

# **Class and the Making of American Literature**

Created Unequal

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Simon then begins delivering the extra money himself in order to absolve his mother's sexual debts.

8. After discovering that Vera is his mother, Lincoln feels bitterly betrayed and goes to the jewelry store where Vera works, intending to shoot her. Before he can accomplish his revenge mission, he shoots (and is shot by) another employee. Simon arrives in time to whisk Lincoln away from the premises and police, but cannot save his life; later, with his family, Simon inadvertently takes the blame for killing Lincoln (mainly by not denying the culpability they all immediately assume).

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## 14 "Not/One"

### The Poetics of Multitude in Great Recession-Era America

Margaret Ronda

They were living in America extended terms of credit.  
They were living in America but it's all over.

—John Ashbery, "Default Mode"

where for the good of the very few and the suffering of a great many  
—Myung Mi Kim, from *Penury*

#### I. "THEY ARE GETTING VERY LARGE NOW"

In a poem entitled "Employment" from her 2012 book, *Place*, Jorie Graham examines the problem of American unemployment amid the global financial crisis and ensuing Great Recession. Set in a job assistance office, "Employment" describes the fruitless and repetitive effort of waiting to be called: "the waiting all day again in line till your number is / called it will be / called which means / exactly nothing" (32). To be "called," here, is the opposite of being addressed as an individual, with the dignity of one's personhood intact. Echoing Pablo Neruda's lines from "The Son," Graham's poem denies the "you" the recognition and care Neruda's words shower on the speaker's son.<sup>1</sup> In the unemployment office,

no one will say to you as was promised by all eternity "ah son, do you  
know where you came from, tell me, tell me your story as you have  
come to this  
Station"—no, they  
did away with  
the stations  
and the jobs  
the way of  
life (32)

To become unemployed is, Graham suggests, to be stripped of one's singular identity, private interests and personal "story." Such distinguishing features are relinquished, the poem argues, when one enters the unemployment

office and takes a number. That moment marks “an / exhalation, the last breath of something / and then there you have it: stilled: the exactness: the number: your / number” (33).

What does it mean, Graham asks, to become a “number” by dint of being unemployed? How might the experiences of un- and under-employment, debt, and downward mobility interrupt the fantasies of individual agency, self-determination, and consumer choice so central to the ideologies of neoliberal capitalism? These are questions that Graham’s poem—and, this chapter will argue, a broad swath of American poetry after 2008—takes up. Offering a strong reading of social life as determined by the economy, these poems examine how crisis produces defaulted or foreclosed forms of personhood. Exploring sudden changes, such as foreclosure or being laid off, as well as the slower declines of debt and casualization, these poems consider what it means to be “not *one*,” to *do* or *be* “nothing,” according to the logic of market and state. Such writings, by well-known poets such as Graham, Ashbery, and Timothy Donnelly, as well as more experimental figures such as Mathew Timmons, Myung Mi Kim, Jasper Bernes, and Anne Boyer, are less interested in restoring or revaluing forms of liberal personhood than in meditating on the forms of social anonymity and exclusion—as well as nascent forms of collectivity—that emerge in their wake.<sup>2</sup> They explore what Graham calls a “transition from one state to the / other,” a transition into social relations defined by dispossession, with particular attention to what happens next (33).

Graham’s poem portrays such a transitional moment, the epiphanic recognition of what George Oppen famously calls “being numerous”—being one of many and thus fundamentally substitutable (162).<sup>3</sup> When the “you” takes a number, he “transition[s]” from waged life to wagelessness, from a felt sense of self-reliance and independence to that of dependency and extraneousness. Graham’s speaker “says I / am not / *one*” (33)—and if this moment seems, at first, to signal a defiant reclamation of selfhood (I am not simply one of many, I cannot be reduced to a number), the poem instead reveals the unmaking of this individualist logic and the emergence of the “not / *one*” as a *common* figure, defined not by individual worth but by inclusion in a greater “sum.” This figure is the antithesis of the liberal democratic citizen, a figure of negation and sameness rather than singularity amidst diversity. To be “not *one*” is to be at once reduced and enlarged, less than a private individual and tied, inexorably, to others, part of a larger mass that is defined by superfluity. It is to be made *less than* by being *too many*: one, say, of 198 million unemployed worldwide at the height of the crisis in 2009; or one of 15.7 million unemployed in the United States at the same time.<sup>4</sup> And it means to change one’s “employment” from doing to waiting, from being occupied to occupying space—a transition that comes to stand, in this archive of poetry, for both the constraints and potential this common figure might represent.

