticeable than even the overgrown graveyard.

Immediately following this scene, Cather gives the reader a brief glimpse into John Bergson’s consciousness as he grapples with his legacy and his life on the Divide:

Bergson went over in his mind the things that had held him back. One winter his cattle had perished in a blizzard. The next summer one of his plow horses broke its leg in a prairie-dog hole and had to be shot. Another summer he lost his hogs from cholera, and a valuable stallion died from a rattlesnake bite. Time and again his crops had failed. He had lost two children, boys, that came between Lou and Emil, and there had been the cost of sickness and death. Now, when he had at last struggled out of debt, he was going to die himself. He was only forty-six, and had, of course, counted upon more time.

Bergson had spent his first five years on the Divide getting into debt, and the last six getting out. He had paid off his mortgage and had ended pretty much where he began, with the land.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{29} Cather, \textit{O Pioneers!}, 11.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 135.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 13.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 14.
Although the novel does not explain exactly why John Bergson is dying, the above passage links fatal illness with debt, both insofar as illness leads to or exacerbates indebtedness and insofar as John Bergson’s death is related to the physical toll of struggling out of debt. Indeed, Oscar, Alexandra’s oldest brother, describes pulling out of debt like “pulling a threshing-machine out of the mud; breaks your back.”

Within its opening pages, then, *O Pioneers!* establishes two concepts, which were also everyday realities of life on the Divide at the turn of the century, as intimately intertwined with each other, and which will be operative concepts within this chapter, those being debt and spectrality. As I suggest is evident in the above passage, debt is linked to spectrality through the prominent theme of death in the novel, insofar as individuals die through overexertion or exhaustion while attempting to work off their debts—something we see in *My Ántonia* in the story of the Russian bachelor farmers Pavel and Peter. That John Bergson’s death is related to his condition of indebtedness returns later in the novel when one of the French immigrants living on the Divide, Amédée, has a seizure in the wheatfield. Amédée admits to Emil, who has stopped to greet him while Amédée is reaping his crops, that he has “an awful pain” and that

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Ibid., 38.

I would also link debt and spectrality through the absence of Native Americans in Cather’s novels, insofar as debt and empire, and the violence and genocide resulting from the growth of empire, are inextricably linked, but it is also because of that almost complete absence that this argument would be difficult to develop here. For a deeper discussion of how the history of debt and empirical violence are dependent on each other, see David Graeber’s *Debt.*
something is “‘the matter with [his] insides.’” Emil advises Amédée to go to bed and call a doctor, but Amédée responds, “‘How can I? I got not time to be sick. Three thousand dollars’ worth of new machinery to manage, and the wheat so ripe it will begin to shatter next week.’”35 Emil later sees Amédée being carried out of the wheatfield after having a seizure, and he dies shortly afterward of appendicitis. The precariousness and unpredictability of agricultural markets, even when alleviated by new machinery that allows Amédée to neutralize variable conditions, such as, in this case, a short wheat crop, operates in relation to a debt economy. Even Amédée, a rich farmer, cannot take his financial security for granted, and is afraid to rest because he is anxious to either pay off a debt he incurred in order to purchase three thousand dollars of new machinery or to avoid having to take on new debts as a result of a poor harvest. In other words, debt on the Divide always looms and is something each of the novel’s characters have labored under at one point or another.

In *O Pioneers!,* to be in debt is to live in the shadow of death in this way. By extension, debt is spectral because of how it hangs over or haunts the characters in the novel. Oscar, Alexandra’s eldest brother, expresses this early on in *O Pioneers!,* lamenting that “‘All the time I was a boy we had a mortgage hanging over us.’”36 In this articulation, the mortgage seems to replace the roof of the house itself, leaving one

35 Cather, *O Pioneers!,* 127.
36 Ibid., 37.
exposed and in the open, destabilizing its infrastructure and reinforcing the parallels in the novel between dwelling and buried life. But it is also this language of debt both as shelter and undermining of shelter that invites a reading of *O Pioneers!* as a lesson in inhabiting, that is, inhabiting debt as economic abandonment, one that both forecloses on and makes possible alternative forms of sociality characterized by spectrality. Debt similarly hangs over John Bergson, whose own father, a wealthy shipbuilder, had “speculated, lost his own fortune and the funds entrusted to him by poor seafaring men, and died disgraced, leaving his children nothing.”37 Toward the end of the novel, Alexandra reveals to Emil that their father “used to have dreams about making a great fortune and going back to Sweden to pay back the poor sailors the money grandfather had lost.”38 John Bergson inherits, if not his father’s debt, than the weight and shame of that debt, which is also to say that John Bergson ending up where he began, “with the land,” makes him comparatively successful — both in relation to his father and, as we learn, in relation to the other yeoman on the Divide. To be sure, it is because he does not leave his children indebted that the Bergsons are later able to take on and pay off new debts to develop their land holdings in the midst of foreclosures and their neighbors abandoning their homesteads.

37 Ibid., 15.
38 Ibid., 123.
Finally, and more generally, debt is spectral money, often not bound to the existence of the equivalent value of bullion or coin, which, even in its material existence, is already an abstraction of value. As Graeber argues in Debt, over the course of history, “as credit became unlatched from real relations of trust between individuals, it became apparent that money could, in effect, be produced simply by saying it was there.” An example of this unlatching of credit from trust is seen in the mortgage, in which the pioneer homestead acts as security in the absence of real relations of trust. This phenomenon that Graeber describes of loaning money into existence seems to be an inversion of the forms of spectrality I discussed in previous chapters with regard to Le Sueur’s The Girl and Du Bois’s The Quest of the Silver Fleece. In each of these novels, spectrality was defined by the existence of a physical space—the abandoned warehouse, the swamp hammock—only visible to the dispossessed and nonexistent to others. I have described these spaces, therefore, as being there and not there at the same time. Debt, according to Graeber’s characterization, functions as the creation of value with no material counterpart, and which can, therefore, be called into existence by the government and owners of capital. It is, like the abandoned spaces described in the previous chapter, money that is also both there and not there, but in the inverse sense that its existence has been publicly acknowledged although there is no physical entity or

39 Graeber, Debt: The First 5,000 Years, 337.
real value behind it. The bodilessness of debt money shows all money to be an
abstraction. What’s more, debt underlies all agricultural production in *O Pioneers!*,
meaning that even something as seemingly material and close to actual value as the land
and the production of wheat, corn, and cattle, is nevertheless underwritten by the
specter of debt.

Debt, through its organization of social relations and its production of the
indebted subject, commands and conditions labor. Theorists of debt such as Graeber and
Maurizio Lazzarato have, therefore, taken issue with Marx’s conception of the base and
superstructure, arguing that it is the superstructure that, in fact, precedes the base and
that exchange never comes first. This inversion speaks to Oscar’s complaint that he and
his siblings have had a mortgage hanging over them their whole lives—this image
similarly describes infrastructure displaced by superstructure.40

In *O Pioneers!*, however, financial institutions such as the bank or the railroad are
themselves spectral; Cather offers a handful of references to the creditors—banks,
speculators, and the railroad, mainly—that drive the debt economy, but never presents
them to the reader directly. *O Pioneers!* seems to be a narrative of a debt economy from
which creditors are seemingly absent. As Alexandra’s neighbors leave the Divide during

40To provide a quick, reductive explanation of the Marxist theory of base and superstructure, according to
Marx, the base is comprised of forces and relations of production, which conditions the superstructure,
which would include cultural and political institutions. The superstructure might in turn influence the base.
the drought that lasted from 1885-1887 and “caused farms to fail on a massive scale,”

for example, we are told that “a few foreclosures demoralized the county,”

but the majority of farmers on the Divide seem to leave of their own volition, because they believe “the country was never meant for men to live in” and would not prove habitable;

and because, from Alexandra’s point of view, they were poor farmers to begin with.

In this light, abandonment in *O Pioneers!* is characterized less by the indebtedness of failed homesteads than by Alexandra’s decision to remain on the prairie while all of her neighbors leave her behind to look for factory work in the cities. Just as creditors lurk at the margins of the narrative, none of the indebted yeoman on the Divide remain as tenant farmers—an historically common result of the debt economy—since that story would require the presence of an exploitative creditor in the role of land owner.

