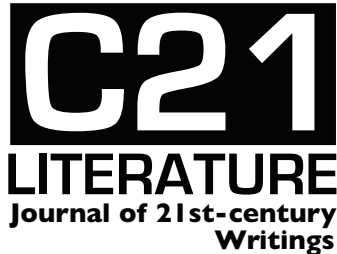




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## Article

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ARTICLE

## 'An Eerie Cacaphony': Reading Occupy Novels

Steven Watts

University of Missouri, US

scwhx5@mail.missouri.edu

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This article looks at how novels that formally engage with Occupy represent the collective goals of the movement. It begins by examining theories of governance infrastructure as practiced at Occupy Wall Street and identifies the people's mic as a significant structure for facilitating collective voice. The people's mic, written about extensively during and after Occupy, utilizes the concept of voice in a way that is moveable from protests to literature. This article moves on to examine how two novels, Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014) and Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* (2013), use narrative voice to represent that structure of collectivity. Both novels incorporate a form of the people's mic into their narrative structure with different ends. *10:04*, widely recognized for its formal innovations, highlights the difficulties of acting collectively and shows how contemporary infrastructure aims to isolate voice. *The Flamethrowers* demonstrates what successful incorporation of that voice could look like and illustrates how that incorporation signifies against those isolating structures. This article suggests that these novels offer two contrasting methods for the structural representation of the infrastructural recreation performed by contemporary political activists in order to illustrate how contemporary fiction can interrogate the epistemological structures undergirding the material inequality protested at Occupy. This reading demonstrates literature's formal investment in political activism and considers how novels interpret political action.

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**Keywords:** Kushner; Lerner; Occupy; Formalism; Neoliberalism; Narration; Collective

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Early in David Graeber's (2013) monograph about his involvement with Occupy Wall Street, the 2011 occupation of Zuccotti Park outside of Manhattan's Financial District in protest of growing wealth inequality,<sup>1</sup> he recounts dual approaches to

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<sup>1</sup> The encampment lasted from September 17<sup>th</sup> to November 15<sup>th</sup> and inspired many more camps across the United States and world. The camp's message was largely centralized around the figures of the

its planning: hierarchical and horizontal. He describes arriving at the first general assembly to see a schedule of speakers on legislation and reform. This was, to his surprise, more hierarchical than traditional general assemblies—a process in which the participants break up into smaller groups for discussion and then reassembly to discuss as a whole and is described as what allowed large groups 'to reach a democratic decision on a collective course of action' (Gould-Wartofsky 2015: 67). Graeber and other horizontal organizers started a rival meeting that abandoned the slate of speakers and, Graeber describes, as people realized what was happening, they too abandoned the staged meeting and joined the general assembly.

Graeber's description is indicative of many aspects of the Occupy events—or, more broadly, what Joshua Clover (2016) calls 'the Movement of the Squares,'<sup>2</sup> linking Occupy to transnational events like the Arab Spring and the 2011 riots in London (195). The account aims to demonstrate how the movement took on horizontal tactics from the start. Implicit in this characterization is the split between hierarchical groups who wanted to strategize at the top before mobilizing protestors and horizontal groups who were more resistant to strategizing within the existing legislative system. One group sought to signal the need for reform and dictate the terms of that reform, the other sought to model a competing system of governance.

This split ultimately appears in the numerous novels written about or inspired by Occupy Wall Street in the years since. Jonathan Lethem's *Dissident Gardens* (2013), Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* (2013), Juliana Spahr's and David Buuck's *An Army of Lovers* (2013), Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), and Barbara Browning's *The Gift* (2017) are among the most popular of the long-form fictional accounts featuring scenes inspired by Occupy Wall Street.<sup>3</sup> Because the structures of governance were so

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99% and the 1%, aiming to illuminate that one percent of the United States population had as much as one third of the wealth in the country.

<sup>2</sup> Clover links Occupy to the almost-simultaneous uprisings and protests across countries like Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Syria, along with the 2011 London riots in response to the extrajudicial killing of Mark Duggan by police—all of which happened during 2011—in a synthetic description of why riots were the method through which this unrest manifested.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Lim's *Dear Cyborgs* (2017), Joss Sheldon's *Occupied* (2015), and Caleb Crain's *Overthrow* (2019) are other entries.

explicit in the theorization and material practice of the Occupy encampments, novels about Occupy provide clear representative accounts of how novels can formally represent that horizontal collectivity aspired to. Using *10:04* and *The Flamethrowers* as examples of novels written in the immediate aftermath of Occupy and praised for their formal experimentation, this article will critically examine how one tactic employed at Occupy Wall Street—the people's mic—can be incorporated into the novel form to signify the existence of alternative social arrangements. The people's mic was the practice of members in an audience repeating what is said by one speaker as a way of amplifying the speaker's words to the whole gathering; because it takes up the concepts of voice and collectivity it was central to theorists and writers of Occupy. This article suggests that *10:04* demonstrates the difficulties of acting collectively and the methods neoliberalism uses to produce atomized subjectivity. It counterpoises this with *The Flamethrowers*, as an example of an Occupy novel that successfully incorporates the form of the people's mic to produce a narrative act of collectivity and represent the counter-structures established by this group.

The people's mic serves as an example of governance infrastructure that is both specifically enacted to fill the absent space of infrastructure and signals against existing structure. It was the practice of echoing the person speaking until the echoes reached the back of the assembled crowd and was used in this instance because of a New York City ordinance that banned unapproved use of megaphones in public spaces. Because general assemblies were large gatherings during which, in theory although not always in practice, anyone could speak, occupiers needed methods to ensure that everyone could hear what was being said. Michael Gould-Wartofsky describes the practice as 'a people powered amplification device for the words of the occupiers, whereby each echoed the voice of the other until everyone in the vicinity could hear what was being said' (2015: 68). This solved a communication problem brought on by structures already in place.