If what is lost, in this moment of transition, is an animating fiction about the worth of one’s individual “story,” what is gained is the revelation of one’s participation in a larger historical story. Most immediately, this is the story of the subprime mortgage financial crisis of 2007–08 and its catastrophic impact on employment and the housing market. The “numbers” of Graham’s poem—“they are getting very large now”—refer, first and foremost, to the collective body constituted, *called into being*, by this economic crisis. The global crisis represented the definitive breaking of certain neoliberal spells: that financial institutions could be trusted, that markets would self-correct, and that the volatility of capitalism could maximize risk while staying off crisis, that government—and the mechanisms of democracy itself—could be relied upon to prevent or repair the fallout of economic instability. At a broader remove, the collective story that Graham’s poem maps is that of the economic turn, post-1973, toward financialization and flexible accumulation and their ensuing effects: deindustrialization, skyrocketing debt in all sectors, the stagnation of wages for American workers, and the increasing casualization of the U.S. workforce (Harvey, *Condition* 141). This broader historical trajectory is referenced in Graham’s lines, “they / did away with / the stations / and the jobs / the way of / life” (32), which gesture to the slow erosion of the “way of life” characteristic of the golden age of capitalism in the post-war period United States (1945 to 1973), a decline that economic historian Robert Brenner terms the “long downturn” (7).<sup>5</sup>

What the scene of “Employment” reveals, then, is the reassertion of the rule of capital as historical agent over and against the more familiar liberal-democratic concept of rights-bearing agency and autonomy invested in the individual citizen, and a recognition of determined relations between persons in classed terms. Yet the poem does not, at first, identify any class-consciousness emerging from this moment of recognition. This reckoning is associated, instead, with an intense anxiety, even a terror of the “large number”: “A large number is a form / of mob. The larger the number the more / terrifying” (33). These lines speak powerfully to an American distrust of thinking collectively in terms of class, an ideological reflex that the poem’s central figure engages by asserting his status as “not / *one*”—not reducible to the numerical mass, not *one of them*. For Graham’s speaker, the numerical mass of the unemployed is a spectral figure of disorder and social chaos. These lines throw into relief an overriding American desire to “say I”—to think, speak, act, and live as a private, waged, “free” individual—even as this desire becomes systematically foreclosed (“it was living / and now is / stilled,” Graham writes) (33). In turn, such descriptions underscore the various failures of American working-class politics over the past two generations: the strategic dismantling of unions, the tendency of working-class voters to support political platforms that are in opposition to their material interests, the entrenchment of neoliberal ideologies that stress individual and entrepreneurial freedoms.<sup>6</sup> Defined in and through

these historical frameworks, the newly dispossessed “you” of Graham’s poem possesses no working concept of solidarity or class antagonism, and instinctively defines himself as “not / one” of that “large number.”

“Employment” ends, however, with the absence of the individual figure, who has “joined” and dissolved into the collective motions of the numerous. This is perhaps the most remarkable undertaking of Graham’s poem: its description of the coming-into-being of this social body and the concomitant disappearance of the individual subject. Something *emerges* in this poem, though its lineaments remain deliberately unclear, while a more familiar individualist presence and perspective vanishes. And it is here, in turn, that we might identify a key characteristic of the poetics of the multitude that this essay explores. If, as Oren Izenberg claims in his recent critical work, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life*: “‘poetry’ names . . . an ontological project: a civilizational wish to reground the concept and value of *the person*” (1), a poem such as Graham’s instead asks, what if a certain category of person remains devalued, unrecognizable? In place of the “reconstructive philosophical imperative” of “the person” (1) that Izenberg identifies as central to the work of canonical poets from Yeats to Hejninian, “Employment” attends instead to the more negative, abstract, and plural forms of existence for those who are “not / one.” “Poetry” thus names an altogether different imperative here: the attempt to imagine a “basic unit of social life” that is not reducible to the singular, a “unit” which emerges on the peripheries of waged life (1).

That Graham’s poem is titled “Employment”—and not “Unemployment,” which would seem the more obvious title—raises a key question: what will the employment of the unemployed be? The title suggests that the energy once channeled into work must now find a new outlet. Taking up the question of what happens when work, and the social value conferred by the wage, no longer becomes a central undertaking or measure of existence, the poem offers two contradictory images of how this newfound social body might employ itself. The first is an image of passive resignation: we see “a legion / single file heading out in formation / across a desert that will not count” (33). The “employment” of the unemployed consists of waiting in line, a wait that extends indefinitely in time and space. Neither a portrait of an energetic crowd nor a chaotic mob, this image of the unemployed mass is orderly, subdued, “heading out” in “single file.” This is, perhaps, the multitude that was “not one”—not unified by interest or revolutionary self-awareness. Their exilic march across a “desert that will not count” portends a collective experience that will remain lost to history, uncounted. Such an image intensifies the pessimism Graham evokes in earlier lines, underscoring a deep-seated, defeatist resistance to class-based identification and organization, and suggesting that this “single file” march into oblivion will be experienced as a purely privative ordeal. Yet this subdued description of passive, orderly acceptance of historical anonymity is countered by a more dynamic image: a “stream of blood.” This “stream” “takes you in from above,” Graham writes (33), evoking an

immersion into an energetic, living body. Such lines echo an earlier description in the poem of an invisible, but palpable, energy that undergirds a “number”: “A number is always hovering over something beneath it. It is // invisible, but you can feel it” (33). Graham depicts a sense of live potentiality—another form of “employment”—that remains incipient, as yet undefined, and thus irreducible to quantification. “Employment” portrays a dialectical vision of the constitution and social function of the unemployed: one that points to the unceasingly difficult circumstances, social invisibility, and lack of mobilization of those “set free” from waged life, and another that stresses their creative, potentially resistant power.

