

QUEER STUDIES, MATERIALISM, AND CRISIS

A Roundtable Discussion

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Kevin Floyd, Miranda Joseph, Heather Love, Robert
McRuer, Fred Moten, Tavia Nyong'o, Lisa Rofel, Jordana
Rosenberg, Gayle Salamon, Dean Spade, Amy Villarejo**

This roundtable was conducted by e-mail from June 2009 to August 2010. We divided participants into three groups, with each group responding in staggered fashion to the prompts. In this way, group 2 was able to see group 1's responses before they sent in their own. Group 3 was able to see the responses of groups 1 and 2. Through this process, we were able to not only include a remarkably large cluster of participants but also allow for the possibility of dialogue between groups. Group 1 consisted of Roderick Ferguson, Kevin Floyd, and Lisa Rofel. Group 2 included Heather Love, Robert McRuer, Fred Moten, and Tavia Nyong'o. Group 3 was Christina Crosby, Lisa Duggan, Miranda Joseph, Gayle Salamon, and Dean Spade.

—Jordana Rosenberg and Amy Villarejo.

Jordana Rosenberg and Amy Villarejo: We'd like to begin with a deliberately open-ended question, to take the pulse of queer studies today. We'd like to know where participants are coming from and heading toward in terms of their orientation to political-economic questions. We've collected a number of possible problematics with which to engage, based on our sense of where queer studies is headed, and how it might best seize on the interconnections between sexuality studies and the legacies of Marxism and historical materialism. Here we ask you to reflect on how a queer hermeneutics can be brought to bear on any of the following: economic crises past or present, the value-form, class and class struggle, capitalist moder-

nity (broadly conceived), periodization, the aesthetic mediation of economic contradiction, exploitation and toil, globalization and theories of space, racism as the privileged instrument of capital accumulation, secularization, and the narration of modernity.

Kevin Floyd: I've been thinking about this rather startling reengagement with utopia in queer studies and about how to understand it in relation to the neoliberal horizon queer studies has been thinking, and thinking against, for some time now. If articulations of hetero- and homonormativity clarified a queer perspective on the privatizing capacities of "rights" within a 1990s neoliberalism (e.g., Lauren Berlant, Michael Warner, Lisa Duggan), what's striking is both the increasingly global horizon of the queer account of neoliberalism in the years since and its elaboration of an explicitly militarized and routinely racist post-9/11 violence (e.g., Martin Manalansan, Chandan Reddy, Jasbir Puar, Anna Agathangelou). This shift in queer thought seems to resonate with Giovanni Arrighi's argument that in recent decades the United States has more forcefully asserted its global policing power precisely in defense of its apparently diminishing financial power.

So where does one get off talking about utopia? Established queer questions about temporality have also become questions about utopia—not simply in the welcome appearance of José Muñoz's book on utopia but also in the book's disagreement with anti-utopian interlocutor Lee Edelman.¹ The category of utopia is indeed central to both of these positions, positions that share a refusal of what Edelman would rightly call the "narcissistic" future to which a certain neoliberal normativity wants to take those of us it would rather not just lock up. If it's difficult to conjure any positive blueprint for a qualitatively different future (though Muñoz bravely does this, in idealist terms he lays out with refreshing forthrightness), one can at least embrace negativity, the destruction of the present. (But then for Theodor Adorno, on whom Edelman heavily leans, negativity and utopia tend to converge. Is *No Future* really a crypto-utopian polemic dressed up in the Lacanian drag of an anti-utopian polemic?)

This engagement with utopia seems symptomatic of a moment in which capital's colonization of the future appears both unassailable, as a familiar neoliberal narrative would have it (hence the "impossibility" of Edelman's "wager"), and (as Muñoz suggests) transparently violent in a way that may suggest the opposite: accumulation's radical fragility. Marxism has read crisis both ways; queer studies seems to be doing the same.

Lisa Rofel: Keywords for global capitalism: value, need, profit, exploitation, universal, uniform. Keywords for a queer hermeneutics: unstable boundaries, unstable

identities, bodies that speak worlds, heterogeneity, abjection. And desire. Brought to bear on global capitalism (and its attendant crises), a queer hermeneutics, especially one that is based in a postcolonial, postnationalist politics, leads us to grasp global capitalism not as a universal, unified phenomenon but as heterogeneous, interconnected practices whose coherence and universalism are asserted in the Euro-American metropolises but undone by the “difference,” the specific histories and unequal positionings of the postcolonies. This queer hermeneutics allows us to move beyond the instrumental/affective dichotomy that has plagued analyses of capitalism, a dichotomy that ironically is itself one of the main products of capitalism. This queer hermeneutics allows us to see that the value-form lies not just in material objects but in bodies deemed differentially worthy of a valuable life, that capitalism is about needs but also about desires (which are not the same), that desires take myriad forms and are materialized in the relationship between eroticism and the mundane labor it takes to get through life. A queer hermeneutics that takes seriously the need to analyze how boundaries are shored up over and against what they try to exclude will refuse to draw the border of queer studies within the framework of the United States for considering the question of how to value queer lives. The assumption of the American nation-state as the realm that signifies a universal capitalism, within which we demand rights, assert the importance of queer lives, and otherwise challenge discourses of power, supports the ideology that America can address itself without reference to its empire. A postcolonial, postnationalist queer studies refuses such inadvertent collusion with American empire.