The practice of the people's mic also had an often-recognized symbolic quality. Todd Gitlin, a sociologist and New Left activist who helped organize the Students for a Democratic Society in the 1960s, described the people's mic as working to 'hook[ed] together assemblages into assemblies with its mic check and phrase echoes[...]'The

people's mic was so ingrained in the movement that it was sometimes used as pure ritual, when there was no practical need for amplification' (2012: 76). Gitlin describes the general assemblies as a network of groups and explains that the people's mic was used to build those assemblages into a larger, unified collection of people; further, the symbolism of this unity became so crucial to the movement that it was common practice beyond its use as a practical solution for a legal problem. Gould-Wartofsky explains that the codification into common practice was organic and 'served as a mnemonic device and reflexive mechanism, encouraging speakers to think through what they were saying and enabling audiences to remember what it was that had been said' (68). If there was solidarity built through this practice, as he later claims, it is because it necessitated thoughtful communication by both the speaker and the audience; particularly as it forced those who disagreed or had divergent perspectives to literally recite the words with which they disagreed. When viewed this way, it is clear why so much writing about Occupy imagines the people's mic as the infrastructural implementation that facilitated governance through the movement.

The people's mic, along with the general assembly and other strategies of decision making in Occupy, is an example of governance infrastructure countering the existing State infrastructure. Governance infrastructures, as defined by Anna Feigenbaum, Fabian Frenzel, and Patrick McCurdy are the 'procedures of decision making, often drawn out in constitutions, handbooks, or agreed regulations, but—importantly—are also represented and realized in architecture and what we call here antagonistic spatial practice' (2013: 150). It is important to recognize these actions and practices as infrastructure because 'infrastructure refers to the organized services and facilities necessary for supporting a society or community. We use this term with basic meaning in mind to capture how protestors build interrelated, operational structures for daily living' (43–4). Like the people's library or kitchen at Occupy, as two examples of material infrastructure, governance infrastructures undergirded and facilitated interactions and relationships of the occupiers.

Practices like the people's mic demonstrate a theoretical investment in horizontal governance by establishing a community-based infrastructure that is accountable to a wide range of people. In tracing the effect of Occupy on subsequent protest

movements, Molly Larkey (2017) claims these practices engage in 'something akin to a performative utterance: instead of describing how the world can be different, it reconfigured the materials of social relationships to actually *be* different' (par. 13). By stating their intentions and structuring their interactions around those intentions, the protestors at Occupy encampments demonstrated through action that alternative social arrangements were possible. Feigenbaum, Frenzel, and McCurdy note the strategy's success: 'The Occupy Movement has perhaps, more than any earlier protest camps, led to a diffusion of knowledge about horizontal decision-making procedures' (149). The success of Occupy, as mitigated as it may have been, was in signifying collective alternatives to neoliberal values of individualism and competition to the ninety-nine percent, or those who were frustrated by wealth inequality but felt powerless. In reworking governance structures through the people's mic, activists highlighted the prevalence of these neoliberal values and presented the possibility of other arrangements.

When novelists engage with the Occupy movement, they are engaging with this legacy of horizontal governance infrastructure. In 2012, the author of *10:04*, Ben Lerner, wrote about his experiences at Occupy Wall Street in an essay about the people's mic for a special issue of *Critical Quarterly*. Lerner considers how the form facilitated communication in Occupy: 'Whatever its local content, the people's mic asserts the priority of the transpersonal subject it convenes, the subject has the authority to reclaim what has been privatized, to occupy. It arose as a practical solution for bypassing the government's control of permits; it has grown into an alternative mode of incorporation, a collective act of self-permission' (67). Lerner theorizes the practice as governance infrastructure and form that insists upon the 'transpersonal subject,' creating community among its participants by overriding the individual, personal, subject. He then narrows the scope of his claim, arguing the form alters our discourse about the social world, saying it 'constitutes an attempt to unmake an utterly bankrupt public discourse so as to refresh the materials out of which a new social world might be reconstructed' (67). He ends the essay by comparing the practice to poetry, using Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' as his example, describing both as an 'anaphoric collectivization of pronouns, a system of public address intended to

establish a corporate person whose work is outside the dominant economy. Of course it can, like the movement itself, be abused or recuperated or neutralized, but when I've been part of it, despite all my individual awkwardness, I've felt the mic was alive' (67–8). Lerner admires the ingenuity and function of the people's mic and its role in the governance of the Occupy encampments; this admiration extends to the form of his 2014 novel *10:04*, which has often been credited with narrating a new, more social, novel form. However, more than showing the aliveness of the people's mic, Lerner's novel demonstrates the difficulty of abandoning the personal subject and participating in the transpersonal, emancipatory forms that he believes can remake the world, especially as someone whose identity is advantaged by current structures.

*10:04* represents both the Occupy Wall Street encampment and the system of accelerated wealth inequality against which the movement stood. The novel is about an unnamed narrator living in New York City between Hurricane Irene and Hurricane Sandy. The narrator has received a six-figure advance for a novel on the strength of a story published in *The New Yorker*, and this novel is his fulfillment of that deal. It features several scenes of reflection on the global supply chain in which the narrator is implicated. These scenes place both the narrator and the reader within the neoliberal system that exacerbates wealth inequality through finance capitalism, and the narration provides detailed descriptions of the infrastructure that facilitates wealth inequality along with how that structure values the individual, personal subject as competitive actors in a market-place. *10:04* places us solely in the narrator's own obsessive description of his role within the larger supply chain infrastructure and illustrates the barriers current government and economic infrastructures place between the personal subject of the narrator and his ability to exit that structure and join an alternative, collective social arrangement.