Even the railroad, that provides the narrative frame for *My Ántonia*, is a ghost in *O Pioneers!* The railroad is mentioned once at the opening of the novel. “About the station,” Cather writes, “everything was quiet, for there would not be another train in until night.”

In *O Pioneers!,* then, the indebted subject is defined in relation to an

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42 Cather, *O Pioneers!,* 27.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 32.
abstract creditor, to, returning to my argument on Du Bois’s *Silver Fleece*, an archive.

Oscar’s resistance to mortgaging the homestead again several years after John Bergson’s death has little to do with his fear that he and his sibling won’t be able to make the interest payments, but rather, is a resistance to the archive itself: “’Maybe it’ll come out right,’” he tells Alexandra, “’But signing papers is signing papers. There ain’t no maybe about that.’”

Oscar’s opposition to signing mortgage papers may seem abstract, but it is not entirely misguided; to sign these papers is, I will argue, to commit oneself to what Lazzarato has termed “subjectivation”—the production of the subject through indebtedness that, for Lazzarato, is bound to subjection, the loss of the ability to act in meaningfully political ways or to develop a sociality that exists in excess of indebtedness, beyond the interpellation of debt. This chapter will argue that while *O Pioneers!* represents the debt economy of the an-originary condition (what Nietzsche and, developing his philosophy of debt, Lazzarato would term a genealogy) of subjectivity and sociality on the Divide, Cather, through the novel’s female protagonist, also imagines the production of a remainder of indebted subjectivity through Alexandra’s inhabiting of debt and reimagining of what it means to be indebted.

Graeber writes, “To be in debt was to have a weight placed on you by Death. To be under any sort of unfulfilled obligation, any unkept promise, to gods or to men, was

46 Ibid., 38.
to live in the shadow of Death.”47 The threat of death that Graeber refers to seems primarily to be a social death, particularly if one understands financial solvency as inextricably social viability—that is, an indebted individual is expected to “assume the way of life (consumption, work, public spending, taxes, etc.) compatible with reimbursement.”48 In O Pioneers!, this organization of sociality through debt also takes the form of an injunction to assimilation; those who fail to assimilate, culturally or ethnically, also tend to be those who mismanage their land or finances, and are marked by social marginalization. Crazy Ivar, the horse doctor on the Divide, is perhaps the most obvious example of this. He lives in self-exile in “the most inaccessible place he could find”49 on the Divide, in a sod house carved out of an earthen dam that a passerby “would not have seen . . . At all but for the reflection of the sunlight upon the four panes of window-glass” set into the hillside. “And that was all you saw,” Cather writes. “Not a shed, not a corral, not a well, not even a path broken in the curly grass. But for the piece of rusty stovepipe sticking up through the sod, you could have walked over the roof of Ivar’s dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation.”50 Ivar has marginalized himself early in the novel because he rejects the human record left on the plains—“the litter of human dwellings,” which is to say, remains that signal

47 Graeber, Debt: The First 5,000 Years, 56.
49 Cather, O Pioneers!, 20.
50 Ibid., 21–22.
consumption, inextricably bound up with the debt economy of homesteading; but also
the hiddenness of which cuts through the fundamental representability, the born-
archival character of the Midwestern frontier, discussed in the introduction to this
chapter, as one of North America’s “first planned settlements of a large region in history . . . before a single legal American settler entered the area.”
Indeed, returning to Oscar’s laments about signing his name “to them papers,” a link seems to exist between debt and representation, both in the sense that debt generates a written record and that debt, which takes the form of a pledge by the debtor, is a form of interpellation and therefore of subject production that is vaguely oppressive: the indebted subject must place a bet on his future self within “hazardous and unknown natural and economic conditions,” under which many pioneers were unable to meet the demand of a mortgage. It seems to be a form of subject production in which one’s subjectivity, like one’s housing, is always already conditional, even as rich farmers, for example, Oscar and Lou, not to mention Amédée, are haunted by past and future debts, which I will discuss in more depth shortly.

Ivar instead embraces that absence of human landmarks that Cather writes was “one of the most depressing and disheartening” things about life in a new country.

52 Cather, O Pioneers!, 37.
53 Marshall, Land Fever, 94.
54 Cather, O Pioneers!, 13.
When Cather’s narrative picks up in the second section of the novel sixteen years after John Bergson died, the Bergsons and their neighbors have become wealthy farmers, but Ivar has lost his land to mismanagement. He has a room in Alexandra’s barn, where he prefers to stay because “he dislikes human habitations.” The farmers on the Divide, however, see him as a physical threat, as well as a threat to the social fabric of their community, and are threatening to put him in an asylum. Ivar tells Alexandra that they “have built the asylum for people who are different, and they will not even let us live in the holes with the badgers. Only your great prosperity has protected me so far. If you had had ill-fortune, they would have taken me to Hastings long ago.” Ivar’s inability to assimilate is tied to his refusal to inhabit the land on the terms set out for him by the financial and political institutions that required, for instance, homesteaders who had received land through the Homestead Act to “prove up.” Ivar loses his land to mismanagement because of the consequences of resisting leaving a record of his own inhabitation, which proving up land, as the phrase suggests, necessitates. Furthermore, Ivar cannot pay off his debts, establishing himself as morally, socially, and financially solvent, if he never takes out a loan or mortgage in the first place. In other words, to fail to take on debt seems to function similarly to failing to pay off one’s debt in the sense

55 Ibid., 47.
56 Ibid., 50.
that both threaten, in *O Pioneers!*, something like a social death or living death. These figures haunt Cather’s pioneer communities in both *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia.*

Carl Linstrum is another example of an individual who has not adopted a way of life compatible with reimbursement. Not only does his family walk away from their farm with only enough to carry, but he pursues a career in wood-engraving, which is, he tells Alexandra, the only thing he cares about even though it “had gone out of style before” he began.  

In other words, he has not been financially successful and, as he tells Alexandra, he couldn’t buy even one of her cornfields. Carl becomes a highly marginalized figure upon his return to the Divide half-way through the novel, with little to show for his time away. Likewise, Cather describes him as a shadow, almost a ghost, of his former self, appearing frail and older than his years, with black hair and pale skin, “fine, relentless lines about his eyes,” and overworked. Carl later goes on to describe his way of life to Alexandra as resonant with a living death:

“Freedom so often means that one isn’t needed anywhere. Here you are an individual, you have a background of your own, you would be missed. But off there in the cities there are thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody, we own nothing. When one of us dies, they scarcely know where to bury him. Our landlady and the delicatessen man are our mourners, and we leave nothing behind us but a frock-coat and a fiddle, or an easel, or a typewriter, or whatever tool we got our living by. All we have ever managed to do is to pay our rent, the exorbitant rent that one has to pay for a few square feet of space near the heart of things. We have no house, no place, no people of our own. We live in the streets, in the parks, in the theaters. We sit in

57 Ibid., 64.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid., 61.
restaurants and concert halls and look about at the hundred of our own kind and shudder."\(^{60}\)

Carl is not simply poor. He lives outside of the debt economy, it seems; he pays rent rather than interest on a mortgage, and he has no ties, not even to the banks. For Cather, failing to pay off one’s debts or failing to take on debts in the first place is associated with the kind of social marginalization or social death that Carl describes because in both cases one has not proven himself to be financially, and by extension, socially credible. To extend this line of argument further, and returning to the role of the spectral in the novel, what Carl describes when he speaks to Alexandra about his lack of social ties is his own ungrievability: “When one of us dies, they scarcely know where to bury him.”\(^{61}\) This passage unmistakably links financial solvency not only with what one might consider a moral or credible subject—which is to say, just a subject—but also with grievability, an issue that will come up again in *My Ántonia.* Debt in *O Pioneers!* provides, therefore, a grounding for sociality, as debt, according to Graeber, has always done; only, by the turn of the century on the U.S. frontier, the indebted are bound not to each other, a social organization through debt that Graeber argues has historically generated communities, but to abstract creditors—banks, the railroads, speculators—operating within a financialization of debt that threatens to undermine the regionalism of the novel.

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 65.