Rod Ferguson: When I started considering Marxism’s potentials and limits, I was a graduate student in sociology. And in that discipline Karl Marx was one-third of a godhead completed by Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. My encounter with Marx was part of sociology’s own exclusions around race, gender, and sexuality. It wasn’t until I read Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* that I began to imagine a way to use Marxism as something other than as a vehicle for those exclusions. As an undergraduate at Howard University, I was well aware of revolutionary nationalism’s rearticulation of Marxism to account for racial domination. But it really wasn’t until *Immigrant Acts* that I began to think about Marxism and intersectionality together.

Around that same time there were these interesting confluences taking place at UC San Diego—the crystallization of a materialist and critical-race feminism led to a large degree by Lowe, a comparative and theoretically attuned ethnic studies spearheaded by George Lipsitz, a deliberately reinventive queer studies

called for by Judith Halberstam, and an emergent queer diaspora/queer of color formation developed by Gayatri Gopinath who was at UCSD on postdoc and Chandan Reddy who was dissertating there from Columbia. In the midst of all of this, it occurred to me that there might be an opportunity to rearticulate Marxist theories of the “totality of social relations” to account for these confluences. It was also a way to provide an alternative historical materialism, one that was alternative to the canonical exclusions of Marxism. For me the potential that queerness holds for Marxism still lies in re-posing the question of totality.

Fred Moten: I just returned home from a conference titled “Rethinking Racial Capitalism.” The gathering was inspired by the conceptual force of Cedric Robinson’s great book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Zed Books, 1983), in which he elaborates the notion of racial capitalism. That notion requires us to think of racism not as capitalism’s instrument but as its condition of possibility. Robinson’s work, in this regard, is conceptually parallel to Michel Foucault’s late lectures on race, racism, and race war, as well as those on the abnormal and “the birth of biopolitics,” all of which partly comprise working notes for the project of a history of sexuality. I’ve been trying to consider blackness—an “ontological totality,” in Robinson’s words, that is preserved by way of self-generated rupture and expansion—as a matter for thought, as well as the object of a politico-erotic claim, for those of us who are trying to live in a different way. That thought and that claim depend on a radical intellectual inhabitation of the general field of sociality-in-differentiation that calls capitalism into existence as a mode of accumulation set to work by regulative desire. They are animated by the interinanimative relation that structures the history of sexuality and the history of raciality, within which sexual-racial capitalism emerges and within which, in Foucault’s words, “life constantly escapes.” As a matter of course, knowledge of this fugitive mode of life, this runaway inherence, this unvalued and invaluable self-care of/in the undercommons, is unimaginable outside the radical (thought of the) outside that is queer hermeneutics or, as I also like to call it, black studies. I think it has many other names as well.

Heather Love: I want to call attention to primarily US-based queer writing that focuses on the lived realities of class and race. One key moment in this tradition is Cherríe Moraga’s discussion of “queer attack” in her 1981 dialogue with Amber Hollibaugh. (“If you have enough money and privilege, you can separate yourself from heterosexist oppression. You can be sapphic or somethin, but you don’t have to be queer.”) I would also point to early work in deviance studies, pulp, Audre Lorde’s *Zami*, Dorothy Allison’s fiction and essays, Leslie Feinberg’s *Stone Butch*

Blues, Eileen Myles's *Chelsea Girls*, Cathy Cohen's 1996 piece "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," and Eli Clare's *Exile and Pride*. Along with recent scholarship on working-class and rural queer life (by Mary L. Gray, Scott Herring, Richard T. Rodriguez, Nadine Hubbs, Lisa Henderson, and others), queer working-class narratives have allowed me to think about my own class trajectory. For those of us for whom queer studies was a route to upward mobility, these texts are crucial. In their reflexivity and their emphasis on the everyday realities of exile, they get at the shame of being an outsider and at the shame of becoming an insider.

I want to recall a queer tradition that focuses on the lived experience of structural inequality. I realize that this might position me at the margins of a discussion that focuses on capital (rather than class as a dimension of social and psychic life). It's also true that I probably have less to say about crisis than about making do and getting by. Because of its emphasis on everyday life and intimate experience, the tradition I am pointing to can seem to lack a revolutionary horizon. But for me this refusal of the choice between revolution and capitulation is what makes this tradition queer.

Robert McRuer: One of the most interesting things about queer theory's engagements with Marxisms of late is the extent to which they cite/site disability and impairment, which often seem to be everywhere in queer theory without being named as such. Over and over, the queer theory we seem to want—one that provides some account of capitalist modernity, neoliberalism, or globalization—is concerned with the invalidated and unthinkable, with figures that are sick, infected, deranged, addicted, scarred, wounded, or traumatized.

Yet at times the figuration of disability in queer theory functions a lot like that of the racialized sex worker in Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black*. From liberal, Marxist, and anticolonial perspectives alike, Ferguson stresses, she marks the excesses of capitalism but cannot, supposedly, occupy a site from which a critique of capital might be launched. Building on Ferguson, we might note that a range of critiques of capital, again running the spectrum from liberal to revolutionary, figure disability as the sign of capitalism gone wrong while also conjuring up a naturalized able-bodiedness that should follow either its reform (for liberals) or eradication (for Marxists and other revolutionaries). Queer and crip reworkings of Marxism might more effectively speak to each other across their shared desire to not simply straighten that which is bent, and might thereby recognize the multiple locations where transnational crip/queer alliances function as sites for imagining a necessarily disabled world—meaning an inhabitable, sustainable, livable

world. Even as various critics, for instance, responded to the Haitian earthquake by again simply metaphorizing Haiti's "crippled" position in the global economy (often using visual invocations of new amputees to make that point), cross-ability alliances on and off the island were imagining a different embodied future by critiquing the ongoing exploitation of Haiti while securing wheelchairs for use in the altered terrain.