Reviews of *10:04* credit the novel with creating social alternatives through the process of imagining collective futures. While they acknowledge the investment the novel has in describing how imbricated the narrator is in contemporary systems of circulation, they claim the formal innovations the novel has are in service of a better future as opposed to a diagnosis of the present. In writing about *10:04*, Maggie

Nelson (2014) says the novel asks, 'how does one develop a horizontal, collective politics while living in a system seemingly hell-bent on privatizing everything' (par. 12). Her review specifically notes the 'space for long monologues by other speakers' as an example of 'nearly incredible empathy with the multitudinous' displayed by the narrator (par. 10, 13). Others, including Juliet Lapidos (2014), Marta Figlerowicz (2015), and Pieter Vermeulen (2017), focus on how the novel switches tenses, particularly in the final scene in which the narrator turns his speech away from the 'I' of the speaker towards the 'you' of his audience.<sup>4</sup> This switch is often read as an invocation of the audience to create a community with the narrator and collectively imagine a future beyond the end of the novel. These arguments rely on a teleological understanding of fiction that resonates with Frank Kermode's argument in *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), in which he claims that the reader imagines endings to understand how we get from the present to that imagined future. Emily Horton (2018: 325–6) best summarizes this angle on the novel by claiming that, 'in this way, a future-looking narrative—or indeed, multiple narratives—regarding the potential revision of social experience, is necessary in order to locate political hope outside the merely intimate, in the realm of the public order.' I don't dispute this interpretation—if thinking about the future is valuable, then it is in this way of imagining and hoping for a desired outcome; however, *10:04* recognizes how this deferment of action is caused by the difficulty of extracting oneself from the existing infrastructure of the world and forming a transpersonal subject that meaningfully opposes those structures. Through formalizing the governance structures of Occupy, the novel also formalizes the errors made by the movement and illustrates the barriers existing infrastructure implements in accessing a collective voice.

The novel is filled with descriptions of the supply chain infrastructure that facilitates daily life and how that infrastructure is imbricated in growing wealth inequality. The narrator is working at his local co-op in one early scene, and he frames the work of the co-op as socially productive to finance capitalism:

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<sup>4</sup> Lapidos: par. 11; Figlerowicz: p. 215; Vermeulen: p. 675–6.



Complaining indicated you weren't foolish enough to believe that belonging to the co-op made you meaningfully less of a node in a capitalist network[...]if you acknowledge to a nonmember that you were part of the co-op, you then hurried to distinguish yourself from the zealots who, while probably holding investments in Monsanto or Archer Daniels Midland in their 401(k)'s, looked down with a mixture of pity and rage at those who'd shop at Union Market or Key Food (95–6).

The narrator admits to belonging to the co-op, and is in fact putting his monthly shift in demonstrating his commitment to communal projects opposed to global capitalism embodied by the co-op; however, he simultaneously distances himself from that community and describes how that project is not outside of the structures of finance capitalism through reference to the investments of co-op members. A co-op that attempts to oppose the named larger supermarkets is always imbricated in the larger structures because of the capital that allows its members the time and energy to volunteer. Putting in time at the co-op is an attempt at ethically cleansing one's participation in unequal resource allocation, and the narrator doesn't attempt to differentiate himself from those whose cynicism he narrates.

The co-op is also used to illustrate how the nuclear family is a structure that renders collective, anti-capitalist action impotent. Listening to the conversation between two members of the co-op, he considers how the conversation demonstrates 'a new biopolitical vocabulary for expressing racial and class anxiety: instead of claiming brown and black people were biologically inferior, you claimed they were...compromised by the food and drinks the ingested'(97). The narrator describes how societal emphasis on health food that drives co-op membership is explicitly racist because of the desire to ensure one's own (white, bourgeoisie) children are healthier than the black or brown children of others. He then extends his analysis by arguing 'this way of thinking allowed one to deploy the vocabularies of sixties radicalism—ecological awareness, anticorporate agitation, etc.—in order to justify the reproduction of social inequality. It allowed you to redescribe caring for your own genetic material [...] as altruism' (98). Not only is the co-op itself bound within contemporary economic

structures, but anti-capitalist discourse also serves the neoliberal purposes of reconstituting the narrator's specific identity as a rich, white guy and creates a biological excuse for him to pursue as much wealth as possible at the expense of a wider community and any sense of equity. In an essay on microeconomics in literature, Jane Elliott (2017: 36) describes how microeconomics governs human behavior: 'If an individual choice does not yet appear to us to maximize utility, then that is only because we have not yet identified the evaluation of cost and benefit, means and end, that guided the choice in question. When combined with methodological individualism, this tautological account transforms every human action into an expression of human agency.' The narrator of *10:04* is describing how language aimed at critiquing the narrator's subjectivity is rehabilitated into this microeconomic language meant to demonstrate this maximal utility and assert some greater return on investment for the individual. Countercultural language meant to describe collective actions are interpreted as individual acts, and the narrator uses this example to demonstrate how material and linguistic structures antagonistic to neoliberalism become subsumed by those normative structures.

The narrator then demonstrates the rehabilitation of the Occupy encampment in service of neoliberal normativity. Through his interactions with Occupy, the narrator interrogates the structure of the encampment. In alignment with the devotion the novel shows to narrative interiority, the narrator does not go to the encampment but invites the camper into his apartment to offer him the infrastructural benefit of indoor plumbing not found at the encampment. The narrator never explains the circumstances of this visit, but does describe that it was common to use Craigslist to 'connect protestors with people in the city who would let them use their bathrooms,' intimating a possibly solidarity between campers and non-campers (44). By inviting the occupier into his home to shower, the narrator connects the infrastructure of his apartment to that of the encampment and supplements that infrastructure. The narrator, then, links the infrastructure to that of the existing world.

