

## Missed Connections: The Collective Novel and the Metropolis

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### Abstract

This essay argues that the urban collective novel serves as an important modernist precursor to network narratives. The collective novel is a literary form, particularly popular during the 1930s, that explores a wide context through a decentered narrative. Previous discussions of these novels have focused on them as exemplars of modernist form in proletarian literature. However, this essay shows another origin for the form in concerns about the metropolis and mass culture that complicates our understanding. Drawing on examples from novels by John Dos Passos, Daniel Fuchs, Albert Halper, Josephine Herbst, William S. Rollins, Jr., and Josephine Herbst it shows how these texts offered not only radically ambivalent assessments of networked existence but often a pessimistic view of the possibilities of political community, extending at times to specific critiques of communist politics. In its conclusion, the essay draws links between these novels and the cinematic network narratives that became popular in the first decade of the 21st century.

The introduction to *New York Panorama*, the first volume of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) guide to New York City, invokes the "rumor of a great city," which:

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goes out beyond its borders, to all the latitudes of the known earth. The city becomes an emblem in remote minds; apart from the tangible export of goods and men, it exerts its cultural instrumentality in a thousand phases: as an image of glittering light, as the forcing ground which creates a new prose style or a new agro-biological theory, or as the germinal point for a fresh technique in metal sculpture, biometrics or the fixation of nitrogen. [Federal Writers' Project 1984, 3]

As the metropolis grew in influence through the concentration, production, and then dissemination of products and ideas, FWP editors argued, it assumed the character of a distinct thing and a cause, and, in particular, a shaper of culture. As both object and agent, the metropolis catalyzed the development of several modes of writing including realism, "yellow" journalism, and naturalism. The FWP writers, like many other critics of the 1930s, likely also had in mind a more recent narrative innovation: the collective novel, a prose form in which the interconnection among character plots is disrupted to the point that social aggregates and their environment become primary. In particular, they would have been aware of the broad influence of John Dos Passos, the form's most lauded American practitioner, whose writing helped shape the styles of Daniel Fuchs, Albert Halper, Josephine Herbst, William S. Rollins, Jr., and Edwin Seaver, among others.<sup>[1]</sup> Growing out of the influence of both modernism and cinema, this early version of network narrative became so influential in leftist cultural movements during the 1930s that critics today often neglect its metropolitan origins. Unfortunately, the focus on the proletarian collective novel elides crucial concerns about mass culture, the breakdown of community, and even skepticism of communism and proletarian culture that emerge clearly in the metropolitan collective novel.

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The political and aesthetic efficacy of collective novels lay in their ability to generate cognitive maps, making both connection and, just as important, *disconnection* visible. Illuminating this capacity, my argument joins two ongoing discussions. The first discussion concerns the status of the collective novel *vis-à-vis* proletarian literature and modernism. The second discussion focuses on the question of what issues network narratives make visible. Critics studying proletarian literature today, like their 1930s predecessors, have placed the collective novel at the heart of their

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case for the inventiveness of proletarian literary culture, linking it by turns to a rejection of modernist aestheticization and an embrace of aesthetic innovation. The attempt to link the collective novel with proletarian culture is compromised on one hand by the emergence of the collective novel from attempts to grapple with metropolitan incoherence, and on the other, by the critiques of communism voiced in key metropolitan collective novels. This analysis focuses on several novels — Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, Fuchs's *Summer in Williamsburg*, Halper's *Union Square*, Herbst's *Rope of Gold*, Rollins's *The Shadow Before*, Seaver's *The Company* — to illustrate how the urban collective novel generates an account of disconnection that charts the deleterious effects of metropolitan mass culture on social and cultural politics.

The accounts of frustrated political community in these novels problematize discussions of connectivity theory and network narrative by moving away from functionalism and description to emphasize manufactured disconnection. Connectivity theory traces the increasing global connections of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, seeking emergent identities, cultural forms, and possibilities of agency. Anticipated in the 1970s by Immanuel Wallerstein's economic World Systems Theory, but seeking to broaden this work beyond the economic and political spheres, theorists in several disciplines — including Bruno Latour, Manuel Castells, and Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri — have conceptualized networks of information, technology, people, culture, and governance. These theories offer accounts of personal, political, and institutional relationships across multiple scales: local, regional, national, and transnational. Actor-Network Theory, associated with Bruno Latour, describes the construction and maintenance of networks of people and technology, allowing theorists to examine both the practices and the rationales holding them together. Connectivity theory also explores how agents of both dominance and resistance make use of new technologies and institutions that transcend national boundaries. For instance while Hardt and Negri trace the emergence of a new global mode of dominion they call Empire, they also examine resistance in the form of transnational activist and cultural movements. Crucial to most of these theories is their functionalist bent, their tendency to focus on how connections are created or maintained. In contrast, the dysfunctional and distorting capabilities of networks were crucial concerns of modernist writers.

Corresponding with the rise of connectivity theory, critics have gained an increasing interest in cultural forms that replicate its complex focus on networks. In the visual arts, several artists have pioneered new forms for imagining transnational relationships. Mark Lombardi's *Narrative Structures*, for example, diagram relationships among power brokers in a globalized network, allowing the audience to visualize connections and influence normally hidden from view. Focusing on construction and interpretation more than description, Thomas Hirschhorn's installations create congeries of images, texts, and material, provoking questions about both the items' relationships and how we develop knowledge in an information-saturated, global context. Recent cinematic forms termed "network narratives" by David Bordwell explore globalized relationships across the sociogeographical incoherencies of class, race, and nation, often by tracking the production, distribution, and consumption of specific commodities. One need only think of recent films like Steven Soderbergh's *Traffic* and Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* to realize how such an expansive form can challenge aesthetic conventions.<sup>[2]</sup>

As a precursor to these network narratives, the collective novel offered writers an opportunity to trace out forms of causality that confounded the plotting which characterized most nineteenth century prose. Indeed, the collective novel seemingly provided writers with the narrative tools to tackle the tension between the "tangible export of goods and men" and the more ephemeral "cultural instrumentality" in the opening FWP statement, namely the difficulty of assessing causality and efficacy in an overdetermined, image-saturated environment. The collective novel, then, represents an important step towards forms of narrative that seem increasingly relevant today, and in consequence the problems its practitioners faced, and often metanarratively explored, remain important.

Despite their diagnostic focus neither interwar collective novels nor modern network narratives fulfill Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson's call for, a "positive hermeneutic, or a decipherment of the Utopian impulses of these same still ideological cultural texts" [Jameson 1981, 296]. Rather than indicating hopeful directions, most of the artworks we might group under network narrative approach globalized relationships as problematic and they portray them at a critical remove. This distance is anticipated in the urban collective novel of the interwar period. In these novels, the charting of social and narrative disruption, often via mass culture, and a self-aware approach to narrative construction undermined

more hopeful renderings of networks. Indeed, writers using the collective form frequently went so far as to question the possibility of political community, and even narrative coherence, in an environment shaped and maintained by mass culture.

## The Collective Novel: Recovery and Repression

The collective novel has long been an important genre for proponents of the United States' radical literary heritage because of its potential for creating expansive politicized narrative. Both early and more recent discussions of the genre's boundaries, often coalescing around Dos Passos, illuminate the stakes of the link between the collective novel and proletarian literature. In "Revolution and the Novel" *New Masses* editor Granville Hicks offered Soviet authors Valentin Kataev and Aleksandr Fadeyev as exemplars of this new literary tendency.<sup>[3]</sup> The crucial issue dividing the emerging collective novel from the older "complex novel", was whether the group "emerge[d] as a character" [Hicks 1974, 29] or whether individual characters continued to dominate the plot. In other words, the represented group had to achieve some sort of unified identity, in essence a form of narrative class consciousness. While Dos Passos served as a promising model for an American collective novel — in 1935, Hicks enthroned him as the heir apparent of a "great tradition" of American letters that chronicled social forces — the critic felt that his novels fell short of realizing a unified group, a shortcoming he believed was based on muddled ideology. Hicks sought to distinguish the politically — charged collective novel from the apparent disengagement of high modernism, maintaining a critical emphasis on the link between content and form. To read his writing on Dos Passos is to sense growing frustration, recognition of undeniable literary talent that flirts with, but refuses to yield to, a communist worldview. For Hicks, Dos Passos's hesitation, his "camp follower" mentality, was a tragedy; the writer's lukewarm and negative portrayals of communists derailed his narrative accomplishments [Hicks 1974, 78].