Tavia Nyong'o: Marriage equality can seem to take place on an entirely different plane from the tax revolt and survivalist politics of the Tea Party. The latter's noxious social attitudes aside, might there not be a common adaptation to the rigors of a risk society? Both assume "personal responsibility," managing the anxiogenic prospects of a looming future of greater insecurity, lower resilience, and flailing health. These are the "no futures" many of us ponder when we ponder capitalism's death drive. Rather than a "haven in the heartless world," is marriage now woven into the fabric of the market's magic carpet, taking us along for the same wild ride?

Against Love (Pantheon, 2003), Laura Kipnis's brilliant and hilarious polemic, was written before the economic collapse. But her sharply observed demolition of our hypocritical attitudes toward fidelity remains prescient. Thinly disguised beneath magazine-friendly prose is a sound sociological treatise on how we govern ourselves through the very ideals and practices taken to comprise individuality and freedom. The problem with marriage is not the sexism, Kipnis insists, nor even the homophobia. The problem is the *love*, the nigh impossible impositions of which prep us for the masochistic demands of life under capitalism. Much as it always seems, from within a financial bubble, that the laws of capitalism have been repealed and that this time wealth will just keep magically growing, so does it seem within the heady throes of a love affair or new marriage that human nature, or the law of averages, has been finally proved irrelevant, and this particular time, for this particular couple, everlasting fulfillment really is at hand. Shorn of these fantasies—of wealth without work, of reciprocity without end—what less compromising demands would we be impelled to make on society, the state, and indeed, ourselves?

The question of intimate politics—as many queer commentators have shown—resists an instant, rhetorical fix. We cannot simply reject the ideologies of romantic love and companionate marriage for their complicities with contemporary capitalism. It is this very relationship of complicity that makes capitalism (sometimes) survivable. This complicity relates to what Jodi Dean, after Slavoj Žižek, calls "the decline of symbolic efficiency" in contemporary capitalism.²

Dean argues that the advanced industrial democracies are increasingly unable to support a stable set of terms for political debate, as those very terms become increasingly the subject of interminable contestation.

In the Lacanian analytic Dean adopts, a decline in symbolic efficiency is accompanied by a resurgence of the imaginary, aggressive dimension of politics. The public inquisitions into politicians' marital infidelity are examples of such aggressive and hypocritical fantasy, as if the stability of our union depended on theirs. Kipnis turns the table on such moralism by daring to speculate that adulterous politicians might be living out the experiments in public intimacy we are too timid to embrace ourselves. And while the noxious men who champion homophobia in public—and privately surf over to rentboy.com to hire “baggage handlers”—are not secretly allies, wouldn't the movement be weaker without their regular recurrence, and the delicious reminder of shared frailties and urgencies their exposure brings?

As much as many hope gays will change the institution of marriage for the better, may we not present the alternative reality that queers will probably do marriage no better than anyone else? We need new anthems for the gay divorcée, new tributes to the failures, *mésalliance*, and complicated legal entanglements we have already entered in our experiments with the public vow. Tracey Thorn's tender lament, “Oh, the Divorces” (*Love and Its Opposite*, 2010), tracks the social and psychic cost not only of the decline of the symbolic efficiency of marriage but also of the excessive inflation of marriage as a public front behind which, it turns out, “we wanted more all along.” The song works as an immanent critique of the alienated sociality within which we negotiate other people's lives as presentiments of our own fate, the personal becoming, as Lauren Berlant says, “juxtapolitical.” “No one gets off without paying the ride” is a line from Thorn's song, but it could also be a graffiti scrawled on a wall in Athens, or anywhere else ordinary life has been turned upside down by the global slump and its bill past due. Which is everywhere.

Miranda Joseph: As the other contributors to this discussion have already demonstrated, queer studies does its work, contributing to diverse and sometimes conflicting projects, with allies across interdisciplinary humanities and social science scholarship. This intention/effort toward “radical intellectual inhabitation of the general field of sociality-in-differentiation” (Moten) leads us to grasp capitalism “as heterogeneous, interconnected practices” (Rofel). So, when we take up the current “crisis,” we define our object of analysis rather differently than the mainstream media (and many academic colleagues as well). We do not see a *financial*

crisis, narrowly defined in time and space as a crisis of the financial system, nor can we speak in any uncomplicated way of “mainstreet,” nor do we assess “the problem” as some of our behavioral science colleagues might, as a matter of the irrationality of individual decision making. On the contrary, we see that people have been engaged in diverse struggles, over time (not in one particular crisis moment), to make viable lives, to cobble together resources that enable fulfillment of—and occasionally resistance to—norms. We see the ways those efforts have made them available for exploitation and invited them to exploit others. It is in that context, then, that we bring some specifically “queer” tools to bear. For instance, Kevin Floyd’s recent book, *The Reification of Desire* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), directs us to the changing articulations of gender and desire that would attend adjustments to the mode of accumulation provoked by the current crisis. And I’m trying to put Lee Edelman’s effort to claim, as queer antifuturists, nineteenth-century hoarders and money fondlers such as Scrooge and Silas Marner (before their redemption by the child, of course) in conversation with popular critiques of the “irresponsible” present-orientation of contemporary investment bankers. The behavior of the bankers might very well be understood to disrupt a variety of norms inseparable from heteronormativity, such as the “moral” responsibility to not “walk away” from an underwater mortgage (see Brent T. White, “Underwater and Not Walking Away: Shame, Fear and the Social Management of the Housing Crisis,” 2009) and thus from a home that figured (in) a gendered, raced, sexualized American Dream.