\(^{61}\) Ibid.
The debt economy in *O Pioneers!* functions not only to produce an economic subject such as what Cather imagines above but also functions, as I will argue later in this chapter, to assimilate the population of immigrants on the frontier and to weed out those who did not have the resources to survive indebtedness. *O Pioneers!* nevertheless seems to be preoccupied with the question of what to do with what remains in excess of this process of subject production, that is, with the spectral and ungrievable figures that haunt the Divide. These figures are literally asylum-seekers for whom Alexandra, as the most prosperous farmer on the Divide, makes room. Ivar tells Alexandra that it is only her “great prosperity” that has protected him so far⁶² and, indeed, it is because of Alexandra’s great prosperity that she is able to deny Frank Shabata the right to plow over the remains of Carl’s old sod house, and it is because of her status in the community that she can offer asylum to other “old-time people,”⁶³ like Mrs. Lee, who have failed or who refuse to assimilate. Unlike Cather’s narrative in “Nebraska” of the sort of eradication of superfluous institutions and individuals after the Panic of 1893, *O Pioneers!* offers a much more important place to failed debtors, both above ground and below ground, as those whose presence, so to speak, reintroduces to the Divide the possibility of a sociality that is not entirely organized by debt; a sociality that, built

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⁶² Ibid., 50.
⁶³ Ibid.
among the remains of an agricultural and economic depression, works to destabilize he provincialism produced by the moral injunctions of the debt economy.

In the opening section of the novel, Lou and Oscar Bergson urge their sister to leave the Divide because, they believe, the land is too high to grow anything. Lou and Oscar want to find work in the city as Carl Linstrum and his family plan to do. Yet, when Carl returns to the Divide, Lou and Oscar are unable to empathize with his poverty and his lack of social and financial investments, in spite of the fact that they, too, would have given up their own inheritance if Alexandra had not convinced them to stay. Alexandra alone values Carl’s freedom, his ability to “move lightly and easily,” and his having experience the world outside of the Divide.

4.3 Inheritance

Discussions and acknowledgments of debt surface in O Pioneers! only here and there, but anxiety and mourning around issues of debt persistently informs the novel. Yet, while Cather begins her narrative of the settlement of the prairie within an historical moment in which indebtedness presented, at least in the public discourse, a challenge to American democratic ideals and exceptionalism, O Pioneers! ultimately diverges from the story of the monopolization of public lands. In the second section of O Pioneers!, Alexandra has accumulated enough land through the original mortgage on her

64 Ibid., 65.
homestead to establish a great farm, and the Divide is thickly populated with other rich family farms, not tenant farmers. Cather attempts to reconfigure indebtedness as an imaginative inhabiting that is linked to “a new consciousness of the country” and expresses what Alexandra feels as “almost a relation to it.” The Bergson’s indebtedness, specifically, is linked to their abandonment by their neighbors, many of whom leave the Divide during the drought. Cather’s O Pioneers! should not be read simply as an ahistorical narrative of an ideal capitalist market functioning as it’s supposed to (as the passage I cited above from “Nebraska” might suggest we read Cather), but also as a reimagining of debt as a form of relation both to the land and to spectrality.

During “three years of drouth [sic] and failure” about which Cather writes in the first section of her novel, Lou and Oscar lose everything they spend on the corn crop. With Alexandra’s direction, the Bergsons are one of the few families who remain on the Divide, as they watch all of the neighboring farmers affected by crop shortages “crawl out.” Carl Linstrum’s departure seems to sadden Alexandra the most, and Cather describes the decision of Carl’s father to sell the farm for whatever he can get, and walk away with whatever his family can carry, in terms of abandonment—not as the dispossession of the Linstrums, but rather, their abandonment of Alexandra. “You’ve

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65 Ibid., 38.
66 Ibid., 32.
stood by us through so much and helped father so many times,” Carl tells Alexandra, “and now it seems as if we were running off and leaving you to face the worst of it.” 67 Carl’s father plans to go back to his former job working in a cigar factory and Carl will apprentice himself to an engraver.

Alexandra responds to Carl’s disclosure by asking, “Is it settled?” 68—a discordant phrasing given that she is asking about the Linstrums’ failure to settle. The answer to her question could, in this light, be both yes and no, calling attention to the displacement and unsettlement underlying the debt economy of frontier settlement in the novel. Underlying the colonization and settlement of the plains, in other words, is displacement, of both Native Americans and disenfranchised pioneers, but a displacement from which Alexandra, abandoned on the plains, ultimately benefits financially. While her neighbors are determined to give up on the high plains or have been compelled to give up their homesteads to foreclosure, Alexandra works to convince her brothers to imagine the drought and crop shortages as a critical moment in which to reinvest in the land, to, as Cather writes, develop a “new consciousness of the country” that, in many ways, acts as an alternative to the antagonistic class-consciousness of the Populist movement that characters such as Lou and Frank Shabata later develop.

67 Ibid., 28.
68 Ibid.
Alexandra proposes to sell all the Bergsons’ cattle and corn to buy the Linstrum farm, and then to “‘borrow money for six years’” and with that loan, she and her brothers can buy up the surrounding abandoned land to acquire “‘upwards of fourteen hundred acres.’” “‘You won’t have to pay off your mortgages for six years,’” she tells her brothers.

“By that time, any of this land will be worth thirty dollars an acre [. . .] then you can sell a garden patch anywhere, and pay off a debt of sixteen hundred dollars. It’s not the principal I’m worried about, it’s the interest and taxes. We’ll have to strain to meet the payments. But as sure as we are sitting here to-night, we can sit down here ten years from now independent landowners, not struggling farmers any longer.”69 Alexandra’s consciousness is a speculative rather than a laboring one, a consciousness that allows her to learn from and profit by the mistakes of her neighbors, whose failing farms she buys up through taking out a mortgage on her own homestead. Alexandra’s urging her brothers to reinvest in the land is an urging them to think like the wealthy rather than the poor, which is to say, to embrace debt as a mode of generating returns from the failures of the capitalist market itself. In this way, for Cather, inhabiting abandonment is a fundamentally capitalist practice. But it is a practice that, importantly, allows Alexandra as a woman pioneer to exercise greater control over her household economy,

69 Ibid., 36.
greater independence to manage her resources, and the agency to reorient the community of the Divide around the very specters of the debt economy to whom she owes her wealth and subjectivity.\textsuperscript{70} When I speak of the specters of debt in \textit{O Pioneers!}, I include among John Bergson, and the two deceased sons who came between Lou and Emil, who we hear about but never meet, the failed farms and, with the exit of Carl Linstrum, the foreclosure of Alexandra’s reproductive potential, which I will discuss in further detail later in this chapter. Likewise, the country, after Carl tells Alexandra his family will be leaving the Divide, “already looked empty and mournful.”\textsuperscript{71}

Although for Cather the inhabiting of abandonment as Alexandra practices is essentially a capitalist practice, it resonates with \textit{The Girl} insofar as Alexandra is inhabiting a failed market space, calling attention to the propensity of capital to inhabit and reproduce itself from its own failure. But Alexandra’s acquisition of the surrounding failed farms also becomes an attempt to preserve the remains of the debt economy. When Carl returns to the Divide sixteen years after his family’s departure, Lou invites him, as somewhat of a challenge, to visit his old homestead: “‘I’ll expect you’ll be wanting to see your old place,’ Lou observed more cordially. ‘You won’t hardly know it.”

\textsuperscript{70} In \textit{The Big Empty}, Douglas Hurt briefly examines the ways in which “homesteading offered an irresistible opportunity for thousands of women.” Hurt, \textit{The Big Empty: The Great Plains in the Twentieth Century}, 5. “Homesteading,” he writes, “strengthened the influence of women in their families, and it expanded their work roles in the home and community. Homesteading reinforced the ability of women to act independently as self-determining people who took responsibility for their lives. By homesteading, single women gained access to property, managed their land, controlled their resources, and decided how to spend their money.” Ibid., 8.

\textsuperscript{71} Cather, \textit{O Pioneers!}, 30.
But there’s a few chunks of your old sod house left. Alexandra wouldn’t never let Frank Shabata plough over it.”

