

DAVIS SMITH-BRECHEISEN

## The Pivotal Decade Revisited, or the Contemporary Novel of the Seventies

This paper takes up the recent turn in the contemporary novel to the aesthetic and economic debates of the 1970s as ways of thematizing their own aesthetic and political ambitions. Turning to art's legibility within a matrix of global economic relations, I argue for the political importance of two recent novels — Percival Everett's *So Much Blue* and Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* — that not only dramatize a particular moment of economic violence in the 1970s (the expansion of US hegemony via financial instruments), but formalize the era's aesthetic upheaval (the turn from modernism to postmodernism). In doing so, they offer a vision of the politics of literature not dependent on our experience of capitalism but which looks instead to the formation of a political and economic regime that has come to govern the world system under capitalism in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Modernism, Contemporary Novel, Seventies, Value, Neoliberalism, Experience, art

Since 2013 there has been a notable uptick in novels about the 1970s by some of contemporary fiction's most notable writers: Meg Wolitzer's *The Interestings*, Jonathan Lethem's *Dissident Gardens*, Jhumpa Lahiri's, *The Lowland*, Lauren Groff's *Arcadia*, Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers*, Percival Everett's *So Much Blue*, and to some degree Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, notable among them. Thomas Pynchon returned to the early 1970s with *Inherent Vice* (although maybe he never left it). And Ben Lerner's *10:04* returns to the aesthetic dilemmas of the 1970s, if its political anxieties remain decidedly forward looking. Though this essay's scope is limited to two of these novels — *So Much Blue* and *The Flamethrowers* — its aim is to produce an account of how, by returning to a fraught moment of economic and aesthetic upheaval, contemporary novels focused on the 1970s not only grapple with this history, but potentially revitalize political and aesthetic forms in the present. That economic upheaval is, famously, the moment in the early 1970s when the United States abandoned, as Judith Stein puts it in *The Pivotal Decade*, “factories for finance,” an economic shift both born of crisis and transformative in the kinds of crises it would produce, domestically and globally (Stein 2010). The story is by now familiar: Faced with declining rates of profit and growing expenditures domestically and abroad, policymakers in the United States pursued a series of policies — including floating the dollar and imposing austerity measures — that transformed the United States economy from one rooted in manufacturing to one that relied on the financial sector. In much the same way, United States policymakers seized upon the economic crisis of the early 1970s to justify domestic austerity measures that were crucial to the formation of a neoliberal economic regime that has since become more or less economic dogma, the IMF (underwritten by US banks) was doing the same globally as a way of, in effect, disciplining the global economy into adopting this new economic regime.

The period's aesthetic upheaval — the ostensible abandonment of modernism for postmodernism — proved no less pivotal, if less economically consequential. Here, I mean the rise of a particular ontological problem in this history of art and the history of the novel. In the history of art, it is a problem traceable to two foundational essays, Donald Judd's “Specific Objects” (1965) and Michael Fried's “Art & Objecthood” published two years later. In the history of the novel, it is traceable to what has since become a manifesto for postmodern literature, John Barth's 1967 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” where he lays out what he would describe as his “mixed feelings” (Barth 1984, 62) about the heady avant-garde arts of the sixties and the dissolution

