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[Chapter in Sharae Deckard and Stephen Shapiro (eds.), *World Literature, Neoliberalism, and the Culture of Discontent* (Palgrave, 2019)]

The Long 1970s: Neoliberalism, Narrative Form, and Hegemonic Crisis in the work of Marlon James and Paulo Lins

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Writing during his stay in the U.S. between 1938 and 1953, C.L.R. James noted a turn to sadism and cruelty in the popular arts “immediately after the consciousness of the Depression had seized hold of the country” (1993, 122). He was particularly struck by the tremendous popularity of a new form of violent gangster-detective fiction, which, he argued, was an “expression of mass response” to the turmoil unleashed by the financial crisis of 1929 (122). In a society where “there is no certainty of employment, far less of being able to rise by energy or ability,” the “individual demands an aesthetic compensation in the contemplation of free individuals who go out into the world and settle their problems by free activity and individualistic methods” (127). Gangster stories, continued James, have given to “millions a sense of active living, and in the bloodshed, the violence, the freedom from restraint to allow pent-up feelings free play, they have released the bitterness, hate, fear and sadism which simmer just below the surface” (127). The popular demand for narratives of this sort was indicative of a loss of faith in existing institutional forms of social authority and advancement. The previously hegemonic social compact was unravelling: the “political ideas of the old regime are exhausted and recognized as such by the vast majority,” declared James (159).

Some seventy years after James’ critique, another Caribbean migrant to the U.S., working in the shadow of the Great Recession of the late 2000s, produced a gangster novel as bloody and violent as anything written during the Depression. Marlon James’ *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (2014) describes the political upheavals and gang warfare that shook Jamaica in the 1970s, as well as the subsequent migration of Kingston’s gangs to the U.S. and their involvement in the cocaine trade. Many of the rude bwoys and Shotta Dons that populate *A Brief History* are lightly fictionalized versions of real gang members such as Lester Coke and Claudie Massop. Like their historical counterparts, James’ characters possess self-identities profoundly shaped by the consumption of Hollywood westerns and gangster films, the influence of which on Jamaican society has been widely noted. As Obika Gray observes, the “penetration of American popular culture [. . .] through the extensive distribution of B-grade Hollywood films and [. . .] the importation of American popular magazines, comic books and pulp fiction” was an important vector in the imposition of U.S. imperial power in the Caribbean (2004, 99). James’ complex engagement with the impact of these imported cultural forms, which owe much to the narrative conventions popularized by Depression-era gangster fictions, speaks to the history of Caribbean-U.S. relations across the ‘long’ twentieth century. But it also speaks to the specific contours of our contemporary moment: an era of hegemonic dissolution analogous to the one C.L.R. James described when analysing the popular arts of the 1930s.

Broadly speaking, the years since the financial crisis of 2007/08 have seen many of the political regimes that functioned in the global North as representatives of the neoliberal economic consensus confront a crisis of legitimacy. While it is widely recognized that neoliberalism has eviscerated working-classes worldwide, what is new about the current moment is that middle-class fractions in the U.S. and western Europe now face similar pressures as their means of social reproduction – home ownership, higher education, pension

security, and so forth – become harder to access. The critical and popular reception of James’ bloody epic, I will argue, is at least in part an expression of the response of middle-class elites in the U.S. and U.K. to the strain these pressures have placed on the hegemonic social compact. The novel itself, meanwhile, must be read against the backdrop of what Brian Meeks describes as a protracted period of hegemonic dissolution in Jamaica, one that reached a “crescendo” with the events surrounding the extradition of Christopher ‘Dudus’ Coke in 2010 (2014, 181). Coke is leader of the Shower Posse and the son of Lester Coke, whose life story provides much of the raw material for James’ narrative. In fact, *A Brief History* presents a kind of genealogy of Jamaica’s “thirty-year crisis” (Meeks 2014, 181), the roots of which lie in the fallout from the struggles of the 1970s and the subsequent neoliberal re-structuring of the island. In this way, the novel casts light on the general trajectory of historical capitalism since the beginning of the “long downturn” in the 1970s (Brenner, 2006).

In what follows, I explore James’ registration of this trajectory through a comparison with the Brazilian Paulo Lins’ equally epic novel of gangsterism and slum life, *Cidade de Deus* (*City of God*, 1997). Unlike the geographically more expansive *A Brief History*, *City of God*’s compass is limited primarily to the closed world of the titular *favela*, located on the western edge of Rio de Janeiro. Despite this limited compass, however, the “inexorable weight of contemporary history makes itself felt” in the novel’s representation of the desperate lives of its protagonists (Schwarz 2012, 227). Spanning the period from the 1960s to the early 1980s, the narrative is shadowed by the presence of the dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1985) and by the unfolding logic of the world-economy. Published in the midst of the presidency of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, during which a whirlwind of deregulation and privatization overthrew all established relations between politics and economics, *City of God* speaks to what Francisco de Oliveira calls Brazil’s “era of indeterminacy”, the impact of which was to push the political system towards “the hither side of hegemony” (2006, 5; 2007, 106).