The supplementation of Occupy's recreation structures could foster solidarity or demonstrate the narrator's isolation from that collectivity. Feigenbaum et al define recreation infrastructure as what 'create the camp as a 'world,' a microcity

or microvillage, a sociality on its own' (183). These structures seek to recreate the world and Occupy sought not only to signal opposition to the structures of wealth inequality, but to make such opposition a livable condition. Crucial to this recreation is 'the sense of autonomy of the protest camper's collectivity in relationship to the status quo' (183). It is unrealistic to expect that the encampment maintain complete autonomy in the middle of Manhattan, and the narrator's invitation to the camper may help the camper maintain that sense of collectivity at the camp; however, as will be demonstrated, the narrator does not build solidarity with the philosophy of the camper and instead focuses on how neoliberal biopolitics reproduce themselves unconsciously. After the dinner, the narrator says, 'I told him to text me if he or a friend needed to shower again and that I was sure I'd see him at the park regardless, that I was often at the People's Library, but I never did' (50). Just as with the co-op, he is willing to help out with Occupy on his own terms, but does not demonstrate a belief in the autonomy of the camp or act in any way that would entail him 'getting kettled and beaten by police on the Brooklyn Bridge,' like his guest (48).

The narrator does not believe that alternative structures can meaningfully oppose the dominant structures of neoliberalism, and this disbelief is found not just through representations of infrastructure but through the much remarked upon form of the novel. Maggie Nelson claims that a 'crucial' part of the novel's narrative form is how it makes 'space for long monologues by other speakers,' and she further describes that 'our narrator is an engaged, even breathless, listener' (par. 10). *10:04* contains many scenes where Lerner recounts and meditates on the experiences of people whom he has met—coworkers at the co-op, the occupier, a young child he tutors—and Nelson characterizes these scenes as a 'sharp contrast to the kind of pompous, self-centered male author' whose interiority dominates the narration (par. 10). Nelson sees the novel's greatest formal characteristic as its devotion to recounting the experience of others through its decentering of the Great White Author, an experience she qualifies: 'one could say this is sleight of hand—the book is of course all Lerner, all the time—but this is literature, not anthropology, which means the novel's accomplishment lies in its offering of an experience of a certain kind of openness and curiosity, not in literally providing a platform for other voices' (par. 11). This argument claims

that while not literally representing the voices of others—they often do not get their own quotations and the reader never leaves the narrator's consciousness—the narrator demonstrates an openness and curiosity about others that demonstrates the possibility of a true community.

This formal analysis echoes the way Lerner describes the people's mic as enacting a 'transpersonal subject.' Pieter Vermeulen (2015: 661) connects Lerner's concept of the 'transpersonal subject' to Roberto Esposito's concept of biopolitical personhood, arguing that, 'Lerner's narrative deviates from the formal template of the traditional novel, with its reliance on character, plot, narrative, and fictionality.' Through this deviation, Vermeulen says, the novel breaks down barriers between personal subjects and enacts this transpersonal subject. In Vermeulen's reading, the narrator is able to divest himself from 'personhood' in service of this transpersonal subject and by providing space for monologues and the eventual incantation of the second person, *10:04* enacts a subject similar to the people's mic. The narrator does not divest himself of this personhood though and instead actively focuses on the impossibility of doing so. Because of this, the novel never actually represents a 'transpersonal subject' as much as highlights the biopolitical obstacles blocking that creation.

Despite the narrator's ability to listen, he resists truly ceding control of the narrative in the way that would be necessary to create that transpersonal subject. This resistance is illustrated in the aforementioned scene with the occupier. In addition to considering and supplementing the recreational aspects of Occupy, Lerner's narrator reframes the governance structures to demonstrate their ultimate capitulation to capitalism. The scene begins with the narrator's realization that he does not regularly cook for others—he cannot remember the last time he has. As he cooks for the occupier—again supplementing camp infrastructure—he thinks: 'at the very least, I resolved to cook henceforth for my friends, to be a producer and not a consumer alone of those substances necessary for sustenance and growth within my immediate community' (46). The narrator imagines concrete actions he could take to consolidate the people around him into a community, but he already couches it in economic terms of production and consumption. He then thinks about food preparation as a familial act:

I'd caught an ideological mechanism in flagrante delicto: you let a young man committed to anticapitalist struggle shower in the overpriced apartment that you rent and, while making a meal you prepare to eat in common, your thoughts lead you inexorably to the desire to reproduce your own genetic material within some version of a bourgeois household, that almost caricatural transvaluation of values lubricated by wine and song. Your gesture of briefly placing a tiny part of the domestic—your bathroom—into the commons leads you to redescribe the possibility of collective politics as the private drama of your family (47).

The first notable aspect of this passage is the clear description of how individuals have been biopolitically encouraged to reproduce the conditions of capitalism even while intellectually committed to anticapitalist struggle. Neoliberalism is so enshrined in normative behaviors that in framing the act as familial, it translates the desire into bourgeois reproduction; his nuclear family is the only group the narrator could consider sharing his home with, and care of that nuclear family is imagined and arranged hierarchically. The second notable characteristic is the absence of the occupier from this passage. In Nelson's reading, the narrator's encounters with others are a demonstration of his ability and devotion to listening; in practice, the narrator's encounters with others are saturated with his own hyper-academic analysis.

The occupier does not act or speak to prompt this description—the narrator offers to cook for him and then thinks about the offer, demonstrating an attempt at communality that gets subsumed by individualism. At one point, the narrator notes a compliment he received from the occupier, but immediately adds to the compliment: 'the food was okay, but the protester kept saying it was awesome' (48). This is not an act of empathetic listening, nor does it, as the people's mic would require, force him to sit with the words of his companion. Instead, he precedes the occupier's words with his own analysis, demonstrating a limit to how much he can commune with the occupier in good faith. As the occupier begins to share his experience in the encampment, the narrator intrudes in order to frame the story through his own intellectual perspective: 'I thought he was embarking on a story of sexual awakening,

but he meant something more general' (48). Again, the narrator is clarifying the distance between his perspective and his guest's but characterizing his own thoughts as more specific and nuanced.

While it is true that the narrator frequently repeats what his guest says, often apparently in the guest's own words through a kind of free-indirect style, the whole passage is framed by the narrator's comparison of himself with his guest. The passage ends with the two saying goodbye on the train: 'it felt strange and unsettling to stay on the train as the protester got off and the doors closed, to continue uptown toward a center for the performing arts, but I never considered altering my plan' (50). As this encounter with Occupy concludes, the narrator demonstrates it has left him unchanged. Despite claims that his narrator empathetically encounters others and recites their stories, and despite Lerner's professed belief in the form of the people's mic, his narrator demonstrates the difficulty of overcoming the infrastructures that create and facilitate the contemporary individual person.