of high modernism. Beginning with “Specific Objects”, Judd began to codify what Fried called Literalism, but which is more broadly called Minimalism, by insisting that the “rectangular plane” has used up its “given... life span” and thus called for a new kind of art conceived in “actual space” — these works, he believed, were “intrinsically more powerful and specific than paint on a surface” (Judd 1965). I will shortly return to this debate, but for now it is enough to point out that this shift away from the wall and into “actual space” entailed making the beholder’s experience central to what it meant to make or even conceive of ambitious art. This was no less true for a certain strain of the novel. Sounding a lot like Judd, Barth too points to the “the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities” (Barth 1984, 64) of the novel as a form. And Barth too posits a solution, one that is by now famous: To write novels “which imitate the form of the Novel by an author who imitates the role of the Author” (Barth 1984, 72). This is almost Jameson’s exact definition of postmodern pastiche: As “modernist styles... become postmodernist codes” what’s left is the “the cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion” (Jameson 1992, 17). Or, as Barth puts it, through a kind of recursive framing, the work of the postmodernist writer: “Neither merely repudiates nor merely imitates either his twentieth-century modernist parents or his nineteenth-century pre-modernist grandparents. He has the first half of [the twentieth] century under his belt. But not on his back” (Barth 1984, 203). What is crucial for the ontological problem as it plays out in the contemporary novel is not pastiche *per se*, but the ways pastiche has historically been leveraged as an appeal to the subjectivized experience of the reader: By ironically framing high modernism (or realism), the postmodernist author indulges a fantasy that, liberated from the demands art might make on its readers, the novel might instead appeal to the reader’s tastes and thus aspire to a “fiction more democratic in its appeal” (Barth 1984, 203). Unlike, their High Modernist forbearers who, Barth argues, could reach only “professional devotees of high art” (Barth 1984, 203) postmodernist authors chart a path forward by reconfiguring the relationship between the work and the reader, such that what was once immanent to the work, is conceived (like art in actual space) in a situation with a reader. Notably, there is not all that much disagreement about the aims of postmodern literature: In both Jameson’s and Barth’s accounts the novel is reconfigured with the reader in mind. The disagreement lies instead over the attractiveness of postmodernism’s solution to the felt exhaustion of high modernism — what Jameson laments, Barth celebrates.

The 1970s proved, in other words, pivotal in more ways than one. Economically, the financialization of the US economy fundamentally reshaped the global economy. Aesthetically, the emergence of postmodernism ushered in a set of aesthetic commitments that, in opening the work to the reader, posed an ontological threat to the work of art. This is the economic and aesthetic situation inherited by contemporary novels. Focusing on *So Much Blue* and *The Flamethrowers*, I demonstrate what it might look like for the contemporary novel to tether the period's aesthetic upheaval to its economic one — not only by returning to the socioeconomic restructuring of the era from the standpoint of the present, but by staging the aesthetic conflicts of the period, drawing both into the present. Each of these novels, I argue, affirms a more or less explicit link between the economic restructuring of the mid-1970s and the financial crises that it would produce, while at the same time positing what it means for a work of art to represent that long history.

Jameson, of course, has famously argued that this state of affairs meant that the postmodern novel “can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only represent our ideas and stereotypes about that past” (Jameson 1992, 25). But if it is true that as a result of this meta-historical turn that “we are condemned to seek History by way of our pop images and simulacra of that history”, (Jameson 1992, 25) it is nonetheless true that representations of that history by some recent ambitious novels are illuminating it new ways. As Treasa De Loughry has recently argued, *The Flamethrowers* takes up “Jameson’s spatial revision of Lukacs’s class consciousness” (De Loughry 2020, 14) to address United States’ global dominance, “figuring class revolutions, extractive politics, and uneven displacements” (De Loughry 2020, 172) as belonging to a single structure, even — or especially — when that fact eludes the characters of the novel. Thus *The Flamethrowers* — and I will argue *So Much Blue* as well — grasps what its characters cannot, because the standpoint of the novel is not beholden to any particular experience of the world-system. De Loughry sees this structural relationship between plot and character within the novel as a formal effort that “meta-fictionalises ways of seeing capitalism” and in turn requires “the overview of the world-historical reader” (De Loughry 2020, 172). I will put the point slightly differently, however: Just as this turn to the world-system entails the attenuation of the particularity of the experience of its characters, it no less demands overcoming or suspending the particularity of the “world-historical reader.” It is my argument here that insofar as *So Much Blue* and *The Flamethrowers* are invested in the economic structures themselves — as opposed to our experience of them — the portrait

It is my argument here that insofar as *So Much Blue* and *The Flamethrowers* are invested in the economic structures themselves — as opposed to our experience of them — the portrait of the period that will emerge is one that emphasizes abstract, unseen, and at times, unfelt structures of exploitation.

of the period that will emerge is one that emphasizes abstract, unseen, and at times, unfelt structures of exploitation. This investment in (and insistence on) a structural view of the world system, I argue, depends on asserting the novel's particularity and legibility within a matrix of global, social and economic forces. It is precisely by framing aesthetic experience rather than appealing to it that these novels assert literary form as the "other to capitalist society," (Brown 2019, 9) offering a vision of the politics of literature that grasps the formation of a political and economic regime that has come to govern the world system under capitalism in the Twenty-First Century.