When it comes to the possibilities generated by such periods of hegemonic dissolution, both Lins’ and James’ novels display an ambivalence reminiscent of C.L.R. James’ assessment of the loss of faith in existing forms of social authority during the Depression. For James, this crisis of legitimacy was potentially productive: the pleasure taken by the masses in the “active living” of the gangster-detective figure was expressive of the “political possibilities that slumber behind these manifestations of our times” and of a collective desire for the realization of human freedoms and potentialities hitherto thwarted by the “routinized existence” of the modern world (147). However, insofar as the expression of these desires was canalized by the social situation and the entertainment industry into the sadistic individualism of the new gangster fiction, what was in fact fostered was “the psychological preparation on a vast social scale of the most striking social and political actuality of our time – the emergence of the totalitarian state” (148). *City of God* and *A Brief History* must negotiate a similar ambivalence, each rehearsing the possibilities for both reactionary and progressive class realignments in the wake of hegemonic dissolution. The precise nature of these possibilities, however, is differentiated in the two novels by the specific social contexts and historical moments to which they respond.

City of God and *A Brief History* help to periodize the messy historical processes through which the neoliberal regime of accumulation unfolded. Three of the five sections that comprise James’ novel are set amidst the upheavals of what might be termed the ‘long’ 1970s in the Anglophone Caribbean. This period runs from the ‘Rodney Affair’ in Jamaica in 1968, when the government’s refusal to allow the radical historian Walter Rodney to re-enter the

country triggered widespread protests, to the collapse of the Grenada Revolution in 1983. During these years, the Caribbean was a crucible of revolt and reaction. Across the region, increasing dissatisfaction with the lack of progress made since independence in eliminating the colonial legacies of “racial, economic, and class oppression” led to the emergence of new social and political movements (Lewis 2013, 448). These were “to the left of the political establishments that had been erected in the wake of the constitutional changes following World War II and which gave the West Indian middle class a hold on political power” (Lewis 2013, 448). Challenging the limited constitutional decolonization achieved by bourgeois nationalist regimes, uprisings such as the Black Power Revolution in Trinidad in 1970, the Union Island revolt in 1979, and the Grenada Revolution of the same year demanded not just political sovereignty, but full economic and cultural sovereignty.

The rise in radical activity in the region prompted fresh rounds of intervention by the U.S., concerned lest another Caribbean island go the way of Cuba. These interventions formed part of the global reassertion of U.S. imperial dominance in the 1970s in response to the downturn in the world-economy. They frequently involved efforts to force countries to implement the set of economic and political policies that would eventually become known as the “Washington Consensus”. The Anglophone Caribbean’s ‘long’ 1970s, then, marks the moment when, with the post-war social democratic settlement and its corollary, constitutional decolonization, having reached an impasse, the region was confronted with the alternative pathways of socialism or neoliberal barbarism. Ultimately, the weight of imperialist pressure would ensure the latter won out: the U.S. invasion of Grenada in 1983, along with the initiation of the free-trade Caribbean Basin Initiative in the same year, signalled the region’s full integration into the neoliberal regime of accumulation and, in Rupert Lewis’ words, “brought the curtain down on Anglophone-Caribbean radicalism for the rest of [the] century” (2013, 455).

In its evocation of the politically-charged gang violence of 1970s Jamaica, *A Brief History* captures a key turning-point in this history. In the 1940s, Jamaica’s two nationalist parties began to recruit “social outlaws from among the militant Kingston poor” as their “shock troops” in the battle for office (Gray 2004, 28). The development of these political gangs was tied to the emergence of distinct urban enclaves in Kingston – garrison communities – in which “support for one party was or became overwhelming” (Meeks 2014, 171). Following the electoral victory of Michael Manley’s left-wing People’s National Party (PNP) in 1972, the struggle between the gangs assumed a more ideological stamp. Hoping to destabilize the PNP government, the U.S. began supplying arms to those groups affiliated to the right-wing opposition Jamaica Labour Party (JLP). The violence escalated and the island descended into a state of near civil war. James’ novel not only makes explicit reference to these events, but also stresses their wider geopolitical significance – not least by having one of its narrators, a CIA operative, compare his agency’s destabilization of Jamaica to its role in the 1973 coup in Chile, generally regarded as the proving ground for neoliberal economic shock therapy.