In this way, Graham’s closing images bear ties to the dual nature of the multitude as defined by Hardt and Negri in their recent theoretical works, *Empire* and *Multitude*: both as those subjected to capital’s rule and as “living flesh” bearing resistant potential (*Multitude* 100). Hardt’s and Negri’s concept of the multitude theorizes the emergent class structures of the present. They argue that older concepts of the working class or the proletariat are no longer viable, and that only an “open, expansive concept” of class can grapple with the flexible, precarious, and expanded nature of labor under post-Fordist production:

Working class is fundamentally a restricted concept based on exclusions. In its most limited conception, the working class refers only to industrial labor and thus excludes all other laboring classes. At its most broad, the working class refers to all waged laborers and thus excludes the various unwaged classes. . . . The working class is thought to be the primary productive class and directly under the rule of capital, and thus the only subject that can act effectively against capital. . . . Whether or not this was the case in the past, the concept of multitude rests on the fact that it is not true today. (106)

Their theory details the expansion of exploitation not only into new markets but into the spheres of everyday life by way of the development of “immaterial labor”—the commodification of information, knowledge, and affect—which they claim has replaced industrial labor as the dominant form of post-Fordist labor (108). In this way, traditional notions of class divisions centered on wage are no longer adequate to account for the present nature of class relations: “the social division between the employed and unemployed is becoming ever more blurred. . . . The poor, the unemployed, and the underemployed in our societies are in fact active in social production even if they do not have a waged position” (131). Yet Hardt and Negri caution against any assumption that this activity will lead inexorably to political action: “the multitude does not arise as a political figure spontaneously,” but instead is dependent upon “a series of conditions that are ambivalent: they could lead toward liberation or be caught in a new regime of exploitation and control” (212).

The multitude is a deeply controversial and much-critiqued term. Many critics have argued that it erases or overwrites real class differences as well as key distinctions between the productive relations of the global north and south.<sup>7</sup> It is, however, an important idea with regard to North American recession-era poetry precisely because these texts tend to halt at the verge of any wholly concrete, sociological, or enumerative description of the multitude itself. The very amorphous nature of the plurality that emerges in these poems echoes the constitutive openness and equivocal capacities central to Hardt and Negri's concept. For Hardt and Negri, these dimensions are tied to a sense of class as an ongoing and changing construct: "a theory of class not only reflects the existing lines of class struggle, it also proposes potential future lines. The task of a theory of class in this respect is to identify the existing *conditions* for potential collective struggle and express them as a political *proposition*" (104). In their insistently plural images of stillness and motion, enclosure and wandering, indebtedness and surplus, these poems offer senses, *sensings*, of collective presence. The multitude is *present*—but what it means, how it functions, and even who it consists of importantly remain in process, subject to change. Thus what a poem like "Employment" or the work of Myung Mi Kim reveals is a speculative poetics attentive to what the multitude is doing, how it is occupying itself, rather than what it will produce. This poetics attends, at the same time, to what its presence makes visible, what conditions produce a standpoint peripheral to that of the middle-class, upwardly mobile, politically empowered subject.

Kim's central subject is the global multitude, what she calls "a small number multiplied many times by itself" (*Commons* 69). Her books of poetry mark the untallyable figure of this global multitude whose numerosity and fundamental substitutability cause it to go unrecorded in the "great books." Her poems move globally, from war-torn "muddy villages" to the first-world urban destitute, from rural famine to gated projects, from images of "gnarled hands pulling up wild onion" to a postmodern "global buying frenzy" (*Commons* 4, 39, 88). Such disorientation—often on a single page—vivifies the uneven character of global capitalism, in which, as Gayatri Spivak puts it, "the 'pre-modern' and the 'post-modern' are inscribed together" (88). It also suggests a "common" experience of dispossession, an experience that has neither center nor bounds, that is happening everywhere but possesses no preordained location. As Kim declares, "To a body of infinite size there can be ascribed neither center nor boundary" (*Commons* 13). What this multitude shares, Kim asserts, is various forms of lack: illness, hunger, debt, pain, geographical displacement, "houseless heads and unfed sides" (99).

Kim's most recent work, *Penury* (2009), intensifies her examination of the peregrinations and privations of this multitude in the wake of global crisis. "Those 840 workers? They're just gone—," Kim writes in one poem (9). Other poems describe the construction of "makeshift shelters" with "raw sewage" running underneath, or detail failures to earn sufficient

money: "He is not making rent" (6, 24). Such lines convey stark descriptions of basic needs—shelter, food, clean water, and, of course, money to pay rent—barely or not at all being met. Here as elsewhere in her poetry, Kim writes in radically pared fragments that enact a poetics of scarcity. This insistent reduction provides the means by which scarcity can become apparent. Kim's lines refuse to ornament, elaborate, and embellish "common life," but instead graph its sparse conditions, which are mirrored in the stripped vocabulary, white spaces, and emphatic periods of her verse. Such portrayals position the reader amid the disorientation and bewilderment of those subjected to "subsistence experiments" while removing the rationalizing languages of neoliberal economics or biopolitics that could serve to justify such experiments. We might see this refusal as an attempt to convey the essential irrationality of the dispossession and violence wrought by globalization on the multitude: what is done "for the good of the very few and the suffering of a great many" (*Commons* 46).