In its marriage of modernist narrative structure and realist social focus, the collective novel offered a potential resolution to a conflict between two of the most influential interwar Marxist aestheticians: Georg Lukács and Bertholt Brecht. In *History and Class Consciousness*, written in 1923, Lukács detailed an epistemological role for the novel as a means of countering reification:

By relating consciousness to the whole of society it becomes possible to infer the thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular situation if they were *able* to assess both it and the interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society. That is to say it would be possible to infer the thoughts and feelings appropriate to their objective situation. [Lukacs 1971, 51]

A novel that could trace the connections among structural relationships, perception of those relationships, and resulting behaviors would offer a powerful corrective to reification. Appropriating the term realism for such a literature, Lukács argued that to achieve the necessary effect, the literary work needed to replicate totality in its own unified aesthetic system, to immerse the reader in a credible world that was recognizably their own. This led Lukács to attack both naturalist and modernist texts, which he viewed as flawed in execution by fragmentary narratives that in emphasizing and replicating flawed perception only skimmed the surface of totality. In a response written in 1938 and published posthumously, Brecht decried the formal constraints of Lukács's edicts while offering an alternate aesthetic theory designed to counter the effects of mass media rhetoric.<sup>[4]</sup> Brecht critiqued the dominance of mimesis in literary construction and critical evaluation as a sop that encouraged readers to lose themselves in the narrative drama while subverting their critical capacity. The pedagogical function, and thus political utility, of literature, could be heightened through non-Aristotelian effects, bucking mimesis, which would both heighten the reader's awareness of the construction of narrative.

If the collective novel could unite these epistemological and pedagogical functions, providing by turns a complex account of social totality and a defamiliarizing jolt to the reader, it would marry modernism's metaperceptual and textual foci with realism's penetrating social lens. Hicks's vision of proletarian literature, captured in this wishful passage, evoked this possibility:

Proletarian literature, however, does not end with John Dos Passos...if we can imagine an author with

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Michael Gold's power of evoking scenes, with William Rollins'[sic] structural skill, with Jack Conroy's wide acquaintance with the proletariat, with Louis Colman's firsthand knowledge of the labor movement, with all the passion of these and a dozen other revolutionary novelists, with something of Dreiser's massive patience, we can see what shape a proletarian masterpiece might take. It would do justice to all the many-sided richness of its characters, exploring with Proustian persistence the deepest recesses of individuality as essentially a social phenomenon. And it would carry its readers toward life, not, as *The Remembrance of Things Past* does, toward death. [Hicks 1974, 65]

The literature Hicks hopes for would render gripping images within a complex narrative, producing a social and psychological understanding of the working class's role revolutionary politics. For Hicks, "toward life", meant cognizance of the economic underpinnings of social totality, which would impel recognition of capitalism's structural injustices and the reader's connections with other proletarianized subjects. The invocation of Rollins for the formal ideal was crucial because of the similarities between Rollins's and Dos Passos's style: compounded adjectives, multiple plotlines, imagism, and incorporation of documentary material. While Dos Passos served as the example of repeated failure he remained the clear benchmark for formally innovative and expansive narrative.

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Now that modernism connotes lasting literary value rather than decadent experimentation, the collective novel ironically serves to buffer proletarian literature against critics who have pilloried the latter's banality and didacticism. When Barbara Foley revived the collective novel category in her seminal study of the proletarian novel, *Radical Representations*, she placed it at the juncture of proletarian literature and modernist aesthetic innovation. Foley begins her discussion of the collective novel with a taxonomy indebted to Hicks.<sup>[5]</sup> She asserts that the form's defining features are the focus on the group rather than individuals, the use of "direct documentary links with the world of the reader," [Foley 1993, 400–402] and the heightened deployment of "experimental devices that break up the narrative and rupture the illusion of seamless transparency" [Foley 1993, 400–402]. This definition allows her to expand the category beyond Hicks's politically-charged division, a move that establishes the form not as a longing, but as the manifestation and fulfillment of proletarian literature's promise. The move to expand and formalize the collective novel genre, quickly leads to its repoliticization. Citing the collective novel's experimental form, the praise it garnered from critics of various political inclinations, and its popularity among writers, Foley contests the monolithic conception of the proletarian literary movement typical among postwar anti-communists (of both the left and the right). While many radical novels had predictable, sentimental plots, as postwar critics charged, Foley hails a more flexible and experimental understanding of proletarian literature. In her view, other typical proletarian novel forms — the proletarian autobiography, proletarian *bildungsroman* and proletarian social novel — had bourgeois origins, but the collective novel: "is primarily the product of 1930s radicalism. The term *proletarian collective novel* would therefore be tautological " [Foley 1993, 398]. Insofar as the collective novel form was a distinctive proletarian literary contribution promoted by communist critics, often practiced by proletarian writers, and developed during a period of heightened awareness of class struggle, it bolsters a reconsideration of proletarian literature's legacy.

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However, this recovery has also created its own peculiar form of repression. While Hicks overemphasized authorial politics in his imagination of the collective novel, Dos Passos remains as troubling for Foley as he had been for Hicks. Foley rightly recognizes that the overwhelming influence of Dos Passos, a rather ornery fellow traveler in both life and letters, generates tension between the collective form and communist political doctrine. But her move to bring Dos Passos into the fold generically, if not doctrinally, sidesteps Hicks's reservations. One symptom is her heavy focus on the national trilogy *U.S.A.*, the most formally ambitious of Dos Passos's interwar works. In contrast, in Hicks's analysis *Manhattan Transfer* forms a crucial prior link in the evolution of the collective form, which was tied to the growth of the metropolis. Like the FWP, Hicks stressed the city's effect on narrative, positing William Dean Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and Frank Norris's *The Octopus* — the former utilizing the metropolis as an organizing rubric, and the latter as a governing node in a global market — as antecedents of Dos Passos's novels. Hicks was not alone in recognizing the earlier novel's innovations. A glowing 1925 review by Sinclair Lewis, comparing Dos Passos favorably to modernist icons Proust and Joyce, presciently suggested that "*Manhattan Transfer* might be the founding of a new school of writing" [Maine 1988, 68]. Dos Passos himself believed the form was distinctive enough to be the first of his novels to merit the name "chronicle", the designation he applied to the *U.S.A.* trilogy, marking these novels' shared focus on

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historical and spatial context.<sup>[6]</sup> By asserting the proletarian nature of the collective novel, Foley misses a secondary link between content and form in many collective novels: the struggle to narrate the incoherent modern metropolis and, in turn, use it as a microcosmic exploration of modernity. Written by a member of the cultural elite, focusing primarily on bourgeois characters, and yielding no coherent class-based social agenda, *Manhattan Transfer* was by no means a proletarian novel, but it was a collective novel. Its inclusion in this category troubles the equation between proletarian literature and the collective novel while opening communist cultural politics to a mass-cultural critique.

## ***Manhattan Transfer*, Mass Culture, and Disconnection**

By portraying both the dissolution of social connectivity in the city and the conflation of mass-market images with political desire, Dos Passos identified crucial problems for writers and activists associated with the radical left. *Manhattan Transfer* mapped the interpenetration of media in urban lives, highlighting the way the media shaped conceptions of the self and community. In the novel, the confusing urban milieu and technologies of desire perpetuate an unjust social order to the detriment of the individuals within it. Critics discussing the novel's critique of mass culture often concentrate on Jimmy Herf and Elaine Thatcher, the novel's most developed characters, but Dos Passos's links among the urban environment, mass culture, and politics emerge most clearly in the clutter of subplots and resonant images that gave the novel its collective force and which constitute the object of this analysis. Through them Dos Passos identified the epistemological problem engendered by the metropolis that gave rise to both the possibility and need for collective narrative.