Christina Crosby: I am thinking of John Ruskin, famous in Victorian Britain for his writing on art and architecture, and infamous for his writing on political economy. As an erstwhile enthusiastic Evangelical believer, Ruskin’s work is at the intersection of religious ethics and the secular sciences of wealth and society. He makes manifest what Victorian doxa disavows, that a Protestant religious tradition is intertwined with what is imagined as the (moral) value-free discipline of economics.

In demonstrating this collusion, Ruskin’s texts tend toward the writerly, gathering a rhetorical force that in his political economy bursts into an efflorescence of allegory. His Evangelical training called him to interpret this world as a figure for another, first in the symbolic economies of the Bible, then in heterodox allegories that perversely seek to be true to this world.

Ruskin’s allegories may be illuminated by Walter Benjamin’s reading of the intimacy between allegory and the commodity-form of value. For Benjamin, allegory is a systematic overnaming that mutes things only to make them speak more clearly the truths of the allegorist. Like the commodity, then, in allegory “the

meaning can be replaced for another at any time. . . . Thus in the commodity, the allegorist is in his element. . . . [Yet]. . . [i]n the soul of the commodity, which gives the illusion of having made its peace in its price, a hell rages.”³ Mute and mournful, or raging, things remain for Benjamin beyond their allegorical existence or their life as commodities, never making their peace with abstraction. Beyond the devilish alienation of allegorizing and commodification, one can glimpse another possibility, as in the “palpable” relation of a collector to the objects collected, which are renewed in the collection that is “always somewhat impenetrable, and at the same time uniquely itself.”⁴ In Ruskin the violence inherent in the commodity-form of value is rendered as a rhetorical event. Yet there is more than the simple repetition of that violence, and that more is Ruskin’s perverse desire for justice. When the interpretive dictates of typological reason fail him, allegorical reason finds meanings beyond the properly legible. In staying true to allegory, Ruskin both appropriates whatever is at hand, conscripting it to represent immaterial values, and also elevates and honors the mundane world and those he finds there. His terrific struggle against doctrinal political economy is illustrative of one of the most tightly sutured and vociferously disavowed relationships of Calvinist secularism, that of religious ethics and orthodox economic theories of value.

La lutte continue. The world we inherit from Victorian Britain is more degraded, more violent, a degradation and violence laid down by industrial capitalism and morphed into our post-Fordist nightmare. Ruskin’s work is for me worth reading both as a symptomatic instantiation of that violence and an effort to endow the world with precious meaning adequate to its beauty.

Dean Spade: It’s awful to see the process by which various gender and sexual eccentricities that have been sites of resistance and disruption are rehabilitated through liberal equality, recognition, and inclusion rubrics to become fertile spaces for calls to criminalization, standardized family formation, and military occupation. It is painful to watch various sites of grassroots mobilization eclipsed by funder-driven nonprofits articulating “LGBT” politics as a site for building white power. It is complex work that queer and trans scholars and activists engage in the face of these losses, work that must also occur while we navigate the impact that imprisonment, deportation, unemployment, loss of public benefits, the destruction of public education, and other conditions are having on the day-to-day lives of queer and trans people. Part of that work is to account for how the incorporation and deployment of sexual and gender excesses occurs, to analyze the investments in whiteness and capitalism that already belonged to various gay and lesbian ways of life and to gay and lesbian studies and politics that make

them available for such adoptions. Another part is to interrogate our alternatives, to examine how they also produce politics of truth that require standardization, normalization, and the identification of internal enemies. This requires producing methods of self-critique and perpetual reflection best modeled by women of color feminism and visible in some prison abolition-focused queer and feminist work today as well. When practices of stateness centered on slavery and genocide perpetually emerge as an exile logic that is constitutive of our very psyches, thinking outside it may in fact be impossible. The impossibility of the other politics and ways of knowing we propose, the attempt to hold them lightly yet practice them urgently, is a struggle of this work. There is something about the practices of marginal queer and trans life that informs this work in all its impurity, something in the grief that has always been central to queer and trans life that is one of its most necessary tools. A queer hermeneutics gives us a depth of field for comprehending these pervasive reiterations of stateness and its regimes of violence, even those articulated in the name of the queer.

Gayle Salamon: In the middle of *Humanism and Terror* (Beacon Press, 1969), Merleau-Ponty says this about Marxism: “The foundations of Marxist politics are to be found *simultaneously* in the inductive analysis of the economic process and in a certain intuition of man and the relations between men.” Marxist politics is grounded simultaneously in two different places—economic processes and relations between men—and relies on both induction and intuition. To the first: attention to those economic processes seems to be a particularly vital force in queer theory right now, as in David Eng’s recent proposal that closer attention to the workings of capital, and the ways in which surplus value is differentially extracted from subjects of color, might return “queer” to critique and some of the political promise from which it has in recent years become unmoored. That second foundation—intuition—is a bit hazier, but I think a politics is located there, and there might be something useful to our collective musings here, even beyond the inadvertent queerness in his formulation of “relations between men.”

I am very interested in Heather Love’s suggestion we need to address “the lived experience” of inequality as well as its structure. The importance of spatiality in Love’s intervention resonates for me with the importance of space and orientation in Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* (Duke University Press, 2006), and I wonder how we might think about spatiality in this context alongside what we might think of as the temporal turn in queer studies, with the important work of Edelman, Halberstam, Muñoz, and Freeman, among others. It seems to me as if these two different ways of considering intractable inequality that Merleau-Ponty

proposes—the structural and the experiential, or what we might even call the phenomenological—might offer important interdependent foundations for thinking about contemporary formations of queerness and class. I think Heather is right to suggest that we don't yet have a readily available language for describing class inside and outside queer theory. How might we talk about a lived experience of class, or even class abjection, that can be simultaneously shared and neglected by more dominant narratives without engaging in precisely the same kind of identity politics that it has always been queer theory's task to dismantle?