Although such direct political references are absent from *City of God*, Lins’ novel nonetheless registers the specific Brazilian instantiation of the general crisis into which the world-economy stumbled after the post-war boom years. Broadly speaking, the post-war regime of accumulation had been characterized by social democratic (‘welfarist’) class compromise in the core capitalist countries and by ‘developmentalism’ in the global South (Amin 1997, 94, 17). By the early 1970s, the fundamental incompatibility between capitalist class relations and social democracy, manifested in a falling rate of profit, saw the “logic of unilateral capital” strive to reassert itself (Amin 1997, 95). In Brazil, the local articulation of this history unfolded with a certain precocity. The country’s post-war political order had been dominated by a form of nationalist populism, which saw “the left [opt] for an alliance with

sectors of the national business elite in the name of economic modernization, agrarian reform and a certain autonomy with respect to Northern imperialism” (Sader 2008, 10-11). By 1960, the contradictory nature of this alliance, as well as shortcomings in the dominant industrial strategy of import substitution, led to the breakdown of the nationalist model. For Octavio Ianni, the resulting political-economic impasse could be overcome “only by one of two radical measures: socialist revolution or re-integration into world capitalism” (1970, 118). The 1964 military coup represented the triumph of the latter option, with the dictatorship reorienting the Brazilian economy towards a policy of “modernization” predicated upon “interdependence” – in other words, the re-opening of the country to massive foreign investment, such that “multinational oligopolies assumed increasingly important roles in economic policy decisions” (Ianni 1970, 170, 167). Thus, writes Nicholas Brown, “what happened in the coup of 1964 was not unique to Brazil” but rather an early and “particularly dramatic instance of a global phenomenon”: “the turning of the cold war toward the consolidation of a U.S.-led market hegemony, globalization as it is currently understood” (2005, 188).

In *City of God*, the violence of the dictatorship finds expression in the violence and corruption of the police force, while the pressures of modernization and of the renewed penetration of capital are registered in the evolution of the *favela* and its gangsters. Early on in the novel, *City of God* is described as “a large farm” [uma grande fazenda] where the inhabitants can still grow vegetables and pick wild fruits (14). This semi-rural landscape is gradually obliterated by the proliferation of houses, flats, and other buildings. The urbanization of the *favela* coincides with the disappearance of a more “socially conscious” type of gangster and the emergence of a “new style of distinctly antisocial organized criminal” (Line 2005, 73-74). This transition is represented most starkly in the figure of Pipsqueak, who, following the demise of an older generation of gangsters, renames himself Tiny and assumes control of the *favela*. He is more brutal and business-like than his predecessors, reorganizing and rationalizing his drug-dealing activities. His motivations are made abundantly clear: “Money, he was going to make lots of money” (210). The dog-eat-dog attitude of the new-style gangsters speaks to the direction in which Brazilian society was headed under the pressures of neoliberalization. As de Oliveira puts it, the “neoliberal blitzkrieg with its privatizations, deregulations and all-out attacks on the rights of society, [. . .] made steeper the path that descends into social barbarism: greater competition in an already unequal society is not the formula for a democratizing individuality but for a dangerous form of social and political cannibalism” (2007, 111-12).

The transformation in social relations and subjectivities wrought by neoliberalization is similarly addressed in *A Brief History*. The struggle in Jamaica over the competing pathways of socialism or neoliberalism was all but ended in 1980, when Manley was swept from office in a general election. In fact, Manley had already been forced by Jamaica’s dire economic straits to seek assistance from the IMF, a path his successor, Edward Seaga, would pursue with gusto. The revolutionary promise of the 1970s thus gave way to a “long interregnum,” during which “neo-liberal platitudes of the ‘magic of the market’ and grassroots interpretations, such as the crude materialism of the ‘bling’ culture, proliferated” (Meeks 2014, 192). Like Lins, James duplicates this historical trajectory in the development of his protagonists. The novel documents a shift in power amongst Kingston’s gang leaders from Papa-Lo, whose violence often has directly political ends and a strong, if perverse, connection to the social needs of his community, to the more individualistic and entrepreneurial Josey Wales. “From 1976,” declares Josey, “politics don’t mean shit. Power don’t mean shit. Money mean something” (644). Yet Josey himself will eventually be superseded by the slick, university-educated Eubie, who establishes his drug racket “like any

business, better than any shop, because I know from the devil was boy that you can never expand if your core base didn't set right" (494).

The trajectory of the neoliberal era as manifested in James' characters is also mediated in the novel's form. *A Brief History* draws upon the tradition of the Caribbean yard novel, which in the work of writers like C.L.R. James and Alfred Mendes in the 1930s, or Roger Mais in the 1940s and 1950s, sought to depict the life of the urban poor. These authors were members of a radical middle-class intelligentsia and important figures in the rising tide of anti-colonial agitation in the Caribbean. Their narrative interest in the working-class masses was a literary parallel to the emerging alliance between proletarian organizations and middle-class political leaders that would form the backbone of the national independence movements. This had something like a formal corollary in novels such as Mais' *The Hills Were Joyful Together* (1953) and *Brother Man* (1954), which combined vanguard modernist techniques with artistic materials and generic forms drawn from popular culture. *A Brief History* alludes to such works both through its subject matter and its formal composition. The *New York Times*' characterization of the novel – "It's like a Tarantino remake of *The Harder They Come* but with a soundtrack by Bob Marley and a script by Oliver Stone and William Faulkner" – may have been facile, but it did capture James' admixture of high modernist stylings with generic narrative forms and 'B-movie' contents.