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Jameson argues this epistemological problem emerges during the late nineteenth century when awareness of global markets triggers an important split between the experience of a phenomenon and its truth:

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At this point the phenomenological experience of the individual subject — traditionally, the supreme raw materials of the work of art — becomes limited to a tiny corner of the social world, a fixed-camera view of a certain section of London or whatever. But the truth of that experience no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place. The truth of that limited daily experience of London lies, rather, in India or Jamaica or Hong Kong; it is bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life. Yet those structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people. [Jameson 1988, 349]

While Jameson aligns this experience with the inward flows of empire, the flow of goods out of the metropolises was equally important in generating the split.<sup>[7]</sup> As the metropolis grew, its culture industries transformed the modes of social interaction well beyond the hinterlands. This situation was compounded within the city, where expansiveness, social diversity, and media saturation all compromised the authority of experience.<sup>[8]</sup> This development cast doubt on the capacity of a unified plot to depict either the experiential reality or the complex mediated totality of the city.

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The quest of Bud Korpenning — the book's first character — to “git more into the center of things” [Dos Passos 1953, 24] is a metanarrative reference to the difficulty of making sense of a complex environment beyond the reach of the individual consciousness. An anachronism in the metropolis, Bud walks about asking questions, activities emblematic of an earlier age of personal transportation and empirical knowledge, which highlight his inability to deal with modern urban characteristics such as job scarcity, workplace organization, and social services. Rather than flânerie, the contemplative approach to the city lauded by Walter Benjamin and Michel de Certeau, Bud's experience is bewilderment.<sup>[9]</sup> His futile search ends in his fatal plunge into the East River from the Brooklyn Bridge, an important symbol of modernity which had joined the cities of New York and Brooklyn in 1883 [Dos Passos 1953, 125].

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*Manhattan Transfer* addresses this problem directly, mimicking the social complexity and fragmentation of the city to expose the confusion and failure of individual consciousness. Like Bud, readers wander through Dos Passos's metropolis, struggling to keep track of events, particularly in the first section of the novel where the narrative follows eight named characters from different social registers, as well as several minor characters. Reinforcing this effect, the narrative jumps from third person exterior description to stream-of-consciousness impressions. Moreover, the character

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narratives are interrupted by both imagistic passages at the beginnings of chapters and cultural artifacts like headlines and bits of popular song. When, in a review for the *New York Times*, a frustrated Henry Longan Stewart complained that the novel was simply a recording device with “vestige of plot”, he missed the point in assuming that the city was simply available to traditional plotting methods, a strategy that reduced its social and textual complexity [Maine 1988, 65].

The formal innovations of Dos Passos’s text enabled the rendering of the city’s complexity and energy, fracturing conventional expectations to generate a heightened awareness of the problems involved in making sense of the city. Yet they also held forth the promise of a critical epistemology, a means of understanding relationships among urban phenomena. Though the novel’s form replicated metropolitan confusion, William Brevda contends that Dos Passos insisted on art’s “critical transcendence,” [Brevda 1996, 100] which Brevda defines as the artwork’s “capacity to be the center at once both inside and outside of structure” [Brevda 1996, 100]. In other words, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggested, the novel has the structural capacity to stage multiple discourses and subjective perceptions against one another as one of its defining structural elements, allowing it to both mimic and expose [Bakhtin 1981, 6–7].<sup>[10]</sup> While the metropolitan “center of things” seemingly lay outside the grasp of either subjective or unified narrative, the possibility remained that a narrative structure deploying many consciousnesses and discourses simultaneously could establish hierarchies among them. This quality would in turn allow the reader to distinguish among subjective discourses, to move from parataxis to hypotaxis, from observation to understanding. Ideally, the collective novel could bridge the gap between experience and truth, fulfilling Jameson’s call for “cognitive mapping” [Jameson 1988] by rendering complex interactions visible across unbridgeable social divides and epistemological uncertainties. *Manhattan Transfer*’s structure indeed helps to make the metropolis intelligible to readers by narratively connecting a wide range of urban elements and interactions, but it repeatedly stresses social disconnection and alienation.

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Bud’s death provides the blueprint of a key motif, the spectacular catastrophe, which highlights further disjunctions between experience and actuality, linking them to metropolitan mass culture. Before his plunge, Bud finds himself first entranced by the East River into a reverie and then blinded and disoriented by the sunrise off the skyscrapers. As Bud falls, he is incorporated into the urban spectacle; the viewpoint shift to a tugboat captain who watches the fall literally makes Bud’s catastrophe one the sights of the city. The spectacular catastrophe links two dominant modes of understanding the modern metropolis while highlighting disjunctions among actual responsibility, perceived responsibility, and outcome. Guy Debord’s influential formulation of the spectacle echoes the epistemological problem identified by Lukács and Jameson. A manifestation of the material and textual plenitude of advanced capitalism, the spectacle arises when the commodity fetish becomes generalized throughout social life, when “all that was once directly lived has become mere representation” [Debord 1994, 12]. Identifying the spectacle as a product of mass culture, Debord argues:

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Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that all human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance. But any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle’s essential character must expose it as a visible negation of life — and as a negation of life that has invented a visual form for itself. [Debord 1994, 14]

The shifting visual dynamic of the spectacle engenders desires and offers a framework of interaction for urbanites. Yet it also disrupts the ability to form stable understandings of causality and responsibility, including political responsibility.

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A glance through late nineteenth and early twentieth century newspapers, which chronicled the frequently disastrous meeting of the metropolis’s dense concentration of bodies and the modern machinery of industry and transportation, shows catastrophe to be an equally prominent topos.<sup>[11]</sup> While, on one hand, the catastrophe ended subjective involvement in the spectacle for its victims, on the other, it incorporated their bodies into the spectacle, providing material for the media and reinforcing the sense of change and unpredictability that Debord argues is essential to life under the spectacle. One of the dominant motifs of the novel is fire with its often indeterminate origins, its swift destructive power, and its spectacular coverage by the media. Symbolically, a pyromaniac sets the novel’s first fire on the day after the 1898 unification of New York’s five boroughs in the section appropriately entitled “Metropolis.” Each of the four fires in *Manhattan Transfer* occurs suddenly and with indeterminate or irrational origins, reinforcing the indictment of the metropolis as an unjust environment.

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In *Manhattan Transfer*, spectacles, often connected to mass culture, undermine the ability of subjects to perceive their environment accurately, leaving them susceptible to catastrophic reversals. The clutter of subplots reinforce the threat of sudden reversal, as illustrated in Phil Sandbourne's brief narrative, which draws a clear connection between desire, spectacular incorporation, and catastrophe. Walking with a colleague, Phil falls into a discussion of the latest fashions and the attractive women who wear them. Here, mass culture is juxtaposed with the body of a woman — a common modernist linkage, and one that the novel utilizes often.<sup>[12]</sup> As they cross the street at Fifth Avenue, Phil notices a woman in a taxi and wanders into a fantasy in which he joins the woman in the taxi on her unspoken invitation, only to find the material world reasserted in the form of a truck that strikes him. Likely unaware of Phil's gaze or even the accident, the woman leaves. Phil's thoughts, however, indicate that he is still caught in the spell:

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As they lift hi minto[sic] the ambulance Fifth Avenue shrieks to throttling agony and bursts. He cranes his neck to see her, weakly, like a terrapin on its back; didn't my eyes snap steel traps on her? He finds himself whimpering. She might have stayed to see if I was killed. [Dos Passos 1953, 171]

Unable to distinguish fantasy from reality, Phil mistakenly believes that the woman has an obligation to remain. Their relationship is, like many other relationships in the book, a projection of one person's misguided desire rather than a shared experience. The pattern of sudden reversals continues in several plotlines.