Lisa Duggan: In the United States in particular, the neoliberal economic reason of state managers in both the Republican and the Democratic Parties is under attack from angry, uncivil Tea Partiers and others who loudly insist that economic decisions are politically loaded and who denounce the Wall Street bailout as stridently as they do health care reform. Where is the Left? While liberals call for a return to reason and civility, perhaps the queer Left especially might have something more provocative to say about political feeling?

Scholars, artists, and activists who collaborate under the umbrella of “Public Feelings” groups in Chicago, Austin, and New York (so far) draw from queer theories and politics to make a double move. We work to expose the cynical or reactionary deployment of feeling in public life, from sentimentality to fury—sometimes under the cloak of political rationality, sometimes as an open seduction into reactionary mobilizations. At the same time, we hope to acknowledge the feelings engaged in and through public life and bring them into debate and deployment in and for the Left. I am thinking of the wide-ranging work of Lauren Berlant, José Muñoz, Janice Gould, Jasbir Puar, Fred Moten, Miranda Joseph, Ann Cvetkovich, Sandra Soto, Janet Jakobsen, and Ann Pellegrini among many others.

I think it is useful to note that the current queen of libertarian reason, and touchstone for the Tea Party Right in the United States, Ayn Rand (whose novel *Atlas Shrugged* is now again enjoying runaway sales), based her eroticized capitalist heroes on a historical example of masculine sociopathy. In her published journals, she praises the figure on whom she based the earliest incarnation of her heroic type—the serial killer William Hickman, tried and imprisoned for the kidnapping and dismemberment of twelve-year-old Marian Parker. Her favored slogan, “What is good for me is right,” was attributed to Hickman. From Hickman's mouth to Wall Street's ear. Across the globe, this connection illuminates the affective roots of the rationalized devastations of neoliberal capitalism, as neo-imperial plunder and slaughter as well as theft and exploitation.

For the second move I join José Muñoz along with the Feel Tank in calling for humor, more effective than earnest outrage in so many (not all) circumstances. Here I invite *GLQ* readers to join the more than five thousand members of the Cocktail Party, a barstool-roots movement for left-wing urban homosexuals and those who love us, on Facebook.

Rosenberg and Villarejo: We've got such a wealth of tributaries to follow here! Perhaps it would be best, rather than having to select any one in particular, to try to get at a methodological question that underpins all of these rapprochements between queer studies and Marxism/political economy/historical materialism. That question is the status of totality for queer thought, and, following Roderick Ferguson, we believe now may be a moment in which we might "re-pos[e] the question of totality." If totality has seemed an obstacle in brokering connections between queer methodologies and those of historical materialism, we may be at a point at which that obstacle is breaking down. Specifically, in the wake of identity politics, as we forcefully interrogate some of the presumptions of identity-based sexuality studies, have we opened the way to a new conceptualization of totality, a rapprochement with what had at one point appeared most unqueer to queer studies? We explore some of these questions at greater length in the introduction to this volume, but for now we'd like to hear how the participants have come to navigate these methodological alignments.

Floyd: Can one "re-pos[e] the question of totality" without implicating oneself in an imperial, American universalism? Lisa Rofel suggests that this is a dicey proposition. Must we choose between characterizing global capitalism as either heterogeneous or unified? An old problem still very much with us, as I take several of the earlier interventions in this roundtable to suggest: the problem of grasping the ways in which capitalism's gendered, racialized, sexualized violence is inseparable from (as effect? as condition of possibility? as both?) capitalism's simultaneous identity and nonidentity with itself.

Does re-posing the question of totality mean doing something queer studies hasn't yet done? Or does it mean reframing, rearticulating "the potential that queerness holds for Marxism and has held for Marxism for a while now," as Ferguson intimates with the crucial word "still"? Doesn't it mean thinking what Moten calls "the general field of sociality-in-differentiation" from a point of view which is queer precisely in its refusal of the identitarian vocabularies with which sexuality has been normatively understood? Thinking totality would appear to be one of the things queer studies has been doing at least since the opening lines of *Epistemology of the Closet* (Duke, 1990), at least since Warner's introduction to *Fear of a*

Queer Planet (Minnesota, 1993). And is this not what it does when that dizzyingly broad field called “neoliberalism” becomes one of its defining horizons?

If queer studies has struggled against what Ferguson rightly calls “the canonical exclusions of Marxism,” perhaps one of its untapped lessons is that one struggles against totality only by struggling with it. I take the practice of thinking totality to be a necessarily critical effort to grasp a social field as unified precisely in its disunity. Such efforts are limited by definition; Marx, Lukács, and Adorno all insist in their various ways that this kind of conceptual mapping will be defined as much by what it excludes as by what it includes—that presumptions of bird’s-eye-view omniscience are ultimately caricatures of this critical practice, which doesn’t mean that thinking totality can ever fully avoid turning into its own caricature.

One way queer studies might re-pose the question of totality is to reconsider totality’s necessary relation to “exclusion.” How does one hold unity and differentiation, identity and nonidentity, in one’s head at the same time? One answer is: stumblingly, inadequately.

Ferguson: In Marxist traditions, totality has been a way to theorize the heterogeneity of both social relations and critical formations and to propose relationships between subjects and objects. The trouble is that those theorizations have oftentimes secreted really troubling universalisms, universalisms that themselves become genres of identity politics. On the more favorable side, totality began as a broad attempt to appreciate social and epistemic heterogeneity.