The narrator continues to frame and dominate the stories of others throughout his narrative. In the scene at the co-op, the narrator momentarily cedes discussion to his coworker, Noor: 'My dad died three years ago from a heart attack and his family is largely still in Beirut, Noor said, although not in these words' (99). The narrator gives space to Noor's story, while admitting that it is being told in his voice, like Nelson claims; an experience that almost matches Lerner's understanding of the 'transpersonal subject' of the people's mic. The end of that passage, however, is marked by the same kind of reduction to personal action being valued more than collective action, and collective action being delayed to some imagined future: 'If there had been a way to say it without it sounding like presumptuous co-op nonsense, I would have wanted to tell her that discovering you are not identical with yourself even in the most disturbing and painful way still contains the glimmer, however refracted, of the world to come' (109).

This discovery of the self's divergence from the self is 'a proprioceptive flicker in advance of the communal body'; in other words, Noor's story helped him identify something about himself, and that self-identification will eventually lead to a communal subject. The narrator insists on recognizing the difficulty of extracting oneself

from the dominant contemporary structures before producing a transpersonal subject, and he uses Noor's words to do so here. This not only uses Noor's divulgence as personal fuel, but again delays action to an opportune future-time. The community he experiences with Noor is only possible because of capitalism and so cannot meaningfully struggle against the 'bundled debt, trace amounts of antidepressants in the municipal water, the vast arterial network of traffic, changing weather patterns of increasing severity' that characterize 2011 New York City (108).

This pattern occurs throughout the novel and demonstrates the limits of the narrator's descriptive aims. As he accurately describes how logistics, infrastructure, weather patterns, and interpersonal relationships are all structures synchronously working to exacerbate wealth inequality, the narrator demonstrates the structural reliance upon individual people who seek to compete with each other and the subsequent structural necessity to prevent the formation of any transpersonal communities. Doing this reflects certain limits of the people's mic as practiced by the occupiers, limits that have often been cited as arising when people who differed from the narrator's social background wanted to speak.<sup>5</sup> His desire to empathetically listen is constantly running against his desire to demonstrate he understands the world, and his privilege in it. Thus, the narrative is less a formal experiment in incorporating horizontal strategies like the people's mic into novel form and more of a demonstration of all that is necessary to overcome in order to truly engage in these horizontal strategies.

By comparison, Rachel Kushner's 2013 novel *The Flamethrowers* utilizes these strategies despite still facing the difficulties demonstrated by *10:04*. Unlike *10:04*, her novel does not explicitly feature the events of Occupy; instead, Kushner's novel represents the broader history of deindustrialization in New York and Italy in the 1970s. It is narrated by a character whose given name, like that of Lerner's narrator,

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Gould-Wartofsky's monograph *The Occupiers* describes scenes where people of color attempted to use the people's mic and 'found the crowd would fall silent' or were interrupted by white speakers (98) and recounts how the power dynamics found outside of Occupy with regards to race, gender, disability and class were often replicated throughout all of the structures of the encampment.

is not provided, but she is called Reno by her boyfriend. Because Reno is an aspiring artist, the novel represents an intersection between art and politics; and crucially to Occupy, the politics of the novel deal with burgeoning wealth inequality caused by the incipient implementation of neoliberal policies in deindustrializing countries. Countries that had made their fortunes in manufacturing began to make less money in production and more money in the finance, insurance, and real estate industries (FIRE). With the closing of factories and laying off of factory workers, the novel documents the economic shift that occasioned the wealth inequality protested by Occupy. As such, Kushner's novel represents several of the struggles found in Lerner's text but provides broader context for them.

Although concerned with the 1970s, Kushner directly connects her novel to the conditions protested by the occupiers in 2011. In an online essay she wrote for *The Paris Review* (2012) about her novel, she describes the relationship between the protests in her novel and those of 2011:

As I wrote, events from my time, my life, began to echo those in the book, as if I were inside a game of call and response. While I wrote about ultraleft subversives, *The Coming Insurrection*, a book written by an anonymous French collective, was published in the United States, and its authors were arrested in France. As I wrote about riots, they were exploding in Greece. As I wrote about looting, it was rampant in London. The Occupy movement was born on the University of California campuses, and then reborn as a worldwide phenomenon, and by the time I needed to describe the effects of tear gas for a novel about the 1970s, all I had to do was watch live feeds from Oakland, California (par. 7).

Kushner links the events represented in her novel to current events, even referencing The Invisible Collective's *The Coming Insurrection*, which was used to guide some governance infrastructure of Occupy. As Kushner observes that the anticapitalist movements of the 1970s and 2011 appeared strikingly similar, it becomes clear that the revolutionaries and dissidents of her novel are similar to the subjects rioting in



London and blockading Oakland ports. While unlike Lerner, Kushner hasn't published specifically about Occupy strategies, her novel and narrator demonstrate a narrative familiarity and interest in the structure of Occupy.