In *Manhattan Transfer*, spectacular culture is equally detrimental to the possibility of stable political communities. Anna Cohen's story highlights one mode of social participation — self-definition through mass culture — that conflicts with other ethnic and radical forms of community. As several commentators have argued, Elaine Thatcher's plot provides an example of limited agency and security gained at the cost of participating fully in mass cultural self-objectification. Anna's work in the garment trades could easily highlight mass cultural production, offering an instructive contrast in class and ethnic opportunity with Elaine. However, Dos Passos chose to focus on the effects of mass culture rather than its production, a move that emphasized manufactured disconnection.

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Indeed, mass culture appears particularly destructive to class-based organizing. This is a curious and telling portrayal since Dos Passos would soon be entering his most intense engagement with communism.<sup>[13]</sup> Anna transposes the radical vision of justice that her labor organizer boyfriend Elmer offers onto romantic understandings of the future defined in mass cultural images. Anna daydreams of a future with the young radical, but waffles in her fantasies between a future after the revolution in which Elmer is chosen as New York's mayor and one in which Elmer opens a store on the Lower East Side. Her vision of the post-revolutionary world is particularly revealing as it mixes revolution with glamorous images from the movies.

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Elmer in a telephone central in a dinnercoat, with eartabs, tall as Valentino, strong as Doug [Anna's favorite dancing partner]. The Revolution is declared. The Red Guard is marching up Fifth Avenue. Anna in golden curls with a little kitten under her arms leans with him out of the tallest window. [Dos Passos 1953, 398]

Anna conflates one vision of community with another, drawing together elements of Jewish urban life with an Anglo-oriented cinematic fantasy in which Anna is blond and Elmer tall and dashing

Conflagration returns in this narrative, yielding yet another catastrophic and misinterpreted spectacular incorporation. While Anna daydreams of seizing the means of production, those material means, the scraps of cloth around her, catch fire and severely disfigure her. While the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, which Anna's predicament would likely call to mind for most 1920s readers, tragically united the fate of a group of working women and eventually helped forge sympathies that helped to build a stronger social justice community, Anna's tragedy is individualized and contained. Elaine, who has witnessed the aftermath, limits the damage to the upscale boutique's image by telling other customers, "it was nothing, absolutely nothing" [Dos Passos 1953, 398].

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Ultimately, *Manhattan Transfer* depicts an environment where the capacity for self-realization and community has been sapped, an indictment that Dos Passos eventually transferred to the nation. The Manhattanites, stupefied by the

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spectacle all around them, cannot seem to formulate clear thoughts or lasting relationships. The only characters who profit from the urban environment are those who, like Elaine Thatcher, exchange their independence for security, or those, like the bootlegger Congo Jake and Gus McNiel, who gain power through corruption. Success and failure are both predicated on incorporation into the spectacle. This leaves the possibility of social justice with little chance in the metropolis. Walking out of the city jobless and homeless at the end of the novel, the disillusioned journalist Jimmy Herf becomes the prototype for Vag, the character whose incessant wandering would frame the narrative of the *U.S.A.* trilogy and transfer the indictment of mass culture and political failure to the nation [Wagner 1979, 62].<sup>[14]</sup> It is tempting to read Jimmy's self-exile as productive abandonment of a career and environment in which his choices are constrained for one in which he will have more autonomy. Yet Jimmy's uncertain response to a query about his destination, "I dunno...pretty far," [Dos Passos 1960] recalls the threat figured in Bud's narrative; Jimmy's quest may lead to a ruinous pursuit of an impossible aim [Dos Passos 1960, 404]. The spectacular catastrophe returns again and again in *U.S.A.* as the metropolitan allegory becomes a national one, its questions of justice famously unresolved in the trilogy's final image of the separation between Vag's perambulations and the airborne intercontinental traveler. While Dos Passos was adapting the collective novel for more expansive territory, other collective writers continued to explore the metropolis, finding similar elements of disconnection.

## Marx and Metropolis: The Urban Collective Novel in the Red Decade

The history of the collective novel following *Manhattan Transfer* shows both divergence from its urban focus and remarkable continuities in the concerns with metropolitan culture and disconnection. Despite the urban origins, few collective novels were written about the metropolis, writers preferring instead to locate problems within classically Marxist narratives of struggle in primarily industrial or agricultural milieus. To a certain extent, this may also reflect a general cultural turn away from the metropolis in the 1930s toward the national problems presented by the Depression, as well as the international rise of fascism. However, social historians have argued that the city remained a vital entity, both politically and culturally during the 1930s.<sup>[15]</sup> Besides Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, a few novels — notably Herbst's *Rope of Gold* (1939) and Rollins's *The Shadow Before* (1934) both written by committed radicals — contained significant sections set in the metropolis. Moreover Seaver's *The Company* (1930) and Halper's *Union Square* (1931) engaged with the metropolis at length. In all of these novels, the metropolis exerts a negative force on characters' lives and their understanding of political community.

In *The Shadow Before*, New York is where the bosses live, extending control over mill towns in the hinterlands where the novel is set. The primary urban figure in the text is Harry Baumann, the son of one of the bosses, who grows up among the city's social elite, but feels alienated among them. This disjunction turns him into a sociopathic figure, obsessed with criminality and sadism as a means of enacting his rebellion. Only when he sides with the strikers at his father's textile mill does he seem to be able to turn his energy to useful purpose. However, even there, his background seems to corrupt his understanding. Baumann steals the keys to his father's mill, potentially enabling a sit-down strike, but instead he nihilistically sets out to burn the mill and kills himself when he is about to be caught.

The city has similarly deleterious effects on both community and creativity in *Rope of Gold*. Herbst's communist journalist Victoria Chance is separated from her husband by her need to find work in New York. This separation proves disastrous to their relationship, but the city seems to emanate a more insidious influence over politics. In the following scene Victoria describes the bohemian atmosphere of the city:

Time went very fast. Before you could turn around, the week was over, then the fortnight. She would never thrive in a city; she was a woman for the country as her people before her. Esther had a great deal of company and the arguments and discussions were endless. People who had never before thought of communism argued incessantly. Many of Esther's friends talked of the revolution as if it were, like prosperity in the Hoover era, just around the corner. Victoria sniffed at them often enough and at what she called "Marx, fifth-hand," and she said a revolution was never fought by "paper revolutionaries" with a feeling of pride that, though she herself might be working at a job in the city, Jonathan was actually putting his hand to the plow, for better or for worse. [Herbst 1939, 165]

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This passage repeats Malcolm Cowley's 1934 indictment in *Exile's Return* of Greenwich Village bohemianism as the unconscious promotion of a market-oriented individualism, but shifts the target to fashionable urban radicalism. The book reinforces Victoria's dismissal of bohemians when it shows how Lester Tolman, the leftist journalist with whom she works, is distracted from his writing by alcoholism and an affair with an actress. Ultimately, Victoria, like Jimmy Herf, must leave the city in order to find a radicalism untainted by bohemianism.

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As its title suggests, Seaver's *The Company* offers an alternative organizing principle, while still yoking mass culture and the metropolis. Resembling a 1930s literary prequel to the TV series *Mad Men*, the novel focuses on the copywriters of the Universal Illuminating Company. The city is everywhere present in the novel, in commutes and lunchtime walks, as well as in the attitudes of the main characters. Like *Manhattan Transfer*, *The Company* linked mass culture to the decline of authority. At one point, an unnamed first-person narrator celebrates the departure of a Jewish copywriter named Aarons from the firm, whose cynical self-deprecation — "When you're a harlot, you have to know how, eh boys?" [Seaver 1930] — leads to demoralization among the other writers, who want to believe in their commercial work, "to write inspirationally the way the boss wanted us to" [Seaver 1930, 149]. The final realization of one of the copywriters is that his life has been essentially unproductive: "Advertising didn't make electricity any more than the smoke drooling all day from the mouths of the chimneys. Fifteen years of scribbling meaningless words, an epitaph of smoke." [Seaver 1930, 206].