At the same time, Kim's poems systematically eliminate the fullness of subjective expression associated with the lyric. The "person" of these poems, like the scenes she occupies, remains recalcitrant, her speech blunted and reduced to shards. Kim leaves the reader to "measure silences" that mark an itinerary unmappable by communicative reason. Leaving her pages mostly unwritten amid a few fragmented words, Kim makes imposed silence a palpable, loaded presence. Silence marks the extremities of physical pain, the psychic stress of impoverishment, and the lack of access to basic resources that characterize the wageless "commons." Kim satirizes the neoliberal language of "freedom" as it is applied (or remains non-applicable) to the so-called surplus population of the global poor: "freedom of residence / freedom of movement // as history knows / what justice looks like" (*Penury* 10). Juxtaposing what remains unsaid and those who cannot speak in the global marketplace with cited phrases that stress freedom, development, and mobility, Kim's poetry follows out the question Spivak poses: "What subject-effects are systematically effaced or trained to efface themselves so that a canonic norm might emerge?" (74). Indeed, we might see Kim's poems, along with the work of other contemporary poets of economic crisis, as collectively posing what Spivak calls a "counter-question" to the liberal/lyric concept of the person as locus of potentiality and possessor of value by attending to who and what drops out of the frame. If unemployment, wagelessness, and poverty is one measure of negated personhood, another—even more pervasive in the face of neoliberal policies—is debt.

## II. "AS IF I HAD A CHOICE"

Like unemployment and wagelessness, debt is a collective experience that tends toward the winnowing of social bonds and feelings of shame and worthlessness.<sup>8</sup> Both reframe the individual as fundamentally inadequate,

defined by deficit and failure, vulnerability and culpability, by what she does not possess and cannot fulfill. The privatized nature of these struggles serves to obscure their structural class relations: the individual confronts the financial institution or job market on her own, cut off from others. The framing of debt in insistently moral terms, as David Graeber and Maurizio Lazzarato have argued, paints the debtor as solitary and flawed, having forfeited the right to participate in public life: “humble citizens are taught to think of themselves as sinners, seeking some kind of purely individual redemption to have the right to any sort of moral relations with other human beings at all” (Graeber 378–79). Debt thus functions as another form of depersonalization under contemporary American life, wherein the indebted person has become *less than* an individual, her capacity to participate meaningfully in social life deferred. At the same time, theorists of debt argue that the common condition of social life under contemporary neoliberalism is indebtedness, which affects private and public sectors, individuals and nations, cutting across and remaking social categories—a condition that speaks powerfully to the flexible, changing permutations of class and to the generalization of precarity. As Lazzarato argues: “debt surpasses the divisions between employment and unemployment, working and non-working, productive and assisted, precarious and non-precarious, divisions on which the left has based its categories of thought and action” (162). Recession-era American works such as Timothy Donnelly’s *The Cloud Corporation* (2010) and Mathew Timmons’s conceptual piece, *Credit* (2009), explore these paradoxes of indebted life—as privatized experience and shared economic structure, as site of class antagonism and potential ground of the multitude.

Donnelly’s *The Cloud Corporation* explores these shame-bound dimensions of debt, portraying the formation of an indebted subject whose social existence is structured by relations of exploitation that have assumed the mystified form of individual obligation. One poem from the collection, “To His Debt,” plays this mystification to the hilt, apostrophizing debt in inverted romantic terms as the vampiric presence that not only dismantles the speaker’s ordinary aspirations and drains his vital resources, but that *completes* him. “Where would I be without you, massive shadow / dressed in numbers, when without you there // behind me, I wouldn’t be myself,” the poem opens, parodying the solitary address of the lyric speaker to his beloved (7). Loyal, ever-present debt serves for the speaker as “my measurement, // my history, my backdrop,” a life story defined “in the red,” measuring a private relationship with an intimate, faithful, and entirely destructive other. The speaker here is inactive, supine, a victim fed upon by a bloodsucking creature from whom the only possibility of separation is death, to “awaken in an unmarked pocket of the earth // without you there” (8). What remains in abeyance, by contrast, is the “living / wage” that the speaker “never makes.” In Donnelly’s poem, “living” is located in the realm of waged work. Without the sufficiency of the wage, the indebted

figure—formerly middle-class, with all the expectations and assumptions that accompany this classed position—now subsists in a kind of liminal realm where what is most real, most vital, is what he owes. What we see represented here is a bitterly ironic description of the person being *eaten alive*, in true undead fashion, by the social problem of debt.