### So Much Blue

Kevin Pace, painter and narrator of Percival Everett's *So Much Blue*, opens the novel by saying he will "begin with dimensions. As one should" (Everett 2017, 4). The reason to begin with dimensions, he says, is that the "dimensions of an object are independent of the space in which that object is embedded" (Everett 2017, 4). Although the narrator admits that he is not quite sure exactly what this means, it is clear he understands the importance of the shape of the canvas relative to the space it is in: The canvas is "twelve feet high and twenty-one feet and three inches across" (Everett 2017, 4). The three inches, though he cannot explain those either, are, "crucial to the work" (Everett 2017, 4). They are not, however, crucial to the "volume of the room," which is "ten thousand five hundred cubic feet" (Everett 2017, 4). Immediately, then, Kevin sees the particular shape of the canvas as "independent of the space in which it is embedded" (Everett 2017, 4). And it is not just the shape of the canvas that matters to Kevin but the relation of the literal shape of the canvas to the depicted shape on it: when the narrator begins by describing the ways cerulean is "blending" (or perhaps "bleeding") into cobalt in the "upper right hand corner of the painting," (Everett 2017, 4) he suggests that the aim is not only to thematize the plane of the canvas, but, by beginning with the corner of the canvas, its frame against the dimensions and volume of the room (Everett 2017, 4). The point would seem to be to produce a work that is irreducible to the space that houses it.

The relationship posited here, between the canvas and the space in which it is embedded, will unfold throughout the novel in what appears in many respects as an altogether different register — as the relation between the work of art and the world it represents. *So Much Blue* follows

Kevin from his early days as a young art student and revolutionary interloper, to a rising star in the art world in Paris, and ultimately to a disaffected partner, father, and artist. The novel traces these three narratives in three different, largely disconnected strands — what binds and punctuates them is the painting. Told from the novel's present in the mid-2000s, Kevin recalls the stories of two secrets that continue to haunt him. One, set in the early nineties, recounts Kevin's affair with a younger French woman. This cliché is largely unimportant except that it throws into stark relief a categorically different kind of transgression traced in the other narrative. There, the earliest chronologically, Kevin is a young art student in Philadelphia who travels to in El Salvador in May of 1979, on the eve of its military's effort to seize power, to search for the missing brother of his closest friend, Richard. What happens there is the stuff of nightmares as they travel through a countryside riven by violence, escorted by "The Bummer," a Vietnam veteran and war criminal turned mercenary who has agreed to help (for a fee). The horror of the trip culminates when Kevin finds himself caught up in reactionary violence during which he shoots and kills a police officer. That moment of pulling the trigger — though he has no "physical memory" (Everett 2017, 197) of it — is the subject of his painting. More accurately, the painting is intended to index his experience: Its blues are the blues of his nightmare in El Salvador, which Kevin describes as "rich in blues, more cerulean than the blues at home" (Everett 2017, 21) in Philadelphia — perhaps the cobalt of the painting evokes the "the blue... '63 Caddy Coupe de Ville" or the pthalo blue evokes the police officer's "light blue socks" (Everett 2017, 21).

Because the painting is the record of the narrator's secret past, which is the content of the novel, Kevin believes it too must be held in secret. But what happens to art when its meaning is imagined to be a secret, or a matter of private experience? Asking and answering this question, the novel raises a related problem about the limits of viewing history in similarly experiential terms. When it comes to the period in question — the 1970s — politicians, scholars, and critics frequently frame their accounts in experiential or affective terms — from Jimmy Carter's so-called "crisis of confidence" speech to Jefferson Cowie's framing of the economic upheaval in largely cultural terms in history of the era, *Staying Alive*. More recently Nicholas Dames has noted something more than Jameson's historical pastiche in these contemporary novels of the 1970s, suggesting that they imagine "something uniquely vital to the decade, and in fact uniquely to be missed" (Dames "Seventies Throwback Fiction"). What is uniquely vital is what he takes to be fact — that "the

But what happens to art when its meaning is imagined to be a secret, or a matter of private experience?