Alexandra’s insistence on the preservation of Carl’s old sod house returns to my claim at the beginning of this section that Alexandra’s reimagining of the inhabiting of debt is based on a sense of ethical relation, one that undermines the “morally and socially undesirable distribution of wealth” that characterized monopoly capitalism and that acts as a rejoinder to the despair demoralization of the county during “the hard times.” More specifically, Alexandra’s preservation of the remaining chunks of Carl’s old sod house works to resist the interchangeability underpinning a debt economy. Lazzarato, for example, argues that credit “not only exploits social relationships in general” through the solicitation of the morality of the debtor, the production of indebted subjects who are compelled to act and make decisions both individually and collectively that are consistent with repayment, but also exploits “the uniqueness of existence.” It does so through reconfiguring trust in others, “the belief in new possibilities in life and, thus, in some noble sentiment toward oneself, others, and the world” as, in fact, nothing more than trust in solvency. Credit “makes solvency the

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72 Ibid., 58.
73 Wrobel, The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal, 80.
74 Cather, “Nebraska,” 27.
75 Lazzarato, The Making of the Indebted Man, 60.
76 It is notable, for example, that Cather shifts away from this aspect of the capitalist debt economy in My Ántonia, and chooses to focus in her later novel on credit in spite of solvency and debt forgiveness, as seen in the relationship between the Burdens and the Shimerdas. I would argue that it is this focus on debt forgiveness that is responsible for the re-establish of heterosexual reproduction in the novel.
content and measure of the ethical relationship,” Lazzarato argues. By refusing to plough over Carl’s sod house, Alexandra reconfigures the ethical relationship as making place for insolvency, as remaining in conversation with the specter of a relationship arrested as a result of the dispossessory debt, and even to the extent that she compromises productivity insofar as the plot of land on which the remains of Carl’s house sits cannot be plowed. In this way, the remains of Carl’s sod house challenge, also, the interchangeability that characterized the original cutting up of the Midwest into parcels of land to sell, the “Jeffersonian imposition of the square” that configured “land into space” prior to legal settlement by European immigrants and in indifference to alternative modes of inhabitation and to the topographic details of the land. The intimacy to which the remains of Carl’s sod house speaks disrupts the “map like prospect of field and pasture,” just as it disrupts the logic of the specifically monopolistic debt economy that underwrote while also impeding frontier settlement.

Lou and Oscar are conversely antagonistic toward Carl’s return to the Divide. Lou says of Carl, “‘He doesn’t seem to have done much for himself. Wandering around this way!’” to which Oscar responds, “‘He never was much account.’” Lou and Oscar, having mortgaged their homestead and successfully worked off the debt, have become

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79 Cather, O Pioneers!, 57.
80 Ibid., 60.
conceited. For Cather, this conceitedness signals that they still think like poor people. Discussing their conceitedness with Alexandra, Emil suggests that Lou and Oscar “would be better off if they were poor.”\textsuperscript{81} This mode of being amounts to a failure to grieve the dark time in which they grew up and, therefore, the foreclosure of their ability to experience childhood because they “had to grow up too soon.”\textsuperscript{82} This mode of being, more specifically, prevents them from identifying with Carl’s having been injured by the debt economy and from remembering that they all struggled on the Divide together, or that if Alexandra had not appealed to them to mortgage the homestead, directed their labor to meet interest payments, and experimented with new crops and farming techniques, the Bergsons might have lost their homestead to the banks. In spite of Lou’s Populist agitation, he feels no solidarity with Carl in his poverty. In \textit{O Pioneers!} (Lou’s) political agitation, on the one hand, and (Oscar’s) consumerism, on the other hand, both constitute a failure to mourn, which is to say, the failure to converse with the specters of debt and the failure to inhabit their early abandonment on the Divide, because both are preoccupied with questions of distribution. Alexandra, however, seems more interested in the forms of social organization that a dispossessory debt economy produces and, by extension, in the possibility of reorganizing sociality around the specters of debt, a

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 124.
\textsuperscript{82} Cather, “Nebraska,” 11.
sociality that resists what Lazzarato has describes as the exploitation of social relations through understanding the insolvent to be grievable.

Carl reappears on the Divide exactly half way through O Pioneers!, prompting Alexandra to enter into an argument with her two younger brothers over an inheritance. Their father, John Bergson, had left the original homestead to his three oldest children to continue to farm together after his death. When Lou and Oscar married, the three siblings divided the land fairly, according to the courts, and according to their father’s wishes. Lou and Oscar, now both married, become concerned that Alexandra, now forty and unmarried, is considering marrying her old childhood friend. If Alexandra marries Carl, they lecture her, he would get a hold of her property, including the original homestead their father left them when he died. Alexandra responds that she plans on giving the homestead to Lou and Oscar’s children, but that she will do as she pleases with the rest of her land. Lou objects, asking “‘Didn’t all the land come out of the homestead? It was bought with money borrowed on the homestead, and Oscar and me worked ourselves to the bone paying interest on it.’”83

The question of debt is at the heart of Lou and Oscar’s argument that Alexandra’s land really belongs to them, in spite of court record, for which they provide two reasons. First, they argue that Alexandra’s farm is rightfully theirs because they

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83 Cather, O Pioneers!, 85.
“worked in the fields to pay for the first land [Alexandra] bought, and whatever’s come out of it has got to be kept in the family.”\textsuperscript{84} Lou and Oscar devalue Alexandra’s work of managing the business, of reading the papers and following the markets, and of learning “by the mistakes of their neighbors,”\textsuperscript{85} and in spite of the fact that Alexandra, through speculation and experimentation, acquired most of her land after she and her brothers had already divided the property. In this way, Cather represents the feeling of “sovereign virtue in mere bodily toil”\textsuperscript{86} as both short-sighted and narrow-minded. Lazzarato, for example, makes an important distinction between money-revenue, which, he argues, “simply reproduces power relations, the division of labor, and the established functions and roles,” on the one hand, and money-capital, which “has the ability to reconfigure those relations,”\textsuperscript{87} on the other hand. Through their identification of the production of value primarily and originally in labor, Alexandra’s brothers are arguably thinking in terms of money-revenue, the potential of which is more limited than thinking in terms of capital according to Lazzarato’s definition and as seen in Cather’s novel; in this case, Lou and Oscar seek to reaffirm traditional gender hierarchy and roles that homesteading, as briefly discussed in the previous section, challenged through offering new economic opportunities to women.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 86.  
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 15.  
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 31.  
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 74.
Alexandra, however, thinks in terms of money-capital, which, straying from Lazzarato’s characterization of capital, is a thinking that is intimately bound up with love for the land. Attempting to imagine her place in relation to past and future generations, Alexandra tells Carl: “We come and go, but the land is always there. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it for a little while.”88 Alexandra’s decision to mortgage the homestead is an expression of this understanding, her “faith in the high land” to produce new wealth for those who are willing to hold on to it. Alexandra’s comfortability with the abstraction of value, and by extension credit and debt relations, translates, for Cather, into an ability to relate to spectrality more generally. Indeed, Cather writes that a “pioneer should have imagination, should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves,”89 which is to enjoy, in other words, ideas as the specter of things. In O Pioneers!, Cather attempts to recover the conceptualization of debt as primarily an imaginative inhabiting and only secondarily and atypically exploitative of labor and social relations; and, furthermore, that an understanding of the former works to thwart the success of the latter (which is why there seem to be no landlords in the novel) in two ways. First, to inhabit the spectrality of debt as Alexandra does means, in O Pioneers!, to retain possession of one’s farm and independence; to, in other words, withhold property from one’s creditors. Second, to

88 Ibid., 160.
89 Ibid., 27.
inhabit the spectrality of debt is, as seen with Alexandra, to resist exploitative or dispossessory practices through identifying with the injuries made by the same debt economy.

Shortly after Carl has reappeared the Divide, Lou, suspicious of Carl’s time in the northeast, begins to discuss his Populist politics with him, suggesting that the working-class and poor in New York City should “march down to Wall Street and blow it up.” Carl points out that that “would be a waste of powder” because the “same business would go on in another street. The street doesn’t matter.”90 Lou’s attempt at provocation reveals that his understanding of capital is rooted in materiality, in the specifies of place and the material resources that belong to and characterize it, rather than in a recognition and dialogue with its bodiless existence, its fundamental immateriality, as an abstraction of value or, rather, as an idea.91 Likewise, both Lou and Oscar value production through labor over Alexandra’s knowing and brokering of market forces, forces that are less an effect of material—in this case, agricultural—production but that, in fact, precede and organize the mode of production, both labor and supply.