This portrayal of the social abjection of the indebted is echoed in poems such as “Fantasies of Management,” whose very title conveys an impossible desire for self-governing autonomy outside of the “management” of life by the financial economy’s mechanisms. Donnelly takes particular aim at the fiction that one’s participation in this economy is purely voluntary—that one *chooses* to become indebted, or that declining to take part is a viable option—and thus that it is solely the individual’s fault for whatever uncertainties or misfortunes transpire. He writes:

when they talk as if  
as if I have a choice

in the matter, a way to say  
no and live, I’ll ask  
if they wouldn’t mind kindly  
doing me the favor

of repeating that phrase  
because I couldn’t quite make out  
whatever they just said  
through all that privilege. (27)

The poem reveals the fiction of being able to “say / no and live” as the garbled noise of class warfare, a language thick with “privilege.” The idea that one has “a choice // in the matter,” Donnelly asserts, is indeed a regnant “fantasy of management”—the fantasy of hedge-fund managers and corporate financiers—which perpetuates debt’s individualizing and punitive ideology. The disgusted incredulity at finding oneself the living emblem of such a “fantasy” commingles in these lines with a sense of resignation of being *without* “choice // in the matter.” And this resignation, in turn, bespeaks a final “fantasy”—the capacity to “manage” one’s debts and obligations and thus to live a managed life within the circuits of capital. That even this is a fantasy illuminates how the indebted live on in unmanageable circumstances of insolvency.

Mathew Timmons’s conceptual work, *Credit*, similarly describes this insolvent life by documenting the author’s own transition from good credit to a state of indebtedness and insolvency. Divided into two sections, “Credit” and “Debit,” *Credit* catalogs the author’s financial history from the years 2007 to 2009 by directly reproducing, in chronological order, his credit card offers over a three-week period, and then, from a later period,

letters from collection agencies about his debts. This eight-hundred-page conceptual work, which consists solely of the correspondence of financial agencies without any authorial commentary, documents the re-scripting of the subject of the credit economy—the liberal subject defined by financial stability and trustworthiness—as the indebted subject. Indeed, the force of Timmons's piece is to reveal that the figure of credit is ultimately *the same* as the indebted figure: they share the same name, the same address, and the same accounts. Both are constituted in and through the common corporate language of financial institutions, although the figure of credit is invested with a narrative of consumer “freedom” and corporate approval, while the debtor is inscribed in punitive terms as insufficient and obligated. The “Mathew Timmons” who is addressed as the figure of good credit is framed by this language as middle-class, upwardly mobile, deserving of reward and worthy of institutional confidence; the indebted “Mathew Timmons” has fallen out of these corporate constructs of class mobility into a devalued and socially shameful—even criminal—status. The work aims to reveal the absurd swiftness with which the former can flip into the latter—the sheer permeability, in other words, of these categories of class demarcation under contemporary neoliberalism.

In turn, the financial language documented in *Credit* offers a vivid illustration of financial capital's inevitable encounter with a crisis of its own making. The corporate language of optimism and boundless liquidity, of “pre-approved notices” and “qualification” on display in the first half of *Credit* offers stark evidence of the exuberant, irrational logic of a financialized economy stacking up various forms of debt. Laid bare in this language of “management” is the tendency toward crisis of an economic system based on tenuous credit schemes and overburdened structures of debt. This crisis materializes in the second half of Timmons's book, which shifts from credit offers to dunning letters (a shift coterminous with the catastrophic financial crisis of 2008–09). Displayed in these letters are increasingly desperate attempts at value extraction from a system ensnared in its own predatory lending agreements, toxic financial products, and speculative practices. Indeed, Timmons' dunning letters mirror, in miniature, the larger dynamics of the financial crisis, wherein the very institutions who engendered and oversaw untenable relationships of credit and debt continued to place the burden of responsibility on the shoulders of the indebted individual. *Credit* thus illuminates how the financial system protects creditors—institutions “too big to fail”—and punishes individual debtors, who bear the burden of the financial fallout from the crisis. As another poet, John Ashbery, puts it in a recent poem: “It's always us that has to pay” (6).

Donnelly's and Timmons's work is structured by antagonism, portraying a collective figure—an authoritative, exploitative “they”—through which economic inequality can be made visible. For Timmons, it is the voice of “corporate personhood,” the personified perspective of the financial institutions who command control over the productive life and future horizons

of the indebted. In Donnelly's *The Cloud Corporation*, it is a more shadowy “they,” a collective figure imbued with economic authority and wealth:

one immaterial body, a fictive person  
around whom the air is blurred with money, force

from which much harm will come, to whom my welfare  
matters nothing. (34)

Donnelly's “immaterial body,” both abstract and concrete, “fictive” and yet entirely real in its pernicious effects, gives shape and presence to a hegemonic class that so often remains obscured in American social life. This is the “they” that represents the intensifying concentration of wealth in the hands of the fabulously rich—a trend that continues to increase each year in the United States at alarming rates, giving new meaning to the old phrase, “the rich get richer, the poor get poorer.” It is the “they” who benefit from the staggering inequalities and “harm” of the debt economy, and who justify these inequalities by way of the disingenuous language of “choice” Donnelly satirizes in “Fantasies of Management.” Such personifications function in similar rhetorical ways to the figure of the “1 percent” that featured so prominently in the Occupy movement: to identify and make visible class inequality, and thus to shift accountability from the indebted to the creditor, from those dispossessed to those who profit from exploitation. This redirection focuses attention not solely on the depersonalizing effects of debt but on the larger class antagonisms that underlie it—and, in turn, the renewed dimensions of class struggle that might accompany it.