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The novel goes beyond personal alienation to show the disorganizing effect mass media can have on politics. In one scene, another copywriter, Mr. Nash, passes a demonstration of "Reds" [Seaver 1930, 112]. Written in a way that exposes the limits of Mr. Nash's understanding, the novel shows how newspapers backing a company sponsored union have prejudiced him against the communists' message. The text seems to sympathize with the communists, as it does with Aarons, who is marked out as one of them later. However, the crowd shares Mr. Nash's limits, and the demonstration quickly devolves into a melee. Far less subtly than Dos Passos, Seaver suggested that metropolitan mass culture capably set consciousness in patterns that frustrated attempts to organize.

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## **"Manhattanized Communism": Albert Halper's *Union Square***

Despite the persistently negative image of the city and mass culture in 1930s collective novels, few writers grappled with manufactured desire and co-optation to the extent that Dos Passos had done in *Manhattan Transfer*. However, the concerns with social divisions, image proliferation, and market imperatives all return clearly in Halper's *Union Square*, written in 1931 when the proletarian literary movement was gaining momentum. This novel bears careful attention both because of its literary merit and its direct, metropolitan critique of proletarian literature. Despite the complexity of his form and his steady literary output throughout the 1930s, Halper has received too little attention from critics interested in the textual archaeology of that decade.<sup>[16]</sup> In criticism, Halper emerges as either an urban proletarian novelist or an individualistic objector, but a survey of his politics and literary output suggests a complicated engagement with proletarian culture. Halper's associations and stories in the 1930s do indicate a left-leaning radicalism. However, like Dos Passos, he prized detached criticism, and his political views were tempered by commitment to his writing. In the collective novel, he found a way to voice his concerns. *Union Square* offers a critique aimed at the intersection of radical cultural politics, commitment, and advanced capitalism. *Union Square* draws the early concerns of the collective form — mass culture, social division, and alienation — into dialogue with proletarian literature, showing how radical cultural and political aims are undercut by a metropolitan consumer culture.

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Halper's account of *Union Square's* origins suggests the productive confluence of his lifelong urban experience and a fresh engagement with New York's radical scene and spectacular street life. Publishers had rebuffed Halper's first two novel attempts, manuscripts that focused on the lives of immigrants in his native Chicago. While he was able to support himself by selling essays and stories to the left-leaning *Menorah Journal*, he could not generate the idea for a new novel. Halper moved to a room near Union Square in 1930 after spending several months in a loft in the Bronx. His new neighborhood was in fact a meeting place of a number of neighborhoods. Located at the northern edges of bohemian Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side, *Union Square* also abutted affluent neighborhoods around Gramercy Park, Stuyvesant Square, and Astor Place. By the 1930s, the square had earned its reputation as the center of left-wing radicalism in the city because of its proximity to the headquarters of the Communist Party and several labor unions.

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Rallies for socialists and communists were held in the park frequently, speakers shouting their messages from atop crates. As a symbol of social conflict, it was ideal. On one of Halper's frequent strolls, he noticed a man walking backwards using mirrored glasses as his guide. The perilous navigation of the walker via fragmented reflections, a sort of ambulatory version of Plato's cave allegory, crystallized Halper's observations about urban life. Immediately, he began plotting and drafting the manuscript to *Union Square* [Hart 1980, 48]. The manuscript was accepted and published quickly, delayed only by its acceptance as the Literary Guild Book of the Month, which guaranteed it a wider audience and critical response than many other radical novels received.<sup>[17]</sup>

While Halper nowhere nods to the influence of *Manhattan Transfer* in his memoir, *Union Square's* formal similarities to the earlier novel include diverse and disconnected character plotlines and resonating images. Though political radicals figure centrally, recognizable characters and plots from popular urban novels and movies abound in the text. These serve as allusions to other narratives of urban alienation, highlighting the broad failure of the urban environment to provide meaningful lives and communities. Serving as a "sugar daddy" for a younger woman, the wealthy Mr. Boardman is unhappy with both the volatility of his affair and the tensions created by hiding it from his daughter. The immigrant Andre Franconi sees his relationships with people back home dissolve. Gangsters compel a Hungarian restaurant owner to sell alcohol, which leaves him subject to extortion by the police. The negative trajectory of these plotlines is reinforced by repeated allusions to the fall of the Roman empire and an emphasis on seasonal instability.

*Union Square's* thematic concern with mass culture and social alienation also echoes *Manhattan Transfer*. The novel's engagement with a spectacular mass culture emerges most clearly in the plotline of Celia, a young woman infatuated with the communist artist Leon Fisher. The novel links Celia's failure to win over Leon to the urban consumer culture and its standards of beauty, suggesting a source of frustrated aims. A cracked tooth prevents Celia from smiling, and she believes this blemish keeps Leon from noticing her. Ironically, Leon's attraction to Celia is based in the artistic qualities that her imperfections generate. During a quarrel Leon's bitterness with Celia is mollified by the interesting quality of her "sweet, frozen smile" that hides the gap where her tooth was removed [Halper 1933, 309]. Earlier, when Leon paints Celia, she attempts to smile, but he specifically asks her to refrain. "Then, hurt, she gave up and stared hopelessly before her, the joy of posing gone, the loneliness of her young life flowing from her eyes. In a flash Leon began squeezing paint from tubes and started painting furiously" [Halper 1933, 59]. Because she avoided smiling to hide her tooth, her face evokes a sense of loneliness — simultaneously personal and, in the Depression, historical — which Leon tries to capture.

In her attempt to correct the tooth, Celia is faced with the particularly urban dilemma of a proliferation of choices, abetted by mass media technology, with a dearth of reliable guidance. "Every evening she read the dental advertisements, leaning over the sheets, wondering what dental parlor did the best work at the lowest price" [Halper 1933, 120]. Overwhelmed by these choices, she finally decides to go to a dentist whose quality and value are promised on a flashy sign, "a big, gilt sign with two strong electric bulbs glaring toward the print: 'Painless Dentist, First-Class Work, Lowest Rates, Plates and Crowns, also Gas Administered'" [Halper 1933, 255]. Celia's choice and its result show how the advertising spectacle obscures the actuality of the promised good. The doctor will not give Celia a "first-class job" for less than twenty-five dollars, but comes up with an inferior solution that is just barely within her ability to pay [Halper 1933, 255]. This bait and switch undercuts the promise of the sign. At the end of the novel, Celia is pleased by the results of the dental work, the "flashing smile" that echoes the dentist's beckoning sign [Halper 1933, 376]. However, the novel has already deterred this reading of mass cultural fulfillment by denying the object of her transformation.

As Halper's novel revisits these concerns in the Depression metropolis, it offers more direct commentary on communism than *Manhattan Transfer*, or even *USA*. It even parodies other proletarian novels, undercutting their claims and enabling a critique of the proletarian cultural scene. In *Union Square* the question of commitment — the degree to which individuals subordinate their individual and class interests to those of the proletariat (as defined by the Communist Party) — emerges in several plotlines.<sup>[18]</sup> In each, the novel suggests that commitment is either thinly held or motivated by desires that render social justice a secondary concern. Positioned to attract the sympathies of readers, Leon could offer healthy model of political participation, his commitment and passion reinforcing the justness of communist aims. His willingness to help other characters like Celia, Jason Wheeler, and Comrade Helen displays

generosity and devotion. In the middle of the Depression he abandons a secure job to work as a propagandist making posters for the Communist Party. His commitment makes him an ideal fellow traveler whose art directly serves revolutionary aims. In a conventional proletarian novel, Leon might well be rewarded for his political virtue or martyred heroically. The novel undermines these expectations showing how Leon's gentle nature and selflessness become liabilities in the city.