In the context of the contemporary hegemonic crisis, this instance of aesthetic uneven and combined development might be read in analogy to the cultural work performed by those earlier yard novels: as projecting the possibility of a new alliance between middle- and working-class groups. On this view, the consecration of James' novel by middle-class elites in the U.S. and U.K. – its winning of the Booker Prize in 2015, for example – represents a response by those elites to the potential for such an alliance.¹ The reception of *A Brief History* parallels the recent rise in popularity of culturally prestigious, long-form television shows that draw on 'lowbrow', highly generic narrative forms. "The return to generic narratives by middle-class audiences," writes Stephen Shapiro, is "an indicative feature of the ongoing rearrangement of the composition of class alliances" consequent on the unravelling of neoliberalism's hegemonic order (2014, 223). The latter, as Shapiro argues (following the work of economists Gérard Duménil and Dominique Lévy), was characterized by an alliance between high capitalist business interests and the professional-managerial (more broadly middle) classes. Any "social divorce" between these groups and the establishment of a new class compact between the professional-managerial and working classes "is not an easy or smooth cultural transition" (222). Rather, it requires a "complicated set of cultural rehearsals [. . .] for surely the middle class needs practice in making so different a social linkage" (222-223). The consumption of *A Brief History* by middle-class elites could be said to enable just such a cultural rehearsal.² Not only do the novel's first-person gangster narrators immerse the reader in the impoverished world of Kingston's urban masses; in addition, the presentation of these narrators complicates any straightforward moralizing perspective on their actions, creating an ambivalence in point of view that allows for at least partial identification with otherwise unacceptable social identities. Take Josey Wales: his extreme violence is anathema; yet James endows him with such intelligence and acumen – as well as various liberal attitudes (he has a tolerance for homosexuality unusual amongst his fellow gangsters, for example) – that many critics have echoed Jeff Vasishta in finding Josey "charismatic and compelling" and "completely absorbing" (2014). As James himself has observed: "You can't

¹ Following his Booker Prize win, James was the subject of numerous approbatory articles and interviews in broadsheet newspapers and periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic. In October 2016, the BBC's flagship arts show *Imagine* dedicated a programme to his work.

² In an indication of the continuities between the cultural work performed by *A Brief History* and the high-status TV shows referenced by Shapiro, the screen rights to the novel were optioned by HBO for a TV series.

dismiss Josey Wales' quite liberal worldview. [. . .] The thing about Josey is – yes, he's a psychotic murderer who will kill pregnant women – but at the same time, he has such a fantastic worldview. He has a chill worldview" (Vasishta, 2014). The forms of partial identification enabled by this "chill worldview" permit the reader to rehearse a change in cultural perspective away from existing norms of social authority and status towards hitherto marginalized or subaltern identities.

As I have suggested, however, Josey's own trajectory is towards an increasingly competitive entrepreneurialism. Hence, one might understand reader responses to this "compelling" gangster in a less progressive way also, one that recalls the more troubling tendencies observed by C.L.R. James in his analysis of the popularity of gangster fiction during the Depression. Such fiction allowed the "pent-up feelings" of its audience free-play, releasing the "bitterness, hate, fear and sadism" provoked by a world in which existing forms of social advancement had been eroded and "aesthetic compensation" was sought in "the contemplation of free individuals who go out into the world and settle their problems by free activity and individualistic methods" (1993, 127). Figures such as Josey may well be so compelling to a certain (ideal-type) middle-class audience – now facing the kind of social precarity previously experienced by the working-classes – not only because they represent a rejection of the now crisis-stricken institutionalized modes of social authority, but also because they reproduce in their behaviour the competitive economic logic upon which that audience's status and self-identity had been predicated.

The cultural rehearsal of class realignment *A Brief History* makes possible for its readers, then, is an ambivalent one: on the one hand, renewed sympathy with the poor and the powerless; on the other, the reassuring affirmation of a neoliberal politics of life. In this, the novel encapsulates the competing tendencies that have emerged with the contemporary crisis in neoliberalism: on one side, efforts to build progressive, anti-systemic alliances between the working- and middle-classes (Occupy, for example) and, on the other, desperate attempts to refurbish the existing class compact with high capitalist business interests (the far-right populism of Trump in the U.S., for instance, or the cosmopolitan liberalism of Macron in France or Trudeau in Canada). The inclination of *A Brief History* at the level of its social imaginary, I would suggest, is to affirm the possibility of a new, progressive class alignment. At the level of form, however, despite registering the damage done to subjectivities and collective political agency by the forces of neoliberalization, the novel seems to concede the continuity of these forces (even as the hegemonic status of neoliberalism unravels).