These poems never directly describe such dimensions, nor do they explicitly figure the new constituencies of the indebted multitude—students and recent graduates, “underwater” homeowners, the un- and underemployed, the downwardly mobile worker—emerging from the debt crisis. Yet their insistence on the ways debt produces new social identities defined by precarity indicates these constituencies to be already in existence, if not actively oppositional. The collective rather than specific nature of this experience emerges, in Timmons's text, in the generalized and impersonal language of the corporate address: the addressee is one of many, his name automatically generated by computer program, the financial idiom strategic and managed. That there is no authorial commentary only underscores this structural, not personal, relation. And if this address reveals the greater mechanisms of exploitation at work on the encumbered subject of debt, it intimates the complex range of responses that accompany these workings, from disbelief, passivity, fear, shame, and social negation to something closer to rage. Such rage might be measured as the motivating force of Timmons's work itself—the impetus to document this experience rather than allow it not to “count.” Donnelly's poems are similarly motivated by anti-capitalist (or at least anti-corporate) *ressentiment*. Several works consider what it might

mean not only to be marginal, “beside the point,” but an “obstruction.” As he writes in the collection’s title poem:

but to block a path is like

not being immaterial enough, or being too much  
when all they want from you now is your station  
cleared of its personal effects please and vanish—(34)

Donnelly’s image suggests that in the wake of the depersonalization of indebtedness and unemployment, what remains is the fact of physically taking up space, being a negative presence to this “they.” What might it mean, these lines ponder, not to vanish, but instead to *block a path*? Here we see another transition: toward a tentative embrace of being superfluous as an antagonistic position, a position borne from anger at being regarded as socially “immaterial.”

### III. “THERE WAS NOTHING TO DO AND WE DID IT”

If such embodied obstruction remains a speculative proposition in a poet like Donnelly’s work, other poems of this era undertake a poetics of the active multitude *occupying space*. Experimental works by poets such as Jasper Bernes and Anne Boyer, among others, examine the new forms of anti-capitalist politics and practices emerging in the United States and abroad as a response to the financial crisis, which coalesced in student protests at various University of California campuses against tuition increases and privatization, and the international Occupy movement, with its occupation of public squares and parks in 2011–12.<sup>10</sup> Occupy was composed of a complex, heterogeneous assemblage of participants, from middle-class liberals to anarchists, college students, the homeless, union members, and the unemployed. Part of Occupy’s power and durability as a movement of the multitude was the unwillingness of its participants to unify around a defined political platform, instead enacting the idea (to quote a famous phrase from student signs at Berkeley and Occupy encampments): “Occupy Everything, Demand Nothing.” “Nothing” stands here for the refusal to capitulate to reformist ideas of protest and negotiation: nothing need be demanded because occupiers will expropriate what they need, and because social relations must be entirely reimagined. Doing nothing—“there was nothing to do and we did it,” as Bernes writes in his 2012 meditation on the Oakland Commune (27)—serves as the antithesis of relations oriented around property, the wage, and value-creation. Instead, the multitude formed in and through Occupy insisted on the importance of *taking up* space (to be an “obstruction,” in Donnelly’s phrase) by *taking* space—claiming squares, parks, and plazas as collective sites for the production

of communal life, engaging in the practical and daily relations of encampment, finding means of subsistence, and sustaining dialogue about collective needs and aims. Such activities were intended to mean “nothing” in terms of furthering the reproduction of capitalist relations. Bernes writes, “Without the mobile or stationary screens, the flow of images and figures across our eyes, what were we, what did we owe to this place? When the lights went off, nothing was owned” (27). As Bernes suggests, questions of mutual obligation and communal definition become at once urgent and never fully answerable, always in-process, in the provisional sites of occupation where, for a time, “nothing was owned.” At the same time, doing “nothing” also meant actively blocking or preventing these relations of production, as in the campus strikes on UC campuses and the general strike at the Oakland Port.