Leon's desire for Helen channels his virtues into a mechanism of denial and servility, invisible to Leon, but openly displayed to the reader in its associations with mass culture. Helen is a dual figure identified with mass culture, much like Brigitte Helm in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, who appeared as both the saintly reformer Maria and her lascivious robotic doppelganger. Leon imagines Helen as the pure heroine of a political melodrama. By contrast, Jason, who often points out Leon's naiveté, sees her as a very different cinematic character: highly sexualized, "a big, hot baby" who takes advantage of Leon's idealizing vision to gratify herself [Halper 1933, 203]. Leon's innocence throughout the affair suggests his incompatibility with urban moral codes, a dangerous susceptibility that was a popular theme of 1930s cinema.<sup>[19]</sup> When he helps out with the cleaning at Helen's apartment, a seemingly selfless activity that echoes his devotion to the communists, the text emphasizes the servility of his actions. Leon's blindness is shown as an inability to face an unwanted reality that has negative effects on his behavior and casts doubt on his political commitment.

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In *Union Square*, market demands subvert proletarian culture and complicate the question of commitment by influencing artistic production and valuation. Jason's plot explores this problem by linking propaganda and pornography. A highly cynical writer whose work at one time was seen as promising in proletarian literary circles, Jason, like *Manhattan Transfer's* Jimmy Herf, faces a choice between making a living and making art. Jason, however, chooses the former, and he ends up freelancing pornographic stories, which ironically often fail to sell. Jason taunts Leon through sardonic monologues about the formal qualities and craftsmanship of these stories. His jibes are meant to force Leon to confront the question of the relationship between his art and propaganda, insinuating that Leon has undercut his artistic potential by subordinating his art to political aims.

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This pairing of propaganda and pornography suggests a common ground in market forces, a link made explicit in a scene in which Jason's cynicism suddenly erupts into pointed literary critique. In a crucial scene at a party at "the Kremlin", a tenement which houses many proletarian artists and writers, Jason voices criticism of another poet's work, triggering condemnation and calls for clarification by the other writers. Turning the proletarian writing's prophetic didacticism against itself, Jason monologues on the failures of proletarian literature. Voicing Leon Trotsky's criticism of proletarian culture, Jason suggests that no such culture will emerge without a proletarian revolution, and contends that no first-rate writers have yet emerged from the workers' ranks.<sup>[20]</sup> He contends that most writers have little experience with working-class life, and therefore cannot illuminate those conditions in any useful way. Moreover, Jason charges, they have aggrandized their role within class struggle by suggesting that their work creates class-consciousness even when they do nothing further to aid workers. To this point Jason's concerns about proletarian literature echo critiques from within communist critical circles.

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Jason's most developed critique, however, reveals the intertwined logic of the cultural marketplace and urban arts communities. Foreshadowed in the novel by the misreadings of films from the Soviet Union that idealize its culture and political system — the characters who gain their understanding of the Soviet way of life from the movies are not workers, but the police and the Drollingers, a bohemian couple who nostalgically yearn for Russia's imperial past — Jason asserts that the proletarian cultural movement is a vogue, subject to the demands of the urban literary marketplace more than the needs of the communists or the proletariat. Many of the writers he attacks are amateurs who have attached themselves to a popular movement because of its publicity instead of developing their own work. Jason equates them with the bohemians of the previous generation:

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You're all bohemians! Fifteen or twenty years ago you would, if you had been born earlier, been[sic] living in Greenwich Village, fighting for the 'new freedom,' free love, and all that sort of stuff. But what's happened, comrades? Why the bourgeoisie has stolen your ancient thunder; every shopgirl, every fifteen-dollars-a-week clerk believes in free love and freedom now. [Halper 1933, 287]

While Cowley suggested that radicalized writers rejected bohemian affectations, Jason reveals a common bond between these groups: the marketability of rebellion. In his view, these writers work to establish marketable identities rather than concentrating on artistic development. In consequence, the proletarian cultural scene supports and even encourages second-rate work. Only by developing their specialized skills as artists rather than acclaiming themselves “proletarians,” Jason argues, can they be of any use to workers. Arguing that true proletarian writers will need to emerge from a “background other than Manhattanized communism,” [Halper 1933, 293] Jason suggests that urban social demands have co-opted the already narrow possibility of building a more equitable society [Halper 1933, 293].

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The novel advances the account of market dynamics in a scene which references the 1931 writers’ committee to investigate and publicize conditions among striking Harlan County, West Virginia coal miners, which was led by Theodor Dreiser and featured Dos Passos. In the novel, the writers on the committee believe they will provide the essential compelling testimony, which is, after all, why they were sent. But it is the entertainment provided by the Appalachian folk band and the speech of a young organizer from Kentucky that excite the audience. Here, authentic experience appears to drive the audience’s response, yet the narrative questions whether the audience is motivated by recognition of the value of working class experience and culture, or the *effect* of authenticity, the cultural capital that the “genuine stuff, workers beaten down into the ground, silent, plucking their instruments — men starved and gaunt with toil” [Halper 1933, 274] lends the event and by extension its audience [Halper 1933, 274].

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In summary, *Union Square* effectively questions the sophistication of communist cultural politics. It exposes the complexity of market dynamics that undercut the potential usefulness of proletarian literature, both as propaganda and as art. The novel casts doubt on the commitment of writers to radical politics by identifying the marketability of radical identity. The novel’s depiction of the climactic march draws on negative understandings of urban crowds to create a disturbing figurative dissolution of identity in the political mass. Halper portrays the march as “a dark, advancing shadow against the flat grey of the street below” [Halper 1933, 327]. Halper notes the presence of women and African-Americans among the marchers, and through the growing collective voices suggests the solidification of a community. Silent initially, as the marchers near *Union Square* they become more assertive, “the roar of their united voices struck the waiting crowds like the sound of pounding seas.” [Halper 1933]. This image, which could be read as either hopeful or tragic, is temporary, replaced by a far more ambivalent mob scene in which identities dissolve. The march decays into a melee as the police deploy *agents provocateurs*, who succeed in duping the communists into a disorganized and dangerous mass. In this mass the distinction between intentional and apparent participation dissolves. Struggling to escape the panic-stricken mob, while screaming “I ain’t a Red, I’m an Amerikin!,” [Halper 1933, 354] Hank Austin, a worker with nativist views, suffers a spine-crushing beating when the police mistake him for a violent protester [Halper 1933, 354]. This erasure of his identity as an able-bodied worker is followed by another: his life is rewritten “as a victim of the bosses...of the whole capitalistic system” [Halper 1933, 365] by communists anxious to benefit their own cause [Halper 1933, 365]. The narrative irony in this rewriting in no way eases the erasure. Halper drew on understandings of the crowd as the dissolution of individual identity in order to cast doubt on radicals’ promises of community.<sup>[21]</sup>

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In the final paragraphs of the novel, a skeptical rhetoric disorders the notion of progress essential to communist teleology. The final scenes, in which the communists’ march is juxtaposed with a suicide and the fire that destroys Twenty Door City and kills Mr. Boardman, are punctuated by the repeated phrase, “In this world things move on apace.” [Halper 1933] <sup>[22]</sup> Coupled with the march, this would initially seem to suggest the inevitability of progress and reaffirm the communists’ vision of change. However, the novel’s final verses undercut both the hopefulness of such a vision and its teleology:

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In this world things move on apace. Life must go on. There are children to be born, and some will cry out when their tender skin is cut. But progress overleaps all barriers. Time does not stop, it moves. The tide comes in and great waves roll toward the shore, and if there’re pebbles waiting, why the pebbles are no more. For the future must be faced, no getting away from that, and if you cannot keep apace, you’ll be sitting on your hat. Tramp, tramp, tramp, past Union Square they’re clopping. A wooden beat on an iron street, and no telling when they’re stopping. [Halper 1933, 378]

The marching ends in an ominous tone, one that resonated in later decades as demagogic politics derailed the effects

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of democratic movements. The facile rhyme and violent imagery in this passage affirm the inevitability of progress, but strip it of positive connotation, stressing destructive and unforeseeable consequences. *Union Square* casts doubt on the ability of the communists, or anyone else, to direct progress, leaving little hope in the possibility of justice. At the end of the novel, the square is returned to the scene of economic competition between pushcart vendors that began the novel.