Thus, although *A Brief History* alludes to the yard novel tradition and the types of social commitment such fictions encoded, the way this formal model is incorporated in the text makes of it something different to what it was in the hands of, say, Roger Mais. A work such as *The Hills Were Joyful Together*, responding to the independence struggles of the post-war era, sought to re-shape novelistic conventions in an effort to "represent a collective subject" in a form built historically "around the interior life of the individual" (Denning 2004, 59). As Gordon Rohlehr has suggested, in Mais' text "the fragments of communal experience knit into a single tragedy, character flowing into character, as if the entire group were a single person. [. . .] Mais contrives to blend the disparate voices and modes into a single weighty philosophising voice" (1992, 56). It is precisely this collective narrative voice that is absent from *A Brief History*, in which each chapter is narrated by a single character in such a way as to relocate social experience in the consciousness of the individual. When something like the blending of voices one finds in Mais does occur, it is marked off as a moment of psychological breakdown. After being put in a cell by Papa-Lo, for example, the ghetto youngster Leggo Beast begins to rave uncontrollably. Moving between linguistic registers, he has Papa-Lo perplexed: "Half of what come out of him mouth, not just what him say, but also how him say it didn't originate in Copenhagen City" (343). Leggo Beast's channelling of

disparate, fragmented voices recalls the aesthetic strategies of experimental yard fictions like *The Hills Were Joyful Together*, but it does so only as an instance of isolated delirium.

James' narrative, therefore, displays a re-individualizing tendency that corresponds to the dog-eat-dog individualism – the social cannibalism – that characterizes the actions of many of the novel's leading figures. Indeed, the formal logic of *A Brief History* might be recast in precisely this light: as proceeding through a cannibalization of past forms and genres, which in the case of yard fiction involves the evacuation of its formal impetus towards narrative collectivism, an impetus grounded in the historical situation of nationalist agitation and social democratic advance. In this respect, the novel could be said to encode in a very specific sense the trajectory of neoliberalism, which, in response to the long downturn and absent a scientific-technological revolution capable of boosting labour productivity, succeeded in reviving accumulation only by “cannibalizing the accomplishments of the Fordist-Keynsian order” (Moore 2012, 231). Faced with a decline in the growth of annual labour productivity in the OECD from 4.6% in 1960-73 to 1.6% in 1979-97, neoliberalism embarked on “an extractive strategy that discouraged long-term investments by states and capitals, and encouraged socio-ecological ‘asset-stripping’ of every sort – pension funds were raided, state enterprises privatized, water and energy sources depleted” (Moore 2012, 244, 231). In short, neoliberalism ate its own reproductive foundations.

Although *A Brief History's* formal mediation of this logic might be said to produce it as an object of critique, the re-individualizing impetus of James' narrative and its fostering of an identification with – even absorption in (to recall Vasishta's response to Josey Wales) – the gangster-as-entrepreneur militates against this critical stance. Indeed, the novel's formal tendencies would seem to underline the difficulty it has in imagining a world beyond the sway of a neoliberal politics of life.³ In this regard, *A Brief History* can be usefully contrasted with *City of God*. Like *A Brief History*, Lin's novel incorporates all kinds of pre-existing aesthetic materials. As Roberto Schwarz observes, “faced with the task of giving novelistic form to his vast subject matter, [Lins] has availed himself of every support, from *Angústia* to *Crime and Punishment* to cinematic super-productions” (2012, 233). Absent here, however, is the formal tendency identified in *A Brief History* towards re-individualizing social experience. Rather, what Lins' novel provides via its narration of the lives of multiple characters is a perspective on the social totality (something James' text does only negatively insofar as it consistently marks the fragmentation and atomization of social life). Schwarz again: “As maximum tension becomes routine, the trivialization of death pushes us far beyond any thrill of suspense towards a disabused, all-encompassing standpoint, only one degree removed from mere statistics; a point of view focused rather on the decisive, supra-individual parameters of class” (2012, 229). Significant in this regard is the novel's close association with social inquiry. Lins (who grew up in the City of God) worked as a research assistant in the 1980s on an investigation into criminality in Rio de Janeiro, co-ordinated by the anthropologist Alba Zaluar. The interviews he conducted for this project provided much of the raw material for his narrative, which in places retains the tone and texture of a sociological report. It is this feature in particular from among the text's uneven admixture of forms that lends the novel the systematizing force integral to its supra-individual social cartography.

City of God's combination of reportage, sociological analysis, and modernist technique is also pivotal to its capacity to perform a similar kind of cultural work to that facilitated by James' novel vis-à-vis the realignment of class sympathies. “I wrote this book

³ Although there is not space to develop the point here, it is worth noting the ambivalent trajectory of another central character in the novel, Nina Burgess. She is a sympathetic figure who experiences social precarity and the economic pressures of the neoliberal regime; yet in her constant self-reinvention, she displays a kind of entrepreneurialism of the self fully compatible with the cultural politics of neoliberalism.

as a gift for the middle class,” Lins has said, emphasizing how the presentation of the realities of *favela* life in a culturally prestigious, experimental narrative form might serve as a way both to educate middle-class readers and to enable the cultural rehearsal of a new social linkage to the subaltern classes (qtd. in Lund 2006, 1).⁴ Certainly the publication of the novel sparked “an intense debate in Brazil about the relationship between violence, drug-dealing, social injustice, political action and the role of civil society” (Lund 2006, 1). Lins has claimed that “the research, book and [the subsequent film adaptation] are all fated to continue to stir social mobilization” (Lins 2005, 127). The cultural rehearsal of class realignment enabled by the novel seemed to tally with the current of the times: only a few years after the publication of *City of God*, the victory of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, leader of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), in the 2002 presidential elections signalled an important leftwards shift in Brazilian politics. The PT came to power promising “the priority of the social” – a policy programme aimed at responding to the social needs of the masses (Sader 2005, 68). Lula’s record in office, however, was mixed. His administration not only maintained, but in many instances amplified the neoliberal economic policies of his predecessor, Cardoso (Sader 2005, 71).