“Nothing” becomes, further, a social position to be embraced rather than a purely negative formulation, as the title of Bernes’s chapbook, *We Are Nothing and So Can You*, declares.<sup>11</sup> This title invokes an affirmation of social exclusion and depersonalization, inviting the “you” to join this “nothing” and thereby increase its strength. To be “nothing” is to join the energy and collective anonymity of the multitude, to lose the isolated self in its larger motions, in what Hardt and Negri call its “living social flesh” (192). In her book, *My Common Heart*, Boyer describes this energized obscurity as “bodies pressed against each other until there is not one set of feet on the ground” (13). The crowd’s language is a “voice without words” (13)—a presence, forceful, whose content remains in-process, improvised, and not fully legible. It is less important to emphasize, Boyer suggests, “what makes up the crowd” than to reckon with “the crowd itself” (13)—its distinctive forms of being and thinking and acting rather than its particular participants. This is to embrace the logic of being “nothing,” being-in-common, as what Bernes calls a “radiant darkness” (34). Yet this communality is not only affirmative but crucially oppositional in its embrace of not-belonging vis-à-vis market and state. The voice of the crowd speaks in the bodily grammar of insurrection, riot: “furious cell division, combustion, scarring, blood, circulation, you’re knocked down and picked up and running and tripping over another body that is your body that is hostile or friend you can’t tell, you’re slammed into a wall, and the wall gives” (Bernes 24). Such lines call to mind the violent clashes with police that punctuated Occupy activities across the country and gesture, more widely, to the revolutionary imperatives of class-based struggle.

Both Bernes and Boyer speak to the inevitable impermanence of these particular instantiations of collective action surrounding Occupy. As Bernes puts it: “There was the sharing of things and then there was getting stuffed back into our perfectly ruined bodies imperfectly” (11). Yet these works insist on various horizons of class organization and struggle, beyond insisting on any one scene or site as producing the definitive communal politics of the present. At one level, they portray the terrain of real, material struggle in



a particular time and place, depicting actual actions with palpable and sustained effects.<sup>12</sup> Such portraits speak to the real—not simply imaginary or speculative—presence of a multitude as an oppositional force in American and global politics, whose manifestations cropped up all over:

rampant in Cincinnati occupying San Francisco of Iceland  
mostly in there's Brooklyn rioting in the basements of  
Oklahoma also in Kansas the rental houses and universities in the  
city and not the city Australia hello Texas Maine for hundreds of  
thousands or millions of dollars loans that will never be paid all the  
new tenements occupied (Boyer 6)

Such descriptions of the varied irruptions of Occupy point, in turn, to the living, processual nature of the multitude whose practices can take many forms rather than being defined by a singular event or constituency. These writers suggest that while the particular configurations of Occupy have, for the time, waned, this need not suggest defeat, nor should it encourage complacency. Both Bernes and Boyer evoke future horizons of opposition—horizons that are perhaps already being improvised into existence in some basement in Oklahoma or Oakland streets.

The closing sequence of Bernes's book offers a powerful image of communism-in-action, a vision of a line of buses commandeered by a variety of people—"People who carry their faces in their hands. People who carry things in plastic bags. People who carry other people" (35). The buses circle around the city until

the buses become like the rooms of a disarticulated mansion, whirling through space and crossing and recrossing, combining and disassembling in a stupid, manic dance. Some buses are entirely dedicated to sleeping and some to eating, some buses are 24-hour dance parties, and on some buses people bicker constantly. There are theoretical buses and flirtatious buses. There are sanitation buses and fully-armed bank-robbing buses and buses that hate all the other buses. There are so many of these buses spinning through the city that, eventually, it truly is as if they were themselves the only thing stationary in a crazy world jumping about in every direction, as if space had too many dimensions to be space but not enough to be time. (35)

In these final lines, Bernes envisions temporary structures in permanent motion, occupied by people themselves in motion, all undertaking a "manic dance" of improvised relations. Here we see, as in Graham's poem, an image of the multitude wandering, exiled, outside the realm of productive relations. Yet Bernes's poem imagines a different sort of existence based not in hopeless waiting but in moving and living in common. Bernes's portrait of space out of time, bodies and buses circulating in countless directions,

constitute both a utopian image of the multitude's self-valorization and (following Hardt and Negri) a "political proposition," a provocation to imagine and enact "the unworkable" (Bernes 34).

#### CODA: "POETRY DOING ITS THING"

In his recent work of cultural theory on the global debt crisis, *The Bonds of Debt*, Richard Dienst asks: "who will write the history of these troubled times?" Dienst calls for a Benjaminian counter-history of the present, an account of—and for—those who remain uncounted or marginal to the workings of contemporary capitalism (1). The archive of poems examined in this chapter offer one compelling response to Dienst's query. While the large-scale consequences of neoliberal economic policies have been laid bare in our moment of protracted global crisis, the material conditions and lived experiences of the chronically jobless and destitute continue to enter public discourse largely by way of statistics: the unemployment rate, the number of long-term unemployed, rates of foreclosure, and household debt. These poems, by contrast, portray the social fact of immiseration, making the forms of collective being subsisting at the margins of the marketplace *appear*. Tracing anonymous figures of social life who are not (or no longer) engaged in work, these poems describe bodies engaged in equivocal motion of various kinds—wandering, waiting, gathering, circling, dancing, fighting, sleeping, or occupying space. In this sense, we might regard the significance of this poetry in its very insistence on charting the presence of unwaged, indebted life without attempting to reconnect it into frameworks of empowered neoliberal or lyric self-expression. As the end of "Employment" suggests, the forms of solidarity and struggle that might emerge from conditions of dispossession are precisely what *cannot* be counted. These are, indeed, what the official language of statistics and the dizzying flows of financial capital can never account for. And it is there—where the uncounted become the unaccountable—that this common figure bears an antagonistic potential. Yet these poems remain attentive to the ways such potential is profoundly vulnerable, susceptible to exploitation or wholesale erasure.