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90 Ibid., 59.
91 William Jennings Bryan, the Populist leader who campaigned on the Free Silver platform, which Lou refers to in his conversation with Carl, vowed “to replace the gold standard with a bimetallic system that would allow for the free creation of silver money alongside gold.” Cather, “Nebraska,” 52. Lou thus simultaneously expresses an ignorance of the additional level of abstraction from value that the Free Silver platform called for.
The rationale behind Lou and Oscar’s claim that Alexandra is not at liberty to sell her own land, then, is based on a fundamental misreading of the capitalist economy, in which all money is debt-money. More specifically, the conversation that takes place between Lou and Carl about Wall Street further reveals that underpinning the agricultural production of the Divide, which has been shown to be vulnerable to and determined by the distinct and often unpredictable ecological conditions of the region, and, by extension, underpinning the novel’s regionalist aesthetic more generally, is an interchangeability that drives the capital that subsists independently of any street or group of individuals.

Cather characterizes the Populism for which Lou speaks in *O Pioneers!* as a mode of resentment, what Barillas identifies as “the resentment of farmers against banks, railroads, manufacturers, and middlemen.” This resentment, I argue, constitutes a failure to live with ghosts, which is to say, a failure to inhabit one’s abandonment through inhabiting the spectral nature of debt and the spectrality that debt produces. Lou and Oscar’s preoccupation with redistribution resonates with what Derrida describes as an attempt to “ontologize remains, to make them present” rather than to keep company with ghosts; or, in other words, to attempt to recover abandonment rather than to inhabit it.

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Populism itself is one manifestation of such spectrality—it “gave Wall Street a scare in ninety-six” but, as Carl points out, it did nothing else; Free Silver was consistently defeated and by the time *O Pioneers!* was published in 1913, the campaign had become irrelevant. Carl also points out to Lou that, in spite of their past poverty, the Bergsons are now not only financially secure but “as rich as barons.” In *O Pioneers!*, they psychology of the debtor persists even after Alexandra’s brothers have reconciled their debts and accumulated wealth. In his history of debt, Graeber addresses the psychology of the debtor based on his reading of the diaries of indebted conquistadors. He argues that for the debtor, “the world is reduced to a collection of potential dangers, potential tools, and potential merchandise. Even human relations become a matter of cost-benefit calculation.” What Graeber describes as the cost-benefit calculation of human relationships reinforces the contention that debt exploits social relations by reconfiguring trust in others to trust in others’ solvency. Lou and Oscar’s contempt for Carl embodies this world-view of the indebted man, for whom the experience of indebtedness persists long after debts have been repaid.

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94 Cather, *O Pioneers!* 59.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 Graeber pulls this argument from the ways in which conquistadors “viewed the world that they set out to conquer,” many of whom were in debt and whose conquests were driven by the need to pay off that debt, even while those conquests generated greater debt through exploitative policies. Empires are built on debt, and wherever there is debt there is violence, according to Graeber. Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, 319.
98 Ibid.
Alexandra, however, inhabits debt in the sense that the sociality she embodies necessitates an investment in the insolvent, an investment that resists the debt economy’s exploitation of sociality. Indeed, Alexandra only feels solidarity with Frank Shabata after he has effectively exiled himself from the Divide, having murdered Marie, his wife and Alexandra’s friend and neighbor, and Emil, Alexandra’s youngest brother, for having an affair. As she attempts to come to terms with her brother’s death, Alexandra resolves to visit Frank in prison. Cather writes: “She and Frank, she told herself, were left out of that group of friends who had been overwhelmed by disaster. She must certainly see Frank Shabata. Even in the courtroom her heart had grieved for him. He was in a strange country, he had no kinsmen or friends, and in a moment he had ruined his life.”98 Her visit to Frank in Lincoln, which she couples with a visit to Emil’s university campus, is just one way she seeks out the company of the specters of those left injured—the socially or morally insolvent if not financially insolvent—by life on the Divide as a way to relieve the loneliness she suffers as a consequence of her early abandonment on the Divide. During her visit, Alexandra vows to Frank that she will vigorously advocate for his being pardoned. In doing so, Alexandra refuses the role of creditor, to whom Frank owes a debt for killing her brother; rather, she reinstates herself as a debtor, in some way partly responsible for Emil’s affair with Marie and, therefore,

98 Cather, O Pioneers!, 150.
for Frank’s imprisonment. Alexandra’s refusal to blame Frank enacts a forgiveness of debt that Cather will pick up again in *My Ántonia*.

Alexandra’s keeping company with these spectral figures renews her sense of purpose, prevailing over the simultaneous lurking feeling that “[w]hat was left of life seemed unimportant.” In other words, it is the characters whose futures have been foreclosed on that stimulate, for Alexandra, an awareness in the similarly spectral potentiality that is not immediately present to her. For example, after Emil has been buried, Alexandra gets caught in a heavy rainstorm while visiting his grave. When Ivar drives out to the graveyard to retrieve her, she appears to him as “a white figure” and “a drowned woman”—in other words, like a ghost, herself. As Ivar drives Alexandra home, she tells him:

> “Ivar, I think it has done me good to get cold clear through like this, once. I don’t believe I shall suffer so much any more. When you get so near the dead, they seem more real than the living. Worldly thoughts leave one. Ever since Emil died, I’ve suffered so when it rained. Now that I’ve been out in it with him, I shan’t dread it. After you once get cold clear through, the feeling of the rain on you is sweet. It seems to bring back feelings you had when you were a baby. It carries you back into the dark, before you were born; you can’t see things, but they come to you, somewhat, and you know them and aren’t afraid of them.”

Alexandra’s risking her health, because it brings her near the dead, most immediately gives her a sense of new potential for her life and the lives of those around

99 Ibid.
100 Ibid., 147.
101 Ibid., 147–48.
her. But that she risks her health in a rainstorm is additionally significant in light of the fact that the farmers on the Divide have suffered through long droughts that left many of them indebted, impoverished and desperate, “overwhelmed by disaster,” and their homesteads foreclosed on. Precipitation improved chances for agricultural success and therefore for increased expansion of U.S. empire, economically and through colonization. Intimacy with the dead is one means by which Alexandra can experience “something besides” the cornfields that makes work worthwhile.102

The second argument that Oscar provides to defend his claim that the “‘property of a family really belongs to the men of the family, no matter about the title” is an extension of the first argument. If “‘anything goes wrong,’” he says, “‘it’s the men that are held responsible.’”103 Oscar never explains why he thinks that only the men are held responsible if something “goes wrong,” something such as crop failures compelling Midwestern farmers to take on more debt. Not only do Lou and Oscar fail to extend credit to Alexandra for her contributions to the development of their farm, but Oscar’s claim that only men are held responsible, meaning only men are vulnerable to the uncertainties of agricultural development, further suggests that Alexandra’s brothers do not see women as credible and creditable subjects of the debt economy, perhaps because they were not traditionally heads of the household. With the exception of Alexandra, O

102 Ibid., 65.
103 Ibid., 86.
*Pioneers!* imagines the indebted subject as essentially male, or, rather, men in *O Pioneers!* imagine themselves primarily responsible for debts. Yet Alexandra, like her brothers, also suffers the shame of indebtedness, although the confidence she has in the land prevents her from developing the feelings of indignation over her indebtedness that her brothers express. Alexandra reminds Carl: “‘As for me, you remember when I began to buy land. For years after that I was always squeezing and borrowing until I was ashamed to show my face in the banks.’”\(^{104}\) Lou and Oscar, however, do not see their sister as fitting within the logic of solvency or insolvency to the extent that they cannot imagine a woman being held responsible for misfortune. But Alexandra similarly fails to extend credit to her brothers. As she discusses her debt with Carl, she claims that neither she nor her brothers are responsible for their wealth but rather that the land “‘worked itself.’” “‘And it was so big, so rich,’” she says, “‘that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still.’”\(^{105}\) Alexandra’s comment betrays her own miscalculation of the back-breaking labor required for the Bergsons to make the interest and tax payments on their mortgage; it expresses the perspective of a speculator, subordination physical labor to intellectual labor, more than that of an inhabitant of the Divide who has witnessed the

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 61. Alexandra’s acknowledgment of her relationship with the banks is one of the few times in *O Pioneers!* we hear about a creditor.
\(^{105}\) Ibid., 60.
ways in which debt extracts labor to the extent it cuts lifespans short. Indeed, her own father, dying at only fort-six, had “counted upon more time.”