Even as it rehearses the possibility of a new linkage to the subaltern classes, Lins’ novel illuminates the entrenched social forces that would contribute decisively to the shortcomings of Lula’s administration. As noted, the trajectory of *City of God*’s leading characters registers the colonization of the lifeworld by the logic of neoliberalism; but the sheer pervasiveness of this logic is also emphasized by the formal rhythms of the novel, through which the rhythms of social reality are reconstituted as an object of critique. To understand this process, it is necessary to examine *City of God*’s relationship to naturalism. With its element of social enquiry, the book has affinities with the great naturalist novels of the nineteenth century, specifically those that appeared in Brazil in the 1880s and 1890s. An obvious precursor to Lins’ text is Aluísio Azevedo’s *O Cortiço* (*The Slum*, 1890), set in a tenement yard in Rio de Janeiro. In an important essay on *O Cortiço*, António Cândido highlighted the contradictions of Azevedo’s narrative, which depends upon a series of naturalist stereotypes around race and environment that the unfolding of the plot will undermine. The plot is driven by the insatiable urge of its protagonist, João Romão, to enrich himself. To this end, Romão mercilessly exploits all those in his path, whether white or black, Brazilian or Portuguese. The instrumental logic of capitalist accumulation thereby destabilizes the naturalist perspectives on racial and national difference that nonetheless continue to circulate in the novel as ideological constructs (Cândido, 1991). The contradictory composition of the text thus acquires “critical functionality and *mimetic value* in relation to Brazil” (Schwarz 2001, 34), objectifying at the level of form the contradictions between the new economic rhythms of the country and the governing ideologies of the ruling class.

Something similar might be said of Lins’ novel. This, too, is governed by a rhythm of relentless accumulation, which manifests itself in the intensification of the violence perpetrated by the gangsters and the constant expansion of their criminal activities (from haphazard, small-scale dope dealing to the organized distribution of crack; from the use of

⁴ The 2002 film adaptation of the novel could be said to enable a similar kind of cultural rehearsal in its combination of gritty, generic content with high-production-value cinematic techniques. As Juliet Line observes: “Committing itself to a high level of realism, *City of God* updates *Cinema Novo*’s ethos of using the cinema as a tool by which to aggressively confront Brazil’s citizens, seeking to force them to face up to the unspoken but not unseen horrors of their own society.” (2005, 71). However, the inclusion in the film of various Hollywood-style narrative formulae – in particular, the organization of the story arc around Rocket’s social advancement – introduces an element of conformism, reaffirming the individualizing perspective that the book seeks to transcend.

crude revolvers to the attempted purchase of assault rifles). In the accelerating struggle over assets and territory, the perpetual to and fro between rival gangs (and between the gangs, their victims, and the police) blurs the distinctions between social actors. Thus Knockout, for example, who initially appears as a righteous civilian avenger of Tiny's crimes, is soon mired in the same swamp of violence and drug-dealing as his adversary. The ambivalence of Lins' narrative – the “general dissolution of meaning within energies that become ungraspable” (Schwarz 2012, 233) – destabilizes what might otherwise emerge as a conventional naturalist inventory or typology of subaltern individuals. The effect is to relativize the naturalist narrative perspective as merely “one ideology among others, within a discursive web that has no final word” (Schwarz 2012, 233). Far from limiting the novel's social enquiry, however, the destabilizing of the naturalist paradigm assumes “critical functionality” in relation to the socio-economic reality of Brazil in the period in which *City of God* was written.

Recall that many of the original materials for the book were gathered in the 1980s at a time when industrial production in the country was being restructured, the formalization of wage relations had ground to a halt, and informal labour was expanding. The novel was subsequently published in the midst of Brazil's “era of indeterminacy”, a period “that, given the powerful changes undergone during the previous decade – themselves overdetermined by an intensified exposure to the globalization of capital – would be characterized by its apparent suspension of any relation between the economic and the political, between classes and their political representation” (de Oliveira 2007, 87). This indeterminacy was embodied in Cardoso, the former Marxist dependency theorist who, as president, would allegedly declare “forget everything I ever wrote” as he unleashed a wave of deregulations and privatizations. In line with the general tendencies fostered by neoliberalization, Brazil's economy became increasingly financialized. Productive accumulation stalled, to be superseded by a truncated form of accumulation predicated on the seizure and transfer of assets. The result, as de Oliveira notes, was the growth of a ‘new class’ of investment-fund directors within the bourgeoisie. This class, however, was “unable to offer a coherent solution to the problems that the neoliberal model has encountered on the periphery, one which could unify a broader coalition of capitalist forces beyond those sectors profiting from the orientation towards exports and financialization” (2006, 18-19).