One promising aspect of the notion is its scavenger and interdisciplinary nature. I remember how encouraged I felt as a grad student when I read Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, particularly his use of the category “totality” to argue against specialization. That was tremendously important to me as someone who was struggling to do interdisciplinary work and attempting to reinvent familiar objects. If totality is about the reinvention of the object, as Lukács argued, then we might think of Christina’s revision of John Ruskin and Lisa Rofel’s “queer hermeneutics” as falling within that domain of reinvention.

In addition, the question of totality, as Jordana and Amy pose it in their introduction, partly begs us to consider the critique of identity *as well as* the politics of identity that has often undergirded the term *totality*. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács deploys the concept of totality as a critique of identity, writing that “the category of totality does not reduce its various elements to an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity.” To do so would be to deny the dynamism of dialectical relationships. At the same time, in terms of the history of Western

Marxism, “totality” has been a vehicle for the identity politics of the West. In many ways, it was revolutionary nationalist, women of color, and postcolonial scholars who provided powerful rebuttals to that Eurocentrism. And in doing so, those folks worked to produce other notions of totality not purchased through Eurocentrism.

Queer of color and queer diasporic work has an analogous history with queer studies. In queer studies there was both a critique of identity and what Martin Jay calls a “doggedly consistent Eurocentrism.”⁵ What a lot of us were trying to do and have been trying to do since is point to the invisible maneuvers of identity precisely in those critical formations that presume that they have transcended identity—formations that, in the presumption of removal, have only contracted with discourses of transcendence. We can’t help but “do” totality, so best to know how we’re doing it.

Rofel: Lukács poses the question of totality to account for the pervasiveness of bourgeois modes of consciousness that went well beyond the immediate capitalist relations of production. Christina Crosby’s reading of Ruskin helps us in this regard. A queer hermeneutics desiring a radical future that, as Fred Moten puts it so well, means “knowledge of this fugitive mode of life, this runaway inherence,” leads us back to this question of how to think and act in the multiple. I follow Stuart Hall and Rod Ferguson in naming this question one of articulation and intersectionality in order to allow for temporal contingencies.

Heather Love reminds us of the specificities of affect: the so-called crisis, she implies, is clearly a middle-class experience that for others is just the same old “making do and getting by.” The public sentiments that Lisa Duggan and others have so presciently named seem to me to be symptomatic of the insecurity of the white-dominated US Empire along with a post-9/11 highly regulative public life bent on endlessly recuperating that empire. The kinds of articulations I seek include not just an invocation of the global but a queer interrogation of global geopolitics as Petrus Liu calls for in “Why Does Queer Theory Need China?”: “There transnationally formed, nonterritorially organized power relations are rich sites to be mined for a queer theory that emphasizes that ‘the subject’ is always barred, incomplete, and opaque to itself.” If we are to take seriously the point that “our” worlds in the United States have intimate imbrications with those places pressed into service for the US empire, then we must include in our analytic maps that what is “queer” is constantly expanded, supplemented, and revised by those “others” in Asia and elsewhere whose queerness has also been intimately wrapped up with the United States. The queer subject is a transnational encounter. I read the utopia in queer theory that Kevin Floyd has so incisively honed in on to include

the importance of empire to the way queer theory veers from emphasizing how life gets taken over by the norm to highlighting how life manages to escape. This kind of theoretical veering needs to be at the center of the question of articulation.

McRuer: If totality is a way to theorize the heterogeneity of both social relations and critical formations and to propose relationships between subjects and objects (Ferguson) or “a necessarily critical effort to grasp a social field as unified precisely in its disunity” (Floyd), it seems to me that this nuanced conversation about totality might be glossed by Dean Spade’s earlier comments on “rehabilitation.” Dean describes the ways that queer and trans activists have attempted to think totality by constantly mobilizing sites of “resistance and disruption.” These productive sites of excess are, in turn, continually domesticated by bourgeois universalisms, through what Dean calls “liberal equality, recognition, and inclusion rubrics.”

Queer theorists have rightfully noted the ways that gay marriage is particularly useful for these rehabilitative processes. Consider, for instance, Arnold Schwarzenegger’s comments following the August 4, 2010, court ruling that Proposition 8 (which banned same-sex marriage in California) was unconstitutional: “For the hundreds of thousands of Californians in gay and lesbian households who are managing their day-to-day lives, this decision affirms the full legal and protections and safeguards I believe everyone deserves.” It probably goes without saying that the gay and lesbian “management” of day-to-day lives that the Governor invokes is a far cry from what Heather Love describes as “making do and getting by.” The bright new gay day invoked by this pronouncement—saturated as it is with universalizing homonationalism—obscures how California is indeed arguably leading the way to the future, but a future of degradation rather than dignity. At the time of Schwarzenegger’s statement, in fact, disabled activists had camped out for much of the summer in a tent city on a traffic island in Berkeley that they dubbed “Arnieville.” Their camp—a site of resistance and disruption—deliberately redeployed the degradation of “Hooverville” shantytowns from the Great Depression and was intended to protest massive cuts to In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) and Medi-Cal, along with other programs that elderly, disabled, and poor people depend on. Schwarzenegger did not issue any official pronouncements on Arnieville but did deploy state power to arrest twenty-two activists who took the protest to Sacramento.

I bring forward this localized example, first, to think about how queer and trans and crip (there are many other names, as Fred Moten suggests) attempts to think totality get rehabilitated into recognizable and obfuscating sentiments, and,

second, to note the ongoing labor of theorists in multiple locations (including traffic islands) re-posing the question of totality and struggling with the exclusions necessarily generated by those processes.