Considering Alexandra’s habit of keeping company with those injured by the capitalist debt economy or excluded from the wealth it generates, she is, remarkably, unable to understand the injurious effect of debt on her own brothers. Cather writes: “Like most of their neighbors, they [the Bergson brothers] weren’t meant to follow in paths already marked out for them, nor to break trails in a new country.” But this passage only calls attention to the ways in which westward expansion and the settlement of the plains was subsidized by the state, which helped to clear the path through the forcible removal of Native Americans. Cather’s narrative here seems to work to both disavow and call attention to the violence and dispossession underlying Plains settlement and, as Graeber argues, always a condition of the debt economy. Where there is debt, Graeber argues, there is violence. Yet, *O Pioneers!*, a novel, I argue, largely about debt, is oddly without guilt.

**4.4 Reproduction**

It seems that the majority of farmers in *O Pioneers!* are men, while their wives are in charge of the domestic economy of the household. And the majority of farmers named at the beginning of the novel, who sell their farms, are also men. John Bergson, Cather

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106 Ibid., 14.
107 Ibid., 27.
tells us, would have much rather have seen the skill and foresight of his own father in his sons, rather than in his daughter, “but it was not a question of choice.” All of this is to say that, as a woman farmer, Alexandra is exceptional in *O Pioneers!* But it is also to point out that the majority of those who left the Divide during the drought, early in the novel, were bachelors or yeoman and their wives, leaving Alexandra with few viable suitors. Alexandra’s prosperity, in other words, results in a deep loneliness, while her brothers’ prosperity enable their marriages and reproduction. The extent of that loneliness is glimpsed when Carl asks Alexandra if her neighbors are pleased with her, and Alexandra responds, “‘Well, sometimes. The men in town, at the banks and the county offices, seem glad to see me.’” This would suggest that the motivating relationship in Alexandra’s life is her relationship with her former creditors. After Carl determines that he must go away a second time, after Lou and Oscar have confronted him about his relationship with their sister and his inability to offer anything, financially, to the farm, Alexandra complains, “‘I wonder why I have been permitted to prosper, if it is only to take my friends away from me.’” One might speculate that Alexandra’s childlessness is at least in part a consequence of the debt economy that caused the Linstrums to sell their farm and leave the Divide when Carl and Alexandra were still young. It would be a mistake to assume that Alexandra would have wanted

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108 Cather, *O Pioneers!*, 15.
109 Ibid., 69.
110 Ibid., 93.
children, or would have wanted to marry earlier in her life, but I would argue that, at
the very least, the instability of settlement that marked the period of her youth would
have allowed her to evade the injunction to reproduce. Even when Carl returns to the
Divide, when Alexandra is forty and others see her marrying as ridiculous because she
is considered too old to reproduce, their relationship could be described as sentimental
rather than romantic or driven by desire. But in either scenario, the debt economy in O
Pioneers! interrupts reproductive normativity. Alexandra’s non-reproductive role in O
Pioneers! summons my earlier argument, borrowed from Lazzarato, that money-revenue
is essentially reproductive and money-capital is a mode of organizing that reproduction.
Alexandra does not have a family of her own, as her brothers have, but as one of the
wealthiest farmers on the Divide, she has the power to attempt to reorganize the
sociality of her community around the specters of debt, the same debt that its current
inhabitants have survived.

Although Alexandra actively chooses to stay on the Divide, perhaps because her
settlement there offers her greater opportunity for independence than laboring in a
factory in the city might offer a woman, her being left there by her friends speaks to a
larger pattern in the novel in which women, as vehicles for reproduction, go to waste on
the plains. Marie Shabata, who is murdered before she and Frank have children, feels
imprisoned on the plains in her marriage to her husband. But Emil, who is in love with
her, has the freedom, she remarks, to go away and “leave all this behind him.” Indeed, one of the primary reasons Alexandra is determined to hold on to the farm and settle on the Divide when so many of her neighbors are giving up on farming it is because she wants Emil to have an education and the freedom to pursue an independent life, in spite of her deep ambivalence about his leaving. Perhaps it is Alexandra’s exceptional loneliness that makes her being left behind on the Divide, as a woman farmer, truly an abandonment, and that compels her to live with spectral life.

As Lou and Oscar argue with Alexandra over her possible marriage to Carl and the threat this poses to their children’s inheritance of her property, they accuse Alexandra of having been too hard on them, having driven them to labor to be able to make the interest and tax payments on their mortgage when they were still poor. Alexandra counters, “I never meant to be hard. Conditions were hard. Maybe I would never have been very soft, anyhow; but I certainly didn’t choose to be the kind of girl I was. If you take even a vine and cut it back again and again, it grows hard, like a tree.” Alexandra points here to the specter of her own subjectivity—a subject that, for example, did not have to grow up too soon, or had the chance live harder like the young

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111 Ibid., 121.
112 Graeber argues that what is essential about the psychology of debt is that “the debtor . . . feels he has done nothing to deserve being placed in his position; the frantic urgency of having to convert everything around oneself into money, and rage and indignation at having been reduced to the sort of person who would do so.” Graeber, Debt: The First 5,000 Years, 325.
113 Cather, O Pioneers!, 87.
people she sometimes envies. Alexandra’s statement references the foreclosure of potentialities as a result of debt at the same time that it gestures toward her ability to inhabit those potentialities as the specters of debt. Trees, in *O Pioneers!*, are markers of human inhabitation on the plains, where the country, before its development, otherwise seemed abstract and without landmarks. Trees provide landmarks on an undifferentiated plain that makes the country more navigable. The orchard that Alexandra planted on the Shabata farm signifies domesticity, proof of the inhabiting of what many pioneers believed to be uninhabited country. Trees were also believed, though incorrectly, to bring rain and were planted to increase the chances of agricultural success. Alexandra’s comment points not simply to a failure (or a refusal) to reproduce, but also to a set of potential subjectivities, actions, and ways of relating to others, including her those belonging to her brothers, that never came into being because the necessity of taking on and working off debt foreclosed on them.

The ways in which debt forecloses not just on homes but on ways of being in the world is central to Lazzarato’s argument in *The Making of the Indebted Man*. Although Lazzarato is writing in the context of the post-1979 financial economy, and more specifically in the context of the recent housing bubble, his broader characterization of indebtedness provides an interesting lens through which to understand aspects of *O

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114 Ibid., 63.
Pioneers! that literary criticism has not addressed. Lazzarato argues that debt does not simply exploit labor and, by doing so, increase productivity; debt also “breeds, subdues, manufactures, adapts, and shapes subjectivity.” Debt extends work to include “work on the self.” Cather represents this process, for example, in the resistance many of the farmers on the Divide display toward taking risks, or experimenting with new methods and technologies, even where those technologies are themselves designed to reduce risk and increase predictability. But it is also evident in Alexandra’s ability to prosper through the subversion of her own personality. Cather writes that Alexandra’s “own realization of herself . . . was almost a subconscious existence,” but that “it was because she had so much personality to put into her enterprises and succeeded in putting it into them so completely, that her affairs prospered better than those of her neighbors.” Alexandra, it seems, buries her personal life or, rather, adapts it to the purposes of credibility and solvency. This mode of being stands in contrast to Marie’s; Marie is less able to resolve herself to the absence of possibility, difference, or rupture on the Divide. Cather writes:

The years seemed to stretch before her like the land; spring, summer, autumn, winter, spring; always the same patient fields, the patient little streets, the patient lives; always the same yearnings, the same pulling at the chain—until the instinct to live had torn itself and bled and weakened for the last time, until the chain secured a dead woman, who might cautiously be released.