The novel doesn't simply represent the socioeconomic climate of the 1970s as parallel to that of the 2010s; it demonstrates how the wealth inequality illuminated by Occupy can be traced to the historical moment it represents. In the novel, Reno is an artist who moves to New York to engage with its cosmopolitan art scene. There, she meets Sandro Valera, the son of an Italian motorcycle manufacturer who, like Lerner's narrator, is well versed in theories of power and wealth. Despite living extravagantly, Sandro claims to be estranged from his family because he disagrees with their exploitation of workers and women. In the 1970s, both Italy and the United States had begun the long process of deindustrialization—the process that emptied New York factories that were converted into artist lofts and galleries, restricted the amount of labor needed, and created stagnating wages for those who were still working. This deindustrialization process was accompanied by a growth in finance, insurance, and real estate industries that resulted in the consolidation of public wealth into private wealth that helped create the wealth inequality illustrated by Occupy. In an article tracing the motorcycle as a symbol of industrialization, Andrew Strombeck (2015: 450) observes: 'Long figured as a natural consequence of White Flight and northern deindustrialization, the mid-seventies New York fiscal crisis[...]has received recent attention as a key site of both the ascendance of neoliberal models of governance and the death-knell of the welfare state.' In the crisis of the 1970s, Strombeck notes, the city ceded government control to a board of bankers who quickly and efficiently privatized public goods, services, and wealth; a strategy that has become heavily emphasized in the neoliberal playbook, giving existing public wealth to those with private wealth, exponentially consolidating it upwards and, as Andy Battle (2018) notes in his history of the New York subway, fostering 'a relentless privatization of livability and an attendant hatred for anything common, anything social' (par. 18). In placing her novel in what Alexander Manshel (2017) situates as a trend of contemporary novels about the historical past, Kushner highlights the logic of contemporary capitalism before that logic becomes internalized by its biopolitical

subjects. *The Flamethrowers* describes the circulation of finance capital and how neo-liberal directives facilitate the flow of that capital, illuminating why the narrator of *10:04* feels so constricted.

The narrative voice of *The Flamethrowers* is one of its most striking formal characteristics and creates a counter voice to this logic. It is narrated by a woman the reader only knows as Reno, who is often described as an observer or passive, as when in a review for *The Guardian*, Hermione Hoby (2013) writes that Reno's 'passivity is partly necessity, in that we observe this world through her eyes' (par. 5). This voice—observant, passive, or some mixture—is the formal technique that facilitates collectivity through the novel. Blythe Worthy (2016: 59) contextualizes this passivity historically, by arguing that the novel 'uses women with stifled voices to parallel many feminist works of the 1970s' in a way that 'allows the reader to interact with the voiceless women of the period, offering histories of these particular feminist artists.' Worthy's article situates the novel within a context of the revolutionary feminist art being produced in the 1970s and illustrates the parallels between the visual art of Lee Lozano, Barbara Loden's film *Wanda*, and the subject of the 1975 documentary *Anna*, and Worthy argues that through these parallels the novel acknowledges the silencing of women in artistic and political spaces while also failing to actively represent the art of women of color. The narrative voice takes on meta-narrative characteristics in order to reflect on and rewrite the past.

Rachel Greenwald Smith (2016), in an essay on compromise aesthetics, understands Reno's passivity as a formal-economic characteristic. Smith claims that the novel 'accentuates the tension' between market-pleasing realism and avant-garde experimentalism, 'first and foremost through the passivity of Reno' (192). By reading Reno's passivity not as a subject being acted upon, but as a subject lacking outward action, Smith argues that Reno 'allows the novel to achieve its blend of realism and the insistence on artifice it maintains through its metafictional reflections on art.' A narrator who is passive in this way allows the reader more interpretive agency, Smith argues, as the audience must decide what is objective reportage and what is being mediated through Reno's thoughts. Reno's voice is crucial for understanding the novel's form, and the context provided by these interpretations of her voice provides

insight into what allows her voice to overcome the same barriers the narrator of *10:04* fails to overcome. The voice of the novel feels passive because Reno is narrating what she observes, allowing the reader to see how she is silenced and the ways in which she is uniquely situated to observe the tension between the market and the avant-garde. In this way, she can record the contextual difference between the art performed her coworker at the restaurant, Giddle, and of her wealthy boyfriend. Giddle is 'a waitress but also playing the part of one,' as a means of consolidating gender and class consciousness (88). Sandro, who put a gun in his boot at an art gallery because the gallery 'had some kind of weapons ban' is allowed this performance precisely because he is of a different class than Giddle and Reno (168). Reno does not didactically state the difference in performance but allows it to play out over the course of the novel.

These readings of voice in the novel demonstrate how important Reno and her narrative style are to what the novel successfully accomplishes. The novel codes discourse around art, wealth, and politics as dominated by men, and Reno's interactions are often a result of the sexism of activists. She identifies this by explaining how her understanding of the world contrasts with that of her boyfriend: 'Sandro didn't understand why I let this old man go on at length as if I'd never been on skis, but my experience had nothing to do with Chesil Jones. It wouldn't have interested him one bit. He didn't bring up skiing to have a conversation, but to lecture and instruct' (Kushner 2013: 235). In this description, we can begin to see how Lerner's narrator might have more in common with, and seek to highlight what encourages, Chesil Jones's compulsion to lecture than Reno's ability to listen and relay.

The way Reno reports what unfolds around her allows readers of the novel to believe we are receiving a more impartial version of events than if she was active—whereas *10:04* highlights the inescapability of its narrator's perspective. In comparing the function of voice in the chapters with Reno and the interstitial chapters found within the novel—chapters in which the reader experiences a voice outside of the dominant focalizer—the strategies of effective collective voice become apparent. Like *10:04*, *The Flamethrowers* represents capitalist circulation in a critical way, demonstrating the near totalizing nature of contemporary economic logic and

highlighting the ills of extraction and exploitation. The form functions differently than *10:04*, though, and attention to the use of voice within the novel demonstrates how it acts like in a similar way to Lerner's characterization of 'a textual prototype of the people's mic' that works to be 'an anaphoric collectivization of pronouns, a system of public address intended to establish a corporate person whose work is outside the dominant economy' (2012: 67–8).