defeated, demoralized Seventies” were an “open dissolution” (Dames) of, among other things, the economic and political energies of the sixties. What is “uniquely to be missed” is not the era of stagflation, the breakup of the Beatles, oil embargos, and FM radio, but rather a moment of stillness before “the feeling of inevitability” (Dames) that characterizes so much history of the period would set in. Inevitability is, he writes, “neoliberalism’s best ally” (Dames). For Dames, what gives histories of the period their sense of inevitably is the attention to structural causes and what makes the contemporary novels’ return to the period unique is that they grasp something more affective about the dwindling of economic and political possibility. To take one example in brief, he suggests the ambitions of Lauren Goff’s *Arcadia* – a novel about a failed commune in the 1970s – lie in its emphasis on mood, which he describes as one of melancholy and tenderness. Because of this, he writes, it “remains in one sense more supple than the economic theories and social histories that otherwise have such convincing explanations for the meaning of the Seventies” (Dames). And thus, he suggests, it is more alive to the “open dissolution” of the social compact that had governed the postwar order. Dames, however, takes it for granted that the economic events of the 1970s were in fact an “open dissolution” when, in fact, it might be better seen as a re-entrenchment. No doubt the era saw the dismantling of, for example, the global working class and the unions that protected it and, importantly, that dismantling occurred as part of the dissolution of the postwar liberal pact between labor and capital. Despite the fact that the effects of this characterized many people’s experiences of the era, this dismantling was in another very real way less a dissolution of the United States economic order than it was a tightening of the financial industry’s hold on it, a trade between factories and finance that proved to be decisive in the renewal of the imperial project of the United States that began in the wake of World War II.

In other words, what was experienced by some as an open dissolution was for others an economic boon brought about not as a matter of dissolution but as the “solution” to the economic crises of the period. That solution, pursued by politicians and economists in the United States, was to “free” capital from the strictures of gold, and more importantly, labor, so that financial instruments could be treated as an export. Freeing capital meant not only fostering an economy that would allow capital to function as an export, but implementing economic austerity measures — punishing loan terms, wage freezes, relaxed labor laws, and deep cuts to social programs — that have since become economic dogma on the Right and neoliberal Left. The result then, as it was after the

What was experienced by some as an open dissolution was for others an economic boon brought about not as a matter of dissolution but as the “solution” to the economic crises of the period.

collapse and bailouts of 2008, was the consolidation of the US financial markets' hold on the global economy and massive upward wealth redistribution. From the standpoint of the individual, what was experienced as an economic nadir in the 1970s as well as in the decade since 2008, was, from the standpoint of the state, a moment of massive economic expansion. And what was experienced as a nadir by poor and middle-class people was experienced by the wealthy as a boon. The fact that the moment was and continues to be described as a felt nadir by observers such as Jimmy Carter and Nicholas Dames only mystifies this fact. By contrast, removing the question of experience from the question of economic violence yields a significantly different portrait of the period, one that doesn't hinge on our nostalgia for it (or any other experience).

This begins to suggest the limits not only of an historical account grounded in the individualized experiences of the moment, but of an aesthetic project that is similarly invested in thinking through this social history in experiential terms. Of course, it would be true of virtually any novel to say that it traffics in the experiences that characters have at a particular historical moment, and thus it is expected to be more alive to the experience of living through economic transitions than an economic theory. Indeed, I have begun to suggest how the experience of history is central to *So Much Blue* in its framing of the violence in El Salvador, as Kevin becomes a participant in the clash between the Salvadoran military and revolutionary groups without having any sense of nature of the conflict. For most of the novel, in fact, the violence plaguing El Salvador exists just outside of the frame as they either follow or flee it. In other words, the novel is less interested in producing an account of history than it is in thrusting its characters into the middle of it. Narratively speaking, the novel makes a point to highlight how little the characters know or care about the revolutionary foment. This too is the point of the painting, which is not an effort to capture the historical circumstances that led to the attempted coup in El Salvador or the US-Backed effort to suppress the revolution but is instead an effort to index Kevin's experiences.

Given that the painting is an index of his experiences, it should be no surprise that its blues evoke the blues of his intervention in El Salvador for him alone, in part explaining why the revelation of the painting at the novel's conclusion is a catastrophe. Kevin has kept the painting, like the incident, a secret from everyone because its significance is so specific that he could not stand for its beholders to impose their own names and stories on it. Given the painting's importance and its particularity, it is both ironic and, in a way, unsurprising that it ultimately