116 Cather, O Pioneers!, 105.
117 Ibid., 135.
Within the debt economy of *O Pioneers!*, Marie is insolvent because she ultimately refuses indebted subjectivity. I do not mean that she is personally in debt or refuses to take on debt. By indebted subjectivity, I mean the subject who has adapted him or herself to the possibility of debt or the need for credit through adopting the morality and domesticated self-constitution that a debt economy necessitates. In this sense, debt exceeds the individual or indebtedness per se; its regulations are not limited to those with a mortgage, past or present. It makes sense, then, that a novel that tells a story about domesticity, the domestication of wild land and the domestic economy of the household, would also tell a story about debt as a foundation or that domestication. For Marie, to be solvent is to be not quite living—“a dead woman, who might cautiously be released,” an attitude that refers back to the relationship between debt and death that I argued at the beginning of this chapter pervades *O Pioneers!* Death, here, does not only indicate physical death but, as I discussed, also includes social death or spiritual death. And the relationship between debt and death is not simply a causal relationship, although in some cases it can be, but rather, debt and death seem to intersect or occupy the same topography and the same narrative space.

Marie fears that she is going to waste because she feels deprived of “the future, that is, time as decision-making, choice, and possibility,”118 a future, for example with

Emil, but on which the morality of debt forecloses. “It is these possibilities and the unpredictable alternatives,” Lazzarato argues, “that debt seeks to neutralize” through warding off “Every potential ‘deviation’ in the behavior of the debtor the future might hold.” In *O Pioneers!* These are the patient fields, streets, and lives that have been thoroughly formed by the condition of indebtedness that launches Cather’s narrative. The neutralization of time, the feeling that life is “just the same thing over and over” that drives people to fantasize about their own deaths, takes the form of spatialization of time. The specter of debt that haunts the characters in Cather’s novel thus also creates its own specters that take the form, for instance, of memories of future selves, alternative forms of relation, actions or political formations, or the social unrest first neutralized by free land and later neutralized by the increasing debt that has been linked to the closing of the frontier. These specters never materialize because, as Alexandra describes it, the possibility of those things has been cut back again and again.

The “task of a community or society,” Lazzarato writes, “has first of all been to engender a person capable of promising, someone able to stand guarantor for himself in the creditor-debtor relationship, that is, capable of honoring his debt.” In this light, one can read Marie’s brief affair with Emil as a failure to keep her promise as a married

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119 Ibid., 70.
120 Ibid., 45.
121 Cather, *O Pioneers!* 65.
woman, a failure that is the crux of her insolvency. The result is an act of violence that ruptures the seeming continuity of the novel and the plains. The consequence of this violent rupture is a more noticeable absence of reproductive potential in the novel.

Frank and Marie never have children. Emil is the only Bergson who is born in the United States and has not been assimilated to debt and who, therefore, is the only one of John Bergson’s children “who was fit to cope with the world, who had not been tied to the plow, and who had a personality apart from the soil.” Alexandra reflects that the possibilities such independence holds for Emil’s life is “what she had worked for.” But when Emil is murdered along with Marie, everything Alexandra had worked for and the loneliness she endured, suddenly becomes fruitless. While Lou and Oscar have children, they exist only in the margins of the novel. Cather spends a brief amount of time on only one child, Oscar’s daughter Milly, but after Oscar and Lou drive Carl out of the country, Alexandra cuts ties with her brothers and they do not appear in the novel again. Derrida writes of the “ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead” as a “non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present.” I would include among these ghosts those that might have been born but the potential of which suffered a foreclosure. Derrida argues that the practice of responsibility and respect “for justice concerning those who are not there, of those who are no longer or who are not yet present

123 Cather, O Pioneers!, 112.
and living” unhinges the present.\textsuperscript{124} Alexandra, in her practice of respect for these ghosts, the traces of what is not present, unhinges the seeming continuity and sense of duration of the Great Plains. In this way, although debt, I argue, interferes with reproductive potential in \textit{O Pioneers!}, Alexandra’s insistence on inhabiting that debt is a way to experience this spectrality as potentiality in itself—alternative forms of relation, sociality, and action dwell in that non-contemporaneity.

\subsection*{4.5 Debt Forgiveness}

\textit{O Pioneers!} concludes with Alexandra’s decision to marry Carl and an uncertainty over who will inherit her land when she dies but also, with Emil killed, an uncertainty over who will inherit Alexandra’s and John Bergson’s legacy. The debt under which Alexandra’s brothers and her neighbors labor is simultaneously the specter of abandonment, which abides throughout the novel, and a form of imaginative inhabiting insofar as Alexandra’s willingness to mortgage the homestead is a bet on the potential of the land on the Divide to produce rich crops. Yet this inhabiting of debt results in the novel, at least indirectly, in Alexandra’s not marrying until middle-age. Toward the end of \textit{O Pioneers}, Alexandra forgives a debt when she forgives Frank Shabata for murdering her Emil, the only child of John Bergson who was born in the Americas. Frank stole something from Alexandra, someone (Emil) and something (an

idea) in which she had invested resources. By forgiving Frank, she is releasing him of his obligation to make this loss up to her. *My Ántonia*, Cather’s third Nebraska novel published in 1917, picks up on the possibilities of this forgiveness of debt and offers a more optimistic, less uncertain, vision of future generations. If debt, as Lazzarato argues, possesses the future by creating a sense of time without possibility or foreseeable (productive) rupture, then it seems that the forgiveness of debt would reopen these potentialities. Cather explores this narrative in *My Ántonia*, which concludes with an introduction to Ántonia’s many American-born children, enough that even though she and her husband run a prosperous farm, they cannot accumulate wealth because of the resources it takes to raise such a large family. Jim Burden, the narrator, is made dizzy by the emergence of Ántonia’s children from the family’s fruit cave: “They all came running up the steps together, big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight.”

Jim Burden’s reference to the dark cave in this passage references the cave in which Ántonia lived as a young girl when her family, the Shimerdas first arrived on the Plains. In *My Ántonia*, the Shimerdas, a family of Bohemian immigrants, arrive in Black Hawk, Nebraska to discover that the plot of land they purchased has no house, only a subterranean dugout typical of many early pioneer dwellings. Their relationship with

their Anglo-American neighbors, the Burdens, is defined through much of the novel by private debts, as the Shimerdas rely on the Burdens for their survival. The Burdens provide the Shimerdas with food and tools for much of their time on the Plains. At one point, Jim’s grandfather agrees to sell Mrs. Shimerda a cow, which she will pay off in installments. But Mrs. Shimerda is unable to meet this debt and is afraid that the Burdens will reclaim the cow, which she needs for milk for the family. When Jim and his grandfather find Mrs. Shimerda attempting “to hide the cow in an old cave in the bank one day,” Jim’s grandfather tells her she doesn’t need to pay him anything more for the animal, and that she can keep it. “‘You need not pay me anything more; no more money. The cow is yours,’” he tells her. Mrs. Shimerda responds by running after the Burdens and “crouching down behind grandfather, she took his hand and kissed it.”126

One way in which debt exploits social relationships, as Lazzarato has discussed, is through linking social solvency with financial solvency. The Shimerdas are neither socially nor financially solvent; not only are they incapable of repaying their debts, but Cather represents them as extremely ungracious and lacking in the ability or business intelligence to profitably farm their plot. In a debt economy, writes Lazzarato, trust, “the condition for action, becomes universal distrust, turning into a demand for ‘security.’”127 Yet the Burdens continue to lend the Shimerdas equipment, to bring them food and keep

126 Ibid., 127.
them alive through cold winters, and to refuse to demand any kind of security on the cow the grandfather attempts to sell them. Solvency is not, in *My Ántonia*, a condition for granting credit.

In *O Pioneers!*, however, the debt that hangs over the novel’s characters is the kind of debt that is based on interchangeability, anonymity, and abstraction, the abstraction of formal debts that not only undermines the novel’s regionalism but also undermines the ability of the narrative to productively imagine the flourishing of an American-born generation. *My Ántonia* focuses on social debts and community debts, rather than formal debt to financial institutions, mortgages, or the threat of losing one’s farm, and the novel can, therefore, also think about the forgiveness or cancelation of debts. Departing from the anonymity and interchangeability underlying formal debts, the Burden’s refusal to calculate what they are owed is a kind of humanism that, as Graeber describes it, “avoids reducing each other to slaves through debt.”128 This forgiveness of debt allows Cather to re-establish heteronormative reproduction of the national subject. Furthermore, not only does *My Ántonia* reposition debt as constitutive rather than destructive of community relationships, but it also shifts focus from accumulating capital and noticeable differences in wealth, as we see in *O Pioneers!* to a balance between production and consumption for the sustenance of family life.