*The Flamethrowers* is set in many locations, and as such its narrative represents a broader context for the infrastructure of global extraction and circulation than the narrator observes. The primary way the narrative allows for this is by bringing together Reno—whose class background is left mostly ambiguous—and Sandro's family, who are incredibly wealthy. Reno is a land artist who wants to photograph her marks on the land; Sandro's family owns an Italian motorcycle company that had its genesis in Mussolini's rise to power. Sandro is Reno's access to capital in service of her art, but that access comes with an increased awareness of how Sandro's family has consolidated their wealth through the extraction of resources and production of motorcycles. One art project Reno proposes is racing a motorcycle across Utah's Bonneville Salt Flats and photographing the trace of her bike; Sandro uses his connections to acquire Reno a motorcycle and enables her to enter the time trials event there, where she ends up crashing her bike and stays with some mechanics who work for the Valera company—the company owned by Sandro's father. There she learns, for the first time, of the rift between the owners and workers of the company: 'the company is at war with its factory workers' (120). Reno does not learn about the causes of this war at the time, but is reminded that there are workers making the motorcycles that allow her to engage in her art.

Reno further recognizes her reliance on easy access to capital, and her own distance from that capital, when she goes with Sandro to visit the Valera family in Italy. After a couple of awkward days at the villa, Sandro's mother compliments the dress Reno is wearing, and Reno immediately explains it was a gift from Sandro, prompting this reply: 'of course it was a gift from Sandro [...] a last minute refurbishment before he brought her here' (223). Sandro's family's accumulated wealth, which contributes to Reno's freedom to pursue her art, also blocks her acceptance into Sandro's family.

Riots break out during Reno's visit, and the distance between the villa and the riots maps on to the distance between the Valera family and their workers.

The structures that allow their wealth are only finally shown when, through a series of events (Sandro visits the rioters at the factory, Reno belatedly goes to see him and witnesses him kissing his cousin before subsequently staying with the Valera family's groundskeeper who is an antifascist revolutionary), Reno spends time living with the Italian working class while they plan and engage in a series of antifascist and anticapitalist demonstrations. The workers have to bring their work home and labor as a family in order to meet production quotas and their living conditions are described as awful: 'it was a mass of drab, modern apartment buildings [...] sacks of garbage hung from the windows [...] there was graffiti on every building, as if the exterior of the buildings were the walls of a prison' (271). In comparison to the spacious, extravagant lifestyle of Sandro's family, Reno begins to understand the depth of the exploitation in which the Valera family is involved—an observation that she transfers to New York, when, upon her return, there is rioting in response to a city-wide power outage. She begins comparing things like 'a grocery store nearby had been looted' with the 'proletarian shopping,' or looting that she had seen in Rome (351, 286). The impetus of the riots might be different, but as Strombeck explains, the root causes of rioting against the Valera factory and the rioting during the power outage are found in an immiserated working class who has seen their wealth and public commons consolidated into the hands of the wealthy.

Reno's narrative passivity is built in to facilitate this distanced perspective on the function of neoliberal economy. Reno explicitly repeats the perspectives of others in a nonjudgmental way, functioning like a literary version of the human microphone, and thus the novel demonstrates what resistance looks like to the same structures of which *10:04* demonstrates the totalizing reach. When Reno is told about the causes of the factory riots, her narrative reports what Sandro says at face value, without interruption: 'Sandro said that Roberto had instituted some of the most severe shop-floor policies of any company, and that Roberto was reviled by union leaders and workers, that nothing was going to end well' (250). The narrative tone shift here indicates that she is repeating Sandro's words, and while her interior thoughts to

interrupt the narrative reportage, in instances like, 'The whole structure was unstable, Sandro said, and I understood more clearly, seeing him here, why he kept as far away as he could'—it doesn't undercut or disagree with Sandro's perspective or provide the reader with a more educated understanding of what the speaker said, but affirms the narrator's synthesis of that information with other stories she has heard or observed. The narrative often withholds Reno's thoughts until they directly respond to the dialogue she reports. In this same scene, Sandro's cousin asks about another person staying at their villa: 'Is he famous?' Talia asked. I hadn't heard of him[...]but I assumed this was my own shortcoming' (251). This interruption does not intrude upon the speaker, add information to what Talia provided, or demonstrate a bad-faith interpretation of the original comment; it only amplifies the knowledge and subject position of the speaker. This puts into practice the transpersonal characteristic of the people's mic.

This narrative style pairs with Reno's role in the narrative by allowing her to amplify the voices of all the text's characters, facilitating an understanding of the structures of wealth inequality. When Reno goes to the groundkeeper's apartment, she amplifies the voices of the factory workers, as a counter to the amplification of the Valera voices earlier. It is through this perspective that Reno, and by proxy the reader, learns about the Italian government's protection of the extractive practices of Italian corporations. While talking to some of Gianni's friends, she learns about Italy's political prisoners:

A lot of people around here were hauled off to prison, she said. When I asked what for, she shrugged and said, knowing someone who was involved in illegal activities. Or having your name on a lease of an apartment where someone later stayed who was in the vicinity of the bombing. Disrespectful to the state. They can get you for anything, she said, now that they've changed the laws back to Mussolini's (272).

The most important characteristic of this passage is the free-indirect style of its narration; in this instance, the lack of quotation marks doesn't indicate interiority,

but demonstrates Reno's centering of the words of others. This is also signaled by the space allotted to the unnamed girl's description in comparison to Reno's input. This tone continues throughout the march on Rome: 'The rest of them opened their mouths and hollered in an eerie cacophony. Eerie because it wasn't a cheer and it wasn't a lament. It was ambiguous' (278). Reno is narrating actual action here, but the narration remains descriptive and not evaluative as she attempts to characterize how the cacophony sounded.

Action scenes heighten this narrative effect. When riot police start beating the crowds back, Reno only observes that they are 'pushing them in the direction of the Termini,' and the reader only finds out what the rioters think because Reno describes Bene, one of the rioters, calling the police 'complete bastards.' At one point in the scene, Reno notices a lot of signs protesting Italy's treatment of women, and she thinks, 'that I knew about these issues through Sandro, who would go on at length, made my chest tighten' (279). This is not only an admission that the narrative we've been getting thus far has largely been a repetition of what Sandro has said, or at least of his perspective, but also an admission of getting a broader perspective—that of the working class the company employs. Whereas Lerner's narrator demonstrates the ease of incorporating someone's story into his own narrative of progression towards an imagined future, Kushner's narrator considers the perspectives she encounters as dialectical moments of systemic analysis, painting a broader picture of the function of the contemporary government and economy.