If, as Fredric Jameson observes, “what stands at the centre of the naturalist narrative paradigm is the perspective of the bourgeoisie and its vision of the other (lower) classes” (2013, 149), then the relativization and unhinging of this perspective in *City of God* might be said to speak to the difficulties confronting Brazil's bourgeoisie in the neoliberal era. Marta Peixoto points out that

the novel is told by a detached, nonpersonified, third-person narrator whose educated Portuguese sets him apart from the idiosyncratic, slang-inflected street language of the *favela* youth and the drug gangs. While the precisely reproduced ghetto language creates verisimilitude, the narrative voice, with its correct grammar and ample lexicon, emphasizes social distinctions and establishes a disparaging perspective on the social universe being viewed. (2007, 172-73)

Turning to the narrative's relentless depiction of violent episodes, Peixoto continues:

The sheer accumulation of grisly scenes [. . .] unmoors the novel from its literary project as exposé. The pileup of graphically violent episodes, in its relentlessness, takes on the character of a phantasmagoria, where the narrative voice itself is a further symptom of the social derangement. (2007, 173)

Peixoto's judgement on the text is largely negative, viewing its serial violence and the hysteria of the narrator as in danger of reproducing the sensationalism of mass media accounts of the *favelas*. But this is to miss the significance of the novel's narrative contradictions. What Peixoto describes as the unmooring of the novel from its literary project as exposé is rather an expression of its internalization of the contradictory dynamics of Brazilian society as a formal problem. The reduction of the omniscient narrative voice – the bourgeois naturalist perspective – to one more symptom of the social derangement not only encapsulates the confusions of Brazil's "era of indeterminacy", but also registers the problems confronting the country's bourgeoisie: its inability to "unify a broader coalition of capitalist forces" and re-orient the economy away from financialization and dependency on external credit. In a context where this class has become reliant on the seizure and transfer of assets (rather than production), it is entirely apt that the bourgeois perspective in Lins' novel should become as much a symptom of crisis as the gangsters it describes, whose own reproduction as a social group is similarly based on the seizure of assets and territory. The contradictory composition of *City of God*, in other words, is indicative of its mapping of the social totality through the reconstitution of this reality as a force internal to form.

Crucially, not only does Lins' novel thereby objectify social reality, but unlike *A Brief History* (where the formal reconstitution of the logic of neoliberalization as an object of critique is undermined by the re-individualizing perspective of the narrative), it consistently enforces a critical distance between text and reader. The blurring of distinctions between social actors; the often abrupt or bathetic resolution of character arcs (the death of the *favela*'s most popular gangster in a random car accident, for example); the relative lack of interiority to the protagonists (as compared to James' virtuosic rendition of inner consciousness): together these deliberately forestall any absorption in the novel's characters of the kind we saw in *A Brief History*. The destabilization of the omniscient narrator, meanwhile, also problematizes this as a site of identification. Whereas in James' novel, then, the cultural rehearsal of class realignment is achieved via the reader's immersion in the protagonists' lifeworlds, in *City of God* this rehearsal occurs in the space opened up between text and reader. The novel pursues a form of critical pedagogy: its characters and the world they inhabit, as well as hitherto dominant ways of apprehending this world (the bourgeois perspective of the naturalist narrator), are presented to the reader as matter for careful study and critique. In this way, the novel seeks to encourage new attitudes towards the contemporary situation.

City of God, then, keeps faith with the possibility of imagining a world beyond the sway of a neoliberal politics of life. This is emphasized by the language of the novel. In an effort to capture the gangsters' reified lifeworlds and the violent rhythms and immediacy of *favela* life, the narrative deploys a "quick-fire language, of shortened words and phrases", "clichés", and "pre-formed ideas" (Nagib 2005, 34-35). Yet it treats these as building blocks to be reassembled into a representation of the world in line with poetic technique. Indeed, the novel's approach to its raw materials is characterized throughout by what Schwarz calls Lins' "insistence on poetry" (2012, 232).⁵ There is a persistent strain of lyricism in the narrative – as, for example, in the account of Hellraiser's death, which paradoxically introduces a lyrical note even as it affirms that "all [Hellraiser] could do was live the life he lived without any reason to be poetic in a world written in such cursed lines" (200). Such lyricism serves as a self-conscious marker of the distance between text and world. The assertion of this distance

⁵ See also Hart (2007), who highlights the "vibrant poeticity" of the novel (264).

(however slight) does not signal a retreat into aestheticism or idealism; rather, it is an expression of the novel's political commitment to seeking out a perspective from which to critique the socially cannibalistic logic of a reified reality.