fails to hold the same explanatory power for his wife when he finally does reveal it to her. Tired of living with the hash he has made of his life, in part from carrying the burden of his intervention in El Salvador, Kevin decides to show his wife the painting in lieu of an apology. Her response to the work gives the novel its title: “So much blue,” she says, confused (Everett 2017, 242). Her confusion prompts his explanation of the painting’s significance — “Now you know everything” (Everett 2017, 242). Unsurprisingly, this explanation too fails. It is hard to imagine how the painting could succeed at the impossible task it has been given. To be successful — for it to reveal “everything” — the painting would have to identify and transmit specific experiences of the blues of El Salvador — weather, socks, Cadillacs, and dead bodies — in such a way that the experience of violence could not be mistaken by the beholder. That is, because the painting is indexically linked to and is thus inseparable from the world, it differs from those that are “waiting to be considered, bought, and hung on living room walls or in bank lobbies” (Everett 2017, 4). The suggestion, of course, is that what happens after the work is sold is of no concern to him.

This painting, however, is different because it indexes his experiences and thus, he believes, it is not open to interpretation. This both distinguishes it from an apology which could be misunderstood and accounts for why he shows his wife the painting instead of explaining to her what happened or apologizing. Kevin is “done with apologies,” (Everett 2017, 242) he says, because they are no more than “empty words” (Everett 2017, 242), the very thing the indexical nature of the painting is intended to guard against. The failure of the painting, in this light, is both a tragic-comic conclusion to the novel and a theoretical point about the relationship between beholder and the work of art. Why would one be subject to the emptiness of language and the other not? The narrator is instructive here, when early in the novel he says that he regards the names of the paints he uses as proper names: “Color names” are “proper names” in that “they give us no information about the things named but identify those things specifically” (Everett 2017, 4). To the extent that the name of the color does not refer to any particular feature of the color or denote something about it, but simply is the color, it — like presence of the blues on the canvas — “need not and does not *describe* anything” (Everett 2017, 4). Channeling Gertrude Stein’s reflections on proper names, his point is that because color names “identify” colors specifically rather than denoting anything about them, they can “never make mistakes can never be mistaken” (Stein 1998, 315). In this view, they are not subject to emptiness and thus can never fail because they

are indexically linked to their subject. Insofar as the narrator wants to believe that the painting is not subject to the same kind of indeterminacy or ambiguity as “empty words”, he extends this theory of color names as proper names to the painting itself. The point, then, is that whether the aim is to indulge in the fantasy that the proper name avoids the problems of referentiality (problems such as indeterminacy and emptiness) or to see the world and art as though they are indistinguishable from one another (the blues of the canvas are the blues of political violence), the result in both cases is a commitment on the part of the narrator to art that would insist on the inseparability between the work and the world; to refuse, that is, the gap between signifier and signified entailed by referentiality where the emptiness of language might creep in. Put this way, the painting, as imagined here would neither make mistakes; nor could it be “mistaken.”

But of course, it is mistaken or misunderstood, and in the moment of his failed apology the novel answers the question posed above about what happens to art when its meaning is imagined to be a matter of private experience. Writing around the same moment as Barth and more than 50 years before *So Much Blue* was published, Michael Fried describes this dynamic in “Art and Objecthood,” by arguing that the conflict between modernist works of art and what he calls literalism – or minimalism – depends on the former’s assertion of its own autonomy by “the mutual inflection of one element by another” and the latter’s rejection of it by taking “the relationships out of the work” and imagining the work’s significance in relation to the situation in which the work is encountered. As Fried notes, the minimalist Robert Morris makes this point explicit: “whereas in previous art ‘what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it]’” in the new literalist art, “the experience... is of an object in a *situation* — one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*” (Fried 1998, 153, italics in original). Here the stakes of Kevin’s theoretical error comes more sharply into view: The work that would achieve its irreducibility by aspiring to, in effect, become the object it represents, whether that object is a pair of socks or the act of violence itself, cannot help but subject itself to the experience of the beholder.