## The Narrative Perils of Collection in Daniel Fuchs's *Summer in Williamsburg*

If the collective novel's expansive focus could challenge the viability of political community, why end the critique of coherence at that point? One final urban collective novel of the 1930s deserves separate consideration, if only briefly, because its self-aware critique of narrative form raises crucial problems for both the collective novel and modern network narrative. Daniel Fuchs's 1934 novel *Summer in Williamsburg*, which re-appropriated Halper's hybridization of the Jewish neighborhood novel and the collective form to focus on a Brooklyn ghetto, illustrates the conflict between an increased capacity for collection and narrative coherence. Marcelline Krafchick has accurately described its radical approach to complex narrative, showing how the novel attempts and then deflates a collective approach to its object. [23] In one crucial scene a suicide of indeterminate cause prompts Philip Heyman to meditate on narrating urban complexity. Countering the tendency to read his working-class neighborhood as a uniform "slum," he recognizes its immense diversity, and, hoping to capture it, recites the advice given by Old Miller, one of the elders of the ghetto: "If you would really discover the reason, you must pick Williamsburg to pieces until you have them all spread out on your table before you, a dictionary of Williamsburg." [Fuchs 1961, 12]. In this vision, the collective narrative becomes the collecting narrative, drawing as many elements as possible into its frame.

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Highlighting the stakes of this activity, Fuchs's story showcases the effects of mass culture, most often in the form of cinematic images that rewire desire, shaping the attitudes and behavior of the characters. If Philip, and by extension Fuchs, cannot find a way to represent Williamsburg, mass culture will provide the definitive narrative. Fuchs's depiction of the cinema as a force that has deeply and perniciously influenced the thoughts, language, and behavior of the second generation makes this threat clear. Although he makes fun of his friend's infatuation with actresses, the young boy constantly renders his own understanding of his relationship with a girl in images from romantic films. Throughout the course of Philip's relationship with Tessie, he sardonically notes her tendency to construct an understanding of love out of the movies. The narrator reinforces Philip's observations, suggesting Tessie's attempt to discover the "truth" [Fuchs 1961, 56] of her feelings is "clouded by the shadowy influence of the movies" [Fuchs 1961, 56]. Philip himself, however, is influenced by the movies, which inform his gestures and thoughts. He notes this tendency, saying, "I'm a dope, I fall in love with movie stars and there isn't even a great emotion for Tessie to turn down" [Fuchs 1961, 87]. When Tessie leaves him for Schlausser, he has a brief reverie that recasts his pain in the imagery of cinema:

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In his brown warm mental mist a machine gun began pumping bullets into his heart, his face full of surprise at the unexpected attack. Ta ta ta, rra, traa, ta ta ta. The belt of lead sluiced through the gun. Boomp, boomp, boomp. The bullets sank into his flesh, each impact individually shaking his body. The movies. [Fuchs 1961, 93]

While the behavior of the second generation approximates movie romances, the reality of the relationships seldom measures up to their expectations. Nonetheless, the movies provide solace for this dissatisfaction as well; after he walks from Williamsburg to Clinton Hill and back while mulling his narrow existence, Philip feels "compelled to lose [his sadness] and his loneliness in the darkness of a movie theater" [Fuchs 1961, 47].

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While the idea of collection might provide an alternative to the scripted visions of the cinema, the narrative begins to dissolve when Philip tests the ramifications of Old Miller's directive:

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That means Mrs. Linck and her guinea pigs...my uncle Papravel, and my father, Mahler, and even Old Miller himself. It means my lovely friend Cohen and his pimples. A million things. That means the raw metallic tunes of a player-piano that come out of a window and paint the buildings with drabness; it means the horse rippling the skin of his rump; that couple, fat and perspiring, in holiday clothes with

bathing-suit bags at their sides, drinking vanilla soda water at the candy stand. [Fuchs 1961, 13]

As the list approaches absurdity in its grotesque detail the reader begins to see the pitfalls of the strategy: the more information is available, the more difficult it becomes to parse it for meaningful connections. Though *Summer in Williamsburg*'s form upholds Philip's vision, the collective novel essentially becoming the collecting novel, the skeptical metanarrative returns at several points to reaffirm this paradox. As the narrative expands, it increasingly comes to look like a congeries, a disconnected collection held together only by the conceptual framework of the neighborhood. Ultimately, the novel fails to resolve this tension. Philip eventually recognizes selection as crucial to narrative, but still hopes to incorporate the full range of impressions he has gathered. Critics often recognize the apparent futility of Philip's endeavor, but the novel leaves the reader with the dilemma of condemning all such expansive narrative efforts or recognizing discordant excess as an essential part of complex narrative.

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Fuchs answered this dilemma personally by abandoning metanarrative fiction for screenwriting. In a short reminiscence in *Commentary*, provocatively entitled "Strictly Movie," he resolved the mass culture/critical culture antipathies of *Summer in Williamsburg*. He recalled the influence of the vaudeville and cinema shows of his youth at the Republic Theater on Grand Street while suggesting that the art of storytelling for film required an understanding of fragmented, episodic narrative like his novels. Fuchs largely abandoned long form fiction after the 1930s, turning to work in the industry which had served as the narrative competition for his first novel. While this resolution seemed to eliminate the self-critical possibilities embodied in his fiction, Fuchs's most famous screenplay, for the 1949 *film noir* thriller *Criss Cross*, foregrounded problems of individual and epistemological disconnection.

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## Conclusion: Narratives of Disconnection

The urban collective novel provides an important modernist precedent for both the existence and the interpretation of present day network narratives. Rather than viewing these novels as an attempt to forge or identify points of connection, they may be better viewed as attempts to map disconnection. Emerging alongside the proletarian collective novel, and often overlapping with it, the urban collective novel was an excellent instrument for representing both urban alienation and the failure of political community. Their authors' attempts to use the metropolis as a platform for exploring social disconnection illustrated the spatial power of the narrative, its ability to explore multilayered social environments and the proliferation of images in those environments. The writers skillfully pointed out the contradictions of an environment that promised opportunity yet simultaneously militated against it, suggesting that these conflicting drives undermined both individuals and the bonds of community between individuals. This, ultimately, is the legacy of the urban collective novel: its power to trace the production and circulation of disconnection, the focus on the preemptive and co-optive adaptations that maintain the investment of individuals in damaging economic and social practices. Ironically, even while they condemned its effects, they often identified in mass culture a social order that citizens often found more appealing than the visions of a communist future advanced in proletarian literature. As Halper's and Fuchs's novels showed, the market itself seemed to provide a narrative logic, one that worked through multiplicity while generating desire.

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In arguing that these fellow travelers wallowed about in despair of answers, Hicks and other communist critics who praised the formal character of Dos Passos's and Halper's collective novels while hoping the writers would find their way to a more sanguine view of communism accurately described the novels' pessimistic stances but neglected both the full thrust of their critiques and the tensions shaping the novels' form. The novels' final images — *Manhattan Transfer*'s self-exile, *USA*'s final split, *Union Square*'s brutal march, *The Company*'s vision of smoke — offered little hope of any sort of politics of connection. Even the politically committed Rollins left his reader with a young mother-to-be, radicalized but unemployed, deserted by her lovers and hunting a husband as an instrumental father to her baby.<sup>[24]</sup> As the title of Iñárritu's *Babel* suggests, cinematic network narratives today emerge out of a similar crisis of experience as the one that first defined naturalism and then the collective novel, and these films have been just as notable for their negative stance, their eschewal of hopeful resolutions, as their modernist predecessors. Though critics today, with the absence of a robust communist politics and the rise of modernist aesthetics, are unlikely to judge this a failure of ideology, they will have to reckon with the intensely critical and negative elements of these narratives, their refusal of the network as emancipatory community. It may well be significant that these critical forms have developed in media with anachronistic, even declining, relationships to emerging mass media networks. The novel is, of course, not a radio play

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or a newsreel, nor is the network film a Twitter feed.<sup>[25]</sup> While digital narrative projects today largely seem to embrace the connective possibilities of the network, it is likely that ambitious narrative forms will develop that resurrect the epistemological critique levied by the collective novel.