128 Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, 79.
Returning to the fruit cave at the end of the novel, then, the dark cave, initially an image of the Shimerdas’ destitution, is turned into an image of not just reproduction but unrestrained reproduction. This transformation of the representation of debt and, by extension, capital, from her 1913 to her 1917 novel could in itself constitute the development of an aesthetic of habitat.
5. Conclusion

I chose to write about the three texts that this study examines the most closely—Meridel Le Sueur’s *The Girl*, W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, and Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!*—because in each of them, I have argued, is a unique articulation of what it means to inhabit abandonment and a struggle with how, or whether, to represent those habitats. Abandonment encompasses very real material processes and conditions: poverty, exploited labor, racial discrimination and violence. I have suggested in my examination of Le Sueur, Du Bois, and Cather that to represent abandoned subjects is to risk recovering those subjects from their abandonment, to introduce them to an archive, negating whatever political potential the conceptions and practices abandonment might have. Le Sueur, Du Bois, and Cather thus address the driving question of this dissertation: how does literature negotiate the relationship between those who are abandoned—that is, those who live on the margins of representation—and its own practice of representation? In attempting to rethink representation through literature, theses texts also offer a rethinking of subjectivity. The subject has typically been thought of as essentially a matter of representation, so the abandoned subject, which both seeks and resists representation, stands out as a paradox. Yet, Le Sueur, Du Bois, and Cather remain invested in the potential of that paradoxical figure.

In my chapter on Le Sueur’s *The Girl*, I argue that for Le Sueur, inhabitation is a form of persisting and a rearticulation of subjectivity that emerges in abandoned spaces.
Le Sueur begins this rearticulation with the problem of “being” when one’s being is illicit or illegitimate. The problem of being is essentially a matter of existing solely within public and therefore being denied the ability to properly constitute a public insofar as publicness is reliant on becoming. One cannot become public if he or she is already relegated to that space, if his or her life is already expropriated and exposed.

The concept of habitat thus enters in to Le Sueur via this critique of public. Habitat in this chapter is an alternative to thinking about the public/private dichotomy. For the same reason, in my reading of The Girl I do not want to simply assert subjectivity, as it is bound up with representational politics and therefore with publicity, uncritically.

Inhabiting abandonment in Le Sueur is both an alternative and a critique of the kind of representation built into publics. Inhabiting is provisional and temporary, but it is also what one does when one has been abandoned. Le Sueur links her critique of a (liberal) politics of representation—via the inhabiting of abandonment—with an aesthetic that likewise challenges conventional modes of literary representation. By challenging the generic expectations of proletarian literature, Le Sueur challenges the work of representation itself, imagining new forms for speaking to the abandoned people and spaces that eschew representation, in their abandonment, by more traditional means.

As discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation, one way in which Le Sueur attempts to rethink subjectivity in The Girl is through references to ecological modes of being, which emphasizes proximity and affinities over recognition. In my chapter on Du
Bois’s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, I pick up this ecological thread and develop it further in relation to the specificities of rural space, as well as to a black radical tradition. In *Silver Fleece*, I argue, the ecological presents a counter-epistemology to that of the representational logic of the plantation landscape or an archival logic that operates according to exclusion and dispossession. Monique Allewaert, for example, whose work heavily informed my chapter on Du Bois, looks to ecology as a way to “build stories about places and actors that archives documenting the citizen subjects of print culture cannot.”

Ecology, like habitat, emphasizes practice over perspective or appearance. The dilemma that Du Bois approaches in *Silver Fleece* is, how can one critically recover the ecological as a mode of excess (that which is in excess of the archive) and impermanence for print culture, which would attempt to preserve it, without simultaneously destroying it? This is the dilemma inherent to the building of the settlement in which *Silver Fleece* culminates. I argued in this chapter that for Du Bois, as for Le Sueur, literature offers a potential answer to this dilemma because it enacts the tension between remaining veiled and becoming revealed that is produces habitats of abandonment in *Silver Fleece* and that makes fiction politically useful and ethically necessary. The Silver Fleece, a poetic object born out of the marginality, unnavigability, and unrepresentability of the swamp, is an example of how literary representation allows one to inhabit those “constitutively hidden” processes of production that

operate behind the archive, an ability that was not, perhaps, available in Du Bois’s social scientific writings.

Will Cather’s *O Pioneers!* approaches the concept of inhabiting abandonment by returning to an interrogation of the categories of financial success and failure that I broached in my reading of *The Girl*. Cather does this more specifically through a narrative that explores the social and anti-social functions of debt in pioneer society. In *O Pioneers!*, the pioneer farmers on the Nebraska Divide have all experienced indebtedness; they have all, for example, had to mortgage their homesteads in order to purchase equipment necessary for farming. Debt in Cather’s pioneer economy is what ultimately underpins economic growth for those who survive it. At the same time, *O Pioneers!* challenges the idea of surviving one’s indebtedness in the first place by questioning what constitutes a livable or unlivable life. The farmers who remain on the Nebraska Divide in *O Pioneers!* have all managed to pay off their debts, while those who have failed to do so have been compelled to leave the Divide and largely disappear from the novel, with the exception of Alexandra’s childhood friend, Carl. But the specter of indebtedness continues to haunt the wealthy farmers in Cather’s novel and undermine their sense of financial security and self-possession. Carl returns to the Divide, while still a poor man nearly twenty years after his family walked away from their farm, as an embodiment of that specter. For some, such as Alexandra’s brothers, the effect of this specter is to produce a populist politics that acts as a mode of resentment toward abstract financial institutions. For Alexandra, however, abandoned by her neighbors
who left the Divide because they believed it to be uninhabitable, inhabiting her abandonment means maintaining a relationship to the specters of the debt economy that allows her to make room for a liberal sociality as an alternative to what Cather criticized as an insularity and narrow-mindedness of the post-frontier Midwest. This inhabitation is, for Cather, a part of and enabled by, rather than in contrast to, the capitalist economy, even while that same economy produced abandoned subjects in the first place. According to this model, capitalist injury is ultimately productive because it compels the subjects abandoned by its economy to imagine the specter of collectivity that lies beneath it. The abandoned subject constitutes an attempt in O Pioneers! to think through injurability, grief, and grievability from within capitalism and as an embrace of capitalism.

The Girl, The Quest of the Silver Fleece, and O Pioneers!, in representing people and populations who are inhabiting spaces typically deemed uninhabitable, not only challenge ideas of which spaces are livable, but they also—returning to my introduction on Riis’s How the Other Half Lives—challenge the way we think about which lives are livable. In my last chapter on Cather which examines debt and abandonment in relation to death, grief, and spectrality, I return to this question, which I also posed in my chapter on The Girl in terms of the uneven distribution of the right to be. Judith Butler has articulated this question in terms of “Whose lives matter? Whose lives do not matter as lives, are not recognizable as living or count only ambiguously as alive? Such
questions presume that that we cannot take for granted that all living humans bear the status of a subject who is worthy of rights and protections, with freedom and a sense of political belonging.”\(^2\) By ending with a chapter on Cather’s *O Pioneers!* that explores indebted life as already a form of death, I have sought to bring this question also inherent to both *The Girl* and *Silver Fleece* to the foreground.

Bibliography


Biography

Clare Callahan was born in New York, NY on January 5, 1983. She received her B.A. in English and Anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin in 2005 and M.A. in English from Brooklyn College, CUNY in 2008. Her publications include “‘After’ Theory,” published in Theory@Buffalo in 2009 and “‘I do not want the judgment of any man’: The Unstable Animal-Human Boundary in Linguistics and Kafka’s ‘A Report to an Academy,’” published in the collection of essays Of Mice and Men: Animals in Human Culture by Cambridge Scholars Press in 2009. Clare Callahan was a Preparing Future Faculty Fellow from 2012-2013.