Moten: Marxism was always animated by this other thing, which was not (a) subject, that it was trying to regulate and disavow. All of Immanuel Kant's ambivalence about the constitutive/disruptive force of the imagination is intensified in Marx, re-intensified in Vladimir Lenin, Lukács, Adorno (its racial and sexual determinations more elaborate and surreptitious, given in sharp relation to certain dangerously informal, form-making and form-breaking, lumpen disabilities until this other thing starts to speak so loudly on its subalternative frequencies that the regular music turns off); and the palpable wrench and rush one feels at having read, let alone at having attempted to address, Kevin Floyd's question—the founding question of our public/private tryst—is all bound up with our implication in the extended romance with that ambivalence. I wonder if a kind of break is made possible if we try to break a little something off that question. On the one hand, “where does one get off talking about utopia?” On the other hand, where does one get off? Where in the world does one get off? In what world does one get off? Is there another world in which we can get off? Is there another world, here, that bears a chance, and bodies forth having taken that chance, to get off of—in having gotten off in—this one, which is more and less than that? Isn't this where the question of totality becomes the question of utopia? Appositions and repositions of that mutually emergent fold are generally asked of and by those who have been posed. They're about what Trane referred to, in an expression of the queerest possible desire, as the opposite. They proliferate in the most beautifully unnatural way: one has to be off—which is to say get off—in the world just to ask, as if one were more and less than that. That old interplay of regulation and disavowal often seems to interdict such curiosity, its erotic, world-making errancy, which is what I take Muñoz's point to be. This other thing wants all or nothing at all.

Spade: I've been hung up for a while on the problem that Foucault identifies at the end of his March 17, 1976, lecture. I think about this as a problem for utopic endeavors: how state racism is inherent to the “mechanisms of biopower that the development of society and State ha[ve] been establishing since the eighteenth century.”⁶ Such endeavors seek redistribution. In fact, much of what I have been thinking about for a while has been how the increased centrality of legal strategy in gay and lesbian politics (and the emergent formation of a disappointing trans politics that is sometimes assumed to follow in its footsteps) has been a part of

what Lisa Duggan aptly described as “neoliberal ‘equality’ politics — a stripped down, nonredistributive form of ‘equality’ designed for global consumption during the twenty-first century, and compatible with continued upward distribution of resources.”⁷ I’ve been looking at how the production of demands for formal legal equality sustains conditions of maldistribution and wondering if and when law reform campaigns ever can be useful tactics in resistance strategies whose demands (e.g., prison abolition, the end of immigration enforcement) entail the abolition of the American legal system itself which has protected and maintained a racialized-gendered distribution of property since its inception.

The problem that Foucault raises requires that we take our critical examination of how the projects of standardization, normalization, and distribution that constitute stateness always include state racism and apply it to anticapitalist formations with redistribution demands. If we understand all projects of redistribution to produce forms of stateness, and state racism to be inherent to those projects, what might a trans politics envision when we dream of alternatives to neoliberalism? Andrea Smith suggests a need to think about more just forms of governance, and to imagine “visions of nation and sovereignty that are separate from nation-states.”⁸ I find myself asking what we might see from the vantage point of a trans politics centered on an understanding of racialized-gendered subjection and a critique of liberation projects that embraces failure and excess while demanding attention to the material conditions of existence and the distribution of life chances. What methods of inquiry and intervention might such a politics develop?

Love: Sedgwick engaged the problem of totality in *Epistemology of the Closet* through her discussion of universalizing and minoritizing discourses of sexuality. I would like to suggest the salience in this context of another important (but less often cited) theoretical framework: the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive approaches to sexuality elaborated in Gayle Rubin’s 1984 essay “Thinking Sex.” Rubin makes the distinction in the context of a defense of sexology and sex research, which, she argues, are characterized by “abundant detail . . . and a well-developed ability to treat sexual variety as something that exists.” Because of their focus on description and taxonomy, these fields can “provide an empirical grounding for a radical theory of sexuality more useful than the combination of psychoanalysis and feminist first principles to which so many texts resort.”⁹

Rubin’s brief against prescriptive “first principles” has not been taken up in queer studies; in fact, the radicalism of the field has in part been defined by its anti-empiricism and by its explicitly ideological and partisan character. But Rubin

suggests that radicalism might consist, for example, in making space for the existence of sexual minorities. The descriptive tendency in queer studies and politics is, to my mind, too often obscured. But it is there. You can see the workings of this impulse in *Epistemology*, even or especially in the axioms. What is the first of Sedgwick's first principles? "People are different from each other."¹⁰

The question of totality must be routed through more sustained reflection on the distinction between the prescriptive and the descriptive; ultimately a shift toward description and inclusion would be an important development in the field. To play this out in terms of the question of identity: whatever we think of identity, whether or not we believe in it or approve of it, it continues to exist, to shape our experience, to affect our life chances, and so on. We need an account of identity that makes space for it, and not merely in the hygienic realm of strategy, either. I would never want to lose the utopian and aspirational aspects of the field of queer studies. But as Rubin has taught us, radicalism is not only about making a new future, it is also about making space for what is.

Crosby: I am reminded here of the penultimate sentence of Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?": "Representation has not withered away," which is surely a position as important as ever to defend, for it reminds those of us trained in the humanities that humanity lives in language, and that we must remain sharply vigilant of that condition to which all are subject.¹¹ Differently.