## Notes

[1] Rollins in fact wrote the introduction to the “Manhattan” section of *The WPA Guide to New York City* in a style resembling that of Dos Passos. See [Foley 1993, 398–341] for an account of other writers using the collective novel form.

[2] See [Bordwell 2007, 99–103] *Poetics of Cinema* and *The Way Hollywood Tells It* for discussions of cinematic network narrative. Along with Soderbergh and Iñárritu, Bordwell cites Robert Altman, Rodrigo Garcia, Claude Lelouch, and John Sayles as directors who have explored this style.

[3] For another 1930s discussion of the collective novel as an international development see [Barbusse 1969]. See also essays by Otto Biha and George Lukács in [The Weimar Republic Sourcebook 1995, 239–240, 242–244]. While the collective novel was generally viewed as a leftist genre [Ben-Ghiat 2004, 115] examines its reception in Italy, where editors of the journal *Oggi* worried that it would reflect fascist collectivism. More recent discussions of the collective novel occur in [Hapke 2001, 240], [Rabinowitz 1991, 73–74].

[4] See [Jameson 1997, 28–85] for the “debate” between Lukács and Brecht. Though this much-invoked argument did not surface during the collective novel’s heyday this anachronism poses little problem. Lukács’s views shaped Soviet aesthetics and by extension the views of many American communist critics, while Brecht drew from many of the same influences as Dos Passos and other American literary experimentalists, particularly from the montage cinema of Sergei Eisenstein.

[5] [Foley 1993, 398–441]. Foley redraws the lines between the complex and collective novel to include a range of works that Hicks placed in the complex novel category, most notably Dos Passos’s *USA* trilogy. Author and critic James T. Farrell contested this division in his “A Note on Criticism”, claiming that it mainly served primarily to validate Hicks’s political ideology [Farrell 1936]. See also [Harding 2003, 105–109] for a summary of contrastive positioning of Dos Passos vis-à-vis the collective novel among Hicks, Malcolm Cowley, Alfred Kazin, and Lionel Trilling. This essay sidesteps much of the debate over the division between the collective and complex novel, granting Foley’s more expansive taxonomy while examining its problematic boundaries.

[6] The designation “chronicle” has a long legacy in the novel and usually signals fealty to historical and spatial fact, whether real or invented. While Dos Passos signaled a new direction for himself using the name, he also affiliated his works with this tradition.

[7] Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel also warned about the inadequacy of the individual’s comprehension of their environment in the age of monopoly capital. Weber discusses bureaucracy, [Durkheim 1997], the division of labor, and [Simmel 1964], the effects of the metropolitan social and economic organization as modern changes that contribute to the inadequacy of individual consciousness.

[8] [Brevda 1996, 88] notes that the construction of Times Square — an image-laden entertainment district at the center of the city, rather than the previously traditional marginal location — marked the rise of a spectacular environment in which it became much more difficult to untangle the web of images, which seemed only to refer back to more images.

[9] See [Benjamin 1968, 155–200], Reflections 156–58 [Benjamin 1978, 156–58]; [de Certeau 1988, 91–110] for the most influential discussions of the urban walker, or flaneur, a figure that embodies a contemplative understanding of the city in defiance of the accelerated pace of modern life. See also Cowan, who discusses *Manhattan Transfer* at length, for a discussion of walkers as heroes in modern urban novels.

[10] Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of “heteroglossia” hails the capacity of the novel to stage multiple discourses and subjective perceptions against one another as one of its defining structural elements [Bakhtin 1981, 6–7]. See also Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” for a discussion which foregrounds incorporation of ritual correspondences in the literary structure of *Fleurs du Mal* as a way “to fathom the full meaning of the breakdown” of experience which Baudelaire experienced in the urban environment [Benjamin 1968, 181].

[11] See [Singer 1995] for the obsession of turn-of-the-century journals with urban catastrophes.

[12] See [Huysen 1986, 44–62, 65–81], for discussion of frequent modernist associations between women and mass culture.

[13] Here, the novel explores a twentieth-century American pattern — identified by commentators like Lizabeth Cohen, Michael Walzer, and Michael Sandel — in which individuals chose a private life built on consumption rather than republican models of work or civic participation ([Cohen 2003], [Walzer 1992], [Sandel 1996]). Heinze suggests that instead of embracing the participatory models of citizenship as

Progressives advocated, Jewish immigrants more often engaged in acts of self-definition through consumption.

[14] See [Stott 1973] and [Chabot 1997] for critical accounts that consider this expansion of focus. Hicks's *The Great Tradition* — written between the publication of 1919, the novel which came closest to an endorsement of communism, and *The Big Money* — suggested that U.S.A. was a more mature work than *Manhattan Transfer* because it refused a “retreat that is a confession of futility” [Stott 1973, 288]. However, the “two nations” imagery ending the trilogy with the “transcontinental passenger” [Dos Passos 1960] flying over Vag suggests that Dos Passos retained his ambivalence. It is not surprising then that Hicks was so deeply disappointed with *The Big Money*.

[15] See [Gelfand 1975] for a historical discussion of the growth of urban political power in the 1930s.

[16] The novel has been out of print since 1962. Only two scholars, Lawrence Hanley and John Hart have devoted essays to Halper's novels although Halper still receives regular mention in lists of 1930s authors. See [Foley 1993]; [O'Connell 1997] for criticism that groups Halper's novels with proletarian literature. See [Hart 1980, 55–56] for a review of critical literature on Union Square. See [Sharistianian 1984], [Wald 1978] for discussion of the Menorah Journal circle, of which Halper was a part. Halper's relationship to proletarian literature is complex. In its promotional materials, the Literary Guild distanced Union Square from proletarian writing, yet tellingly admitted the likelihood that Halper's book would be received as such. Halper's agent Maxim Lieber successfully sought out and promoted new writers voice such as Erskine Caldwell and Louis Adamic who represented proletarian voices in their literature. Halper's 1930s novels — *Union Square*, *The Chute*, *The Foundry*, and *Sons of the Fathers* — explored radicalism, labor struggle, and working-class family life, all common subjects in proletarian writing.

[17] See [Foley 1993, 98–109] for a critical discussion of arguments that proletarian literature was not read by its intended audience.

[18] See [Denning 1996, 56–62] for a critical discussion of commitment.

[19] Several 1930s films — including King Vidor's *The Crowd*, Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, and Lowell Sherman's *Morning Glory* — pitted sympathetic yet naïve characters against these urban codes, often embodied in cynical characters. These narratives explored how and to what degree the protagonists are able to adapt to the urban social environment while maintaining their admirable traits. Leon fails in a way that exposes both personal and political flaws.

[20] See [Trotsky 1971, 14] for this argument.

[21] See *The Crowd* [Vidor 1928] for a cinematic representation of identity dissolution in the urban masses. See [Szalay 2000, 200–255] for a contrasting discussion of 1930s choreographic and cinematographic representations of social coherence in Busby Berkeley's films.

[22] Variations of this phrase occur on [Halper 1933, 331, 335, 351, 370, 376, 378].

[23] See [Krafchick 1988, 35–58] for this discussion. Most of my analysis in this section draws on Krafchick's reading, but it seeks to recontextualize Summer in Williamsburg against the framework of the metropolis, mass culture, and manufactured disconnection that guides this essay.

[24] This is not to suggest that network narrative is incapable of positive construction. An expansive conceit like the octopus, the metropolis, or traffic offers a useful way to conceptualize and work through phenomenological disconnection even when the narrative tends toward an inescapable tautology or an absurd congeries.

[25] It is interesting to consider what David Fincher's film *The Social Network* might have been like as a more decentered narrative that have would allowed it to explore the global utilization of Facebook or Napster.

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