While the novel represents Reno's eventual coming to a kind of class consciousness, the clearest narrative of labor and resource extraction the novel provides is through the interstitial chapters. These chapters do not feature Reno, and the narrative style is less apparent than those chapters that feature Reno's direct narration. In an early review of the novel, *The New Yorker's* James Wood (2013) summarizes the plot of the five interstitial chapters:

We hear about T.P Valera, the company's founder, who fought in the First World War in the Arditi (The Italian assault brigade); his dabbling with young Italian Futurists; his membership in the Fascist Party; how the company

expanded, in 1941, to manufacture tires, and its racist and punitive treatment of the Brazilian Indian workers who produced the rubber for the tires; how the company helped to build Italy's modern road system in the fifties; and how it became disastrously involved in the strikes and revolutionary guerilla actions of the seventies (par. 7).

By including these interruptions into Reno's narrative, Kushner demonstrates how the drive of colonial logic to extract nonrenewable resources leads to enslavement, further growth of imperial power, and the eventual privatization of public land and further wealth extraction. Kathryn Yusoff (2018) criticizes ecocriticism for failing 'to grapple with the inheritance of violent dispossession of indigenous land under the auspices of colonial geo-logics or to address the extractive grammars of geology that labor in the instrumentation [...] of dominant colonial narratives' (2). By including these interstitial chapters, the narrative provides more context and a more expansive description of the conditions of wealth inequality, giving narrative space to scenes of extraction and exploitation beyond what the primary narrator experiences. One of the overseers of the Brazilian rubber plantation Valera owns observes, 'the man who puts your pails on the scale against you like he was born to hate you in a natural way[...]he was lured by good money, easy money' (215). The imperial logic gets played out in Valera factories, leading to conditions like those Reno sees when she lives with the factory workers. This, in turn, leads to the factory revolt against the Valera company in which Reno takes part during the main narrative of the novel. This cycle demonstrates how the politico-economic crises that occasioned the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent 2011 Occupy protests are related to the long development of neoliberalism.

These interstitial chapters break up Reno's perspective and broaden the effect of the incorporation of collective voice imitating Occupy's governance structures in the novel's narrative. This is where the structural contrast with *10:04* becomes particularly striking, as when the narrative voice changes to the third person in *10:04*, it is because of the metafictional characteristics of the novel—the narrator's short story that is embedded within the novel. In contrast, *The Flamethrowers* provides



actual third person perspective to break up the totalizing interiority of Reno—even as that totalizing interiority philosophically operates as a narrative version of the people's mic. In these chapters, the reader gains a wider historical and geographical perspective. They also don't solely focus on Valera but include minor characters like Burdmore—a member of the revolutionary group *The Motherfuckers*, whose presence implicitly contrasts Occupy with former leftist groups of New York. Beyond illustrating a fuller picture of the conditions of global production and wealth inequality, these chapters also pull the reader out of Reno's head and introduce an even more removed voice into the narrative; in other words, they present a way to view neoliberalism from the outside of the individual biopolitical impulses that support it and structurally demonstrate how collective action can challenge these structures in the moment. Empathetic listening joins Reno's experience with the experience of others and creates a solidarity among the exploited.

The third person voice of the interstitial chapters provides a comparison to the sections narrated by Reno to demonstrate the generosity with which she reports what she observes. These scenes contrast with Reno's narration and demonstrate how the people's mic is a strategy that can interrupt the biopolitical infrastructure of capitalism and reorganize the facilitation of sociopolitical interactions in a communal way. The third person style of the interstitial chapters reads similarly to how Reno recounts her own conversations with those around her: 'all you can do is involve yourself totally in your own life, in your own moment, Lonzi said. And when we feel pessimism crouching on our shoulders like a stinking vulture, he said, we banish it, we smother it with optimism' (74). Dialogue is provided in the same free-indirect style as in Reno's chapters, despite the narrative being a distant, extradiegetic style instead of Reno's own pseudo-diegetic style. This allows the reader access to a totalizing style that illuminates and critiques neoliberal capitalism while also allowing for Reno's narrative to function transpersonally and distance us from the individual perspective. Thus, while James Wood thinks the novel's 'implied connection between early-twentieth-century radical right-wing art and later twentieth-century radical left-wing art, and between right-wing political activism and left-wing political activism, seems like overloading the novel's thematic circuits, a wrongheaded desire to

make everything signify,' it is actually a formalization of the strategies antagonistic to the structures that uphold wealth inequality found in movements like Occupy Wall Street' (par. 16).

Both *10:04* and *The Flamethrowers* formally engage with the governance infrastructures of Occupy Wall Street, but to different ends. The narrator of *10:04* attempts to think collectively and narrate that collectivity, but he consistently runs against the neoliberal structures that isolate his perspective. Through this repeated contact with existing structures, the narrative demonstrates the difficulties of collective thinking and illuminates the existing methods that stifle that collectivity. The narrator of *The Flamethrowers* succeeds in narrating in a collective voice that generously represents the perspectives of the characters she encounters, but she does so with the help of interstitial chapters that she does not narrate. This formal comparison demonstrates the possibility of collective voice and the necessity of including multiple perspectives, or focalizers, in order to successfully access that collective voice. Both novels experiment with forms of collective voice utilized in Occupy in an attempt to understand existing infrastructures and represent alternative infrastructures. Occupy, of course, ended. The campers at Zuccotti Park were evicted, the encampment torn down, the banks were bailed out, and wealth inequality continues to grow. Likewise, these experiments in collective voice are not a solution to inequality. However, reading the forms of Occupy and the forms of novels about Occupy helps illustrate *how* activists and novelists are thinking together and suggests possible new novel forms for representing our contemporary material reality.

### **Competing Interests**

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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