Underscoring the realities of ongoing inequality whose contours remain fluid and shifting, these poems sketch some of the new directions of class politics in the twenty-first century. Drawing less on older images of the working class, this work explores the new, heterogeneous configurations arising from the chronic economic crises of globalized capitalism. At the same time, these poems have much to tell us, not only about the distinctive forms of exploitation and struggle characteristic of the crisis-ridden present, but about what the particular work of poetry might be with regard to this present. As poet and theorist Joshua Clover has recently argued, it is perhaps time to "post a brief on poetry . . . as the signal literary form of the period," given its

sustained attention to the “non-narrative” workings of late capitalism (39). Poetry’s ability to conjure presences, tendencies, and energies in processual rather than narrativizing terms affords it a distinctive provisionality that is useful for examining the contradictions of the present. While they cannot offer compensatory valuation for the socially devalued, poems such as those described in this chapter attempt to account for the conditions of non-recognition itself, and to explore alternative forms of being and making that may emerge from these conditions. Such an ability to confront the limits of representability, to stage erasure and elision—but also presence, obstruction, and occupation—perhaps renders poetry particularly suited to confront the extremities of late capitalism. In the provisional space of the poem “doing its thing,” wresting presence out of silence, these works reckon with the present difficulties and possibilities “of being numerous.”<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1. Neruda’s poem, “The Son,” begins, “Ah son, do you know, do you know / where you came from?” (330); it proceeds to answer the question with a series of lyric images.
2. Other North American poets writing about economic crisis include Mark Nowak, Ed Roberson, Barbara Freeman, Farid Matuk, Lynn Xu, Anne Winters, Juliana Spahr, Jennifer Moxley, Chris Nealon, Joshua Clover, Kevin Davies, Kaia Sand, Jules Boykoff, Craig Santos Perez, Sesshu Foster, Rodrigo Toscano, David Lau, and Mathias Svalina.
3. “Of being numerous” is the title of (and a line from) a long poem by George Open.
4. According to the *New York Times*, the jobless rate in October 2009 was 10.2 percent. Peter S. Goodman, “U.S. Unemployment Rate Hits 10.2%, Highest in 26 Years,” *New York Times*, November 6, 2009, accessed March 30, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/07/business/economy/07jobs.html>. According to the International Labor Organization, worldwide unemployment in 2009 was 198 million. This article also states that in 2013 world unemployment rates will rise to 202 million, and will continue to rise steeply in coming years. Katy Barnato, “World Unemployment to Hit Record High in 2013: ILO,” CNBC, January 22, 2013, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.cnbc.com/id/100394338>.
5. Robert Brenner’s 2001 book *The Boom and the Bubble: The US in the World Economy* describes these long-term trends: industrial over-capacity and over-production in U.S. manufacturing, which led to falling rates of profitability.
6. See Davis; and Harvey, *Brief History*.
7. See Balakrishnan, which collects a series of responses (often antagonistic) to Hardt’s and Negri’s book.
8. Marxist theorist Silvia Federici has argued that “Debt also has a disaggregating effect; it isolates us from other debtors, because we confront the banks as individuals. So, debt individualises, it fragments the class relation, in a way that the wage did not.” See Vishmidt (<http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/permanent-reproductive-crisis-interview-silvia-federici>).
9. On rising income inequality, see Lawrence Mishel, “Huge Disparity in Share of Total Wealth Gain since 1983,” Economic Policy Institute, September 15, 2011, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www.epi.org/publication/>

large-disparity-share-total-wealth-gain. See also the work of sociologist G. William Domhoff, which describes wealth distribution patterns in the United States from 1983 to 2010. Domhoff, “Wealth, Income, Power,” *Who Rules America*, last updated February 2013, accessed March 30, 2013, <http://www2.ucsc.edu/whorulesamerica/power/wealth.html>.

10. On connections between Occupy and international movements, see Castells. For various perspectives on Occupy from participants, see Blumenkranz.
11. Both Boyer and Bernes’ chapbooks are available as free PDFs available for download. This is a conscious attempt on the part of these writers not to participate in capitalist conditions vis-à-vis the reproduction and circulation of an art object for profit.
12. For a fuller description of the particular history and actions of the Oakland Commune, see the essay, “Occupy Oakland is Dead. Long Live the Oakland Commune” by “Some Oakland Antagonists” in the anticapitalist online magazine *Bay of Rage*, May 16, 2012, accessed March 30, 2012, <http://www.bayofrage.com/featured-articles/occupy-oakland-is-dead>.
13. “Poetry doing its thing” is a line from Chris Nealon’s 2012 chapbook, *The Dial*.

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## Part VI

# Teaching Class