"I am still very unwell, and tormented between the longing for rest and lovely life, and the sense of this terrific call of human cry for resistance and of human misery for help, though it seems to me as the voice of a river of blood which can but sweep me down in the midst of its black clots, helpless."¹² John Ruskin made the ethical decision to answer this call. The economic cycle of overproduction → crisis → overproduction created both untold wealth and its equivalent or more in misery. The fertile inventiveness of finance capital as it developed over the nineteenth century reminds us that value is representational all the way down. The barred subject of capital, \$, cannot know itself and imagines a world in which self-valorizing value is the alpha and omega, world without end. Not so. Ruskin's impassioned, eccentric, ethical, and deeply patriarchal utopian impulses remind us that another world is possible.

Ruskin is a subject "barred, incomplete, and opaque to itself" (Lisa Rofel, quoting Petrus Liu), his desires incoherent and obliquely expressed. The cascading details of his writing, while a furious denunciation of the present, are also glimpses of something excitingly different from the world I know and despair of. *Capital* remains indispensable, in its dialectical analysis of the world capital

makes. I don't think, however, that Marxist concepts alone allow us to address the rhetorical effects of Ruskin's tropes as we are turned by their logic, sometimes finding a drearily familiar and oppressive fantasy and sometimes a world where the everyday has been irradiated with joy. Taking up once more the question of totality, wherein all the remains of the day are impressed with the logic of capital, is both appealing in its explanatory power and unappealing for the same reason. My education in aesthetics urges on me the importance of writing, wherein is sedimented both the complexity of the past and intimations of lives not yet lived. I like what José Muñoz has to say: "Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic . . . a forward dawning futurity."¹³

Joseph: I asked my upper-division undergraduate class at the University of Arizona: "Are you following the economic crisis, do you pay attention to news stories about it?" One student responded that she was overwhelmed with the details and couldn't really get a handle on what was going on. It struck me that she was in need of what used to be called "an analysis." While the phrase *an analysis* might suggest that one always already knows what one thinks, I would like to hear it instead as connoting a necessarily open framework, one that is, crucially—like *totality*—a thought of relationality.

The possibility of "an analysis" is under direct frontal attack here in Arizona. While SB 1070, Arizona's anti-immigration law, has received the bulk of national attention, we are also dealing with HB 2281, the so-called anti-ethnic studies law, which its promoters have portrayed as intended to shut down a particular high school Mexican American studies program in the Tucson Unified School District. But its language augers a broader effort to bar access to thinking relationality: "The Legislature finds and declares that public school pupils should be taught to treat and value each other as individuals," and prohibits "any classes that . . . advocate ethnic solidarity."¹⁴ The threat is not usually so explicit. The spaces and times for relational thought usually just get swamped by the flood of resources—material, institutional, cultural—that flow in support of the specialized bourgeois knowledge production, the production of one-sided knowledge in service to capital accumulation, against which Lukács wrote.

Our task then is not only to defetishize and queer those dominant knowledges—reading the complex and open totality of relations out of which they emerge—but also to offer an alternative orientation, to make another sense, so that we have allies in the fight for the space/time to have this thought.

Duggan: Empire, neoliberalism, capitalism. These are deeply interrelated large-scale phenomena, but they are not the same thing. US empire may be on the rapid exit ramp now, while neoliberal policies are being retrenched in a long twenty-first century to follow Giovanni Arrighi's long twentieth. Though we may be right on the mark in noting the "end of empire," we may be much too optimistic when we use the phrase *late capitalism*.

From a queer studies perspective, our analyses of the mutually constituting politics of class, race, gender, sexuality, nationalism, religion, and disability will shift with the scale, time frame, and location of the political economic framework through which we focus our work. If we focus too consistently and relentlessly at the broadest time/space scale, we will risk missing significant variations and moments of contest in specific times and places. This is the danger that Timothy Mitchell warns us against when he argues that "capitalism" may be too systematic a concept to capture the history of colonialism, or that, according to J. K. Gibson-Graham, is the underrated importance of the persistence of noncapitalist forms of production and exchange. This is the direction that even David Harvey points us toward when he analyzes "neoliberalism" as a double phenomenon—both a utopian theory of unregulated global markets and a pragmatic political rule regime for installing and maintaining regional, national, or local oligarchies. When we write about neoliberal sexual politics, about which of these neoliberalisms do we write? If we focus, blinkered, on specific times and places, as some historians and anthropologists do, we can radically misunderstand the stakes of our political and scholarly engagements.

So perhaps it makes more sense to speak of provisional, shifting, totalities? Moving beyond the Marxist notions of the relative autonomy of culture, or the contingent hegemony of regimes of state power, might we consider the usefulness of shifting frames for historical, political analysis? I like to think of queerness, for instance, as a kind of promiscuous relational experimentalism. Thinking queerly about the history and future of capitalism is a search for Fred Moten's fugitive modes of life existing, both doomed and prescient, among the fractures of totalities past and present.

Notes

1. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

2. Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
3. Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Morning* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 167, quoting Benjamin, *GS*, 5: 466.
4. Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 63.
5. Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 5.
6. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, (New York: Picador, 2003), 242.
7. Lisa Duggan, *Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2004), xii.
8. Andrea Smith, "American Studies without America: Native Feminisms and the Nation State," *American Quarterly* 2008, 312.
9. Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical theory of the Politics of Sexuality" in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (London: Pandora, 1992), 284.
10. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 22.
11. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 308.
12. John Ruskin, *Unto This Last* (New York: Dutton, 1907), viii.
13. José Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 1.
14. Sandra K. Soto and Miranda Joseph provide a full reading of the working of the law in "Neoliberalism and the Battle Over Ethnic Studies in Arizona," *Thought and Action: The NEA Higher Education Journal*, Fall 2010: 45–56.