An instructive comparison can be drawn here with *A Brief History*. This, too, emphasizes the reification of its protagonists' lifeworlds: the thoughts and perceptions of Josey Wales and his fellow gunmen are thoroughly saturated by the clichés and readymade ideas of the mass cultural narratives they consume (Wales' own adopted name, of course, references the 1976 western starring Clint Eastwood). The novel then replicates this in terms of its own status as an art commodity destined for consumption on the international market. For what James presents us with to some extent in *A Brief History* is one variant of the export version of Jamaican culture: gangs, drugs, reggae! In fact, the novel might be said to play up to what Graham Huggan calls the "postcolonial exotic" (2001, vii), its success at doing so then confirmed by its consecration by the global culture industry. James, I think, does this deliberately, invoking such exoticism in order to interrogate the sociological position of his work. Thus, for example, the novel thematizes its potentially problematic packaging of Jamaican culture for an international audience via the character of Alex, a U.S. music journalist who is writing an account of Jamaica's gangs which by the end of *A Brief History* is being serialized in *The New Yorker* under the title *A Brief History of Seven Killings*. Meanwhile, the novel's stylistic excesses, in particular the "cultivated exhibitionism" (to borrow Huggan's phrase [2001, xi]) of its graphic depictions of violence, stage a certain irreducibility to exoticist norms and the commodification of cultural difference. Indeed, in its representation of violence *A Brief History* seems to want to restore the critically distanced perspective on the logic of neoliberalism that its formal dynamics otherwise short-circuit. While always in danger of reinforcing the ghetto-not-so-fabulous image of Jamaica as a gangster's paradise, James' searing and sadistic portraits of violence are, in their very extremity, always also on the verge of overwhelming such clichés. For they are frequently driven to a point of grotesquerie at which they suddenly become expressive not of this or that individual act of violence, but of the sheer weight and socially pervasive quality of the systemic violence of both the Jamaican state – the legacy of its historical origins in colonialism – and contemporary imperialism.

The relevant reference point for understanding James' strategy is, I think, Richard Wright, and in particular Wright's assertion that in writing *Native Son* he sought to correct the "awfully naïve mistake" he had made in his earlier work, *Uncle Tom's Children* (2000, 23). The latter, in its depictions of the sufferings of African-Americans, had allowed for empathetic identification on the part of the reader, for expressions of pity and sympathy that threatened to neutralize the text's protest (it was a book "which even bankers' daughters could read and weep over and feel good about", complained Wright memorably [23]). *Native Son*, by contrast, was intended as a literary assault on the reader: it was to be so "hard and deep" that it would have to be faced "without the consolation of tears" (23). A similar impetus is at work in James' fiction, I would suggest, the horror of its violence intended to provoke a disconsoling distance. Yet it is a fine balance between playing up to the postcolonial exotic and doing so in such a way as to transform this into critique. Whereas James negotiates this brilliantly in his previous novel, *The Book of Night Women* (2009), in *A Brief History* the ideological weight of the motifs he mobilizes (the gangster, the reggae star, the drug-lord), insofar as these have already been made over by the global culture industry, tip the scales towards the confirmation of the dominant cultural logic. The novel's representations of violence struggle to generate the necessary distance, being too easily subsumed into the consolations of an internationally marketable image of Jamaica. This, in combination with the novel's formal dynamics, attenuates its ability to project an alternative social imaginary.

Together, therefore, James' and Lins' novels present something of a paradox. *City of God* was published at a time when the Washington Consensus was at the height of its influence internationally. Indeed, it is worth reemphasizing that in the Brazilian context the moment of hegemonic dissolution in which the novel appeared was the product of the intensification of the forces of neoliberalization. Yet Lins' text is able to mediate this reality in such a way as to reconstitute it as an object of critique, thereby keeping faith with the possibility that things might be otherwise. In this respect, the novel anticipates and perhaps taps into the emergent energies of a wider Latin American reality: for by the turn of the century, "the continent that had been a privileged territory for neoliberalism [. . .] rapidly turned into the leading arena not only for resistance but for construction of alternatives to neoliberalism" (Sader 2008, 5). By contrast, *A Brief History* appeared in the midst of the contemporary crisis of neoliberal hegemony. In this context, there have emerged new possibilities for radical class realignments and anti-systemic movements. In Jamaica itself over the last decade or so, a new spirit of social contestation has registered in a range of popular cultural forms. Thus, for example, "Jamaican popular music in the post-Marley era has moved through a period of the glorification of symbolic wealth and macho sexual conquest (slackness) to a more recent period of 'consciousness' in which themes of unity, resistance, and rebellion have once more come to the fore" (Meeks 2014, 164). Though James' novel can certainly be construed as enabling the cultural rehearsal of a progressive social compact, ultimately it seems unable to escape the exhausted neoliberal logic it records formally via its cannibalization of its literary precursors, now hollowed out and voided of the collective political energies they once encoded. Thus, while both *A Brief History* and *City of God* serve to periodize and critique the unfolding of the neoliberal regime, they also underline – particularly in the case of James' novel – the difficulty in breaking with the social imaginary of this regime, even as it unravels in a haze of reactionary violence.

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