The novel begins with an account of art that intends to assert its irreducibility to the space around it and ends with that same work suspended before a beholder having failed to produce its intended response. It is tempting to say that the cost of retaining its irreducibility is uninterpretability – that without a gesture or appeal, the beholder of the painting is held in a “strange ontological state,” as John Barth put

it a generation before *So Much Blue* was written (Barth). However, in the distance between the narrator's response to the work – his belief that the painting has explained “everything” – and his wife's response – her sense that the painting has explained nothing at all, the novel points to a slightly different problem: The radicalized commitment to indexicality by which the narrator pursues the work's irreducibility erodes the distinction between the work and the world it had intended to secure. Paradoxically, his aesthetic commitment to the inseparability between the world and the work effectively collapses one into the other and thus his project ensures the experience of the beholder is the aesthetic horizon of the work. What the painting's failure at the novel's conclusion makes clear is that from the standpoint of the novel the appeal to the beholder is a problem for art and, in particular, for political art. That his experiences in El Salvador simply fail to produce anything like a coherent or robust account what happened. This seems to me the importance of the novel's tragicomic conclusion when the narrative like the work of art collapses with a single glance. By this I mean *So Much Blue* grasps the limits of historical narratives that valorize the particularized experiences of it, something that observers and commentators of both the 1970s and the present moment of crisis and imperialism rarely do.

### A Trace of a Trace

Like Kevin Pace, the primary narrator of Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* is a hapless American caught up in the revolutionary affairs of others, finding herself caught in a moment of revolutionary foment in the late 1970s, not in El Salvador in 1979, however, but in Rome in 1977. Unlike Kevin Pace, however, Reno (so called because it is her birthplace) doesn't kill anyone. At least, she doesn't pull the trigger herself. Instead, she helps a leader of the Red Brigades disappear into the Alps from where he likely plans the assassination of Roberto Valera who is the eldest son of a Fascist general (one of Mussolini's), head of Moto Valera (a fictional motorcycle company), and brother to Sandro (an artist and Reno's lover). Reno is not herself a revolutionary any more than Kevin is. Instead, like him, she finds herself embroiled in revolutionary action through a series of personal accidents when, after discovering Sandro in the embrace of another woman, she flees with the Valera's family mechanic into the open arms of the Revolution.

Many commentators have emphasized that this moment galvanizes not only the plot, but Reno's ignorance and fungibility. She is, as Myka

Tucker-Abramson points out, “the idiot of the novel” (Tucker-Abramson 2019, 86), citing above all her passivity in the face of world-historical events. Similarly, James Wood — who describes Reno as “dangerously porous” and the novel as “cunningly alive” to our “mobile, flashing present” (Wood 2013) — suggests that it is this passivity that fashions Reno a kind of narrative technology that allows the world to unfold around her. This tracks somewhat with what Kushner herself has said of Reno, describing her as “something like a medium, the reader’s witness to see and interpret what goes on around her” (Lee 2014). The point would seem to be that as a medium Reno is almost transparent, a vessel through which Kushner conjures a seemingly unmediated view into the art world of the long 1970s — little more than a “conduit,” (Kushner 2013, 30) as Sandro calls her. No doubt Reno’s passivity allows her to drift from the art scene in New York City to a worker’s revolt in Italy without much difficulty and the fact that she fails to grasp the significance of either surely makes her the “the idiot of the novel.” Tucker-Abramson and Wood, however different their readings of the novel are otherwise, suggest that the passivity is the point: It is what allows the novel to “pattern global political and economic shifts” (De Loughry 2020, 184) without the question of mediation getting too much in the way. Rachel Greenwald Smith highlights this as a mistake, however, when she suggests that Reno’s “passive posture” (Greenwald-Smith 2016, 192) as a medium mistakenly affords readings that are not overly concerned “with the questions of mediation and artificiality that it might otherwise highlight, because Reno seems like a reliable and neutral vehicle for the registration of a larger social landscape” (Greenwald-Smith 2016, 192). Her point is that “the illusion of direct, unmediated experience” of art in *The Flamethrowers* is precisely what the novel warns the reader against. This is true politically and aesthetically speaking.

Reno is also, like Kevin Pace, an artist. In *The Flamethrowers* it is photography and its relation to Literalism rather than painting that occupies a central place in thematizing the relation between art and politics. Early in the novel, Reno leaves New York City for the Salt Flats of Utah to create a photography series that has its origins in the tracks left in the expansive flats by her speeding Moto Valera. Ideally, she thinks, the photographs would capture the experience of what it means to feel the “milliseconds of life” as her bike raced across the desert. But because Reno’s photographs would merely represent the lines in the dirt made by her Moto Valera bike, themselves indexes of that speed, her images, she worries, “would be nothing but a trace. A trace of a trace” and thus “They might fail entirely to capture... the experience of speed” (Kush-

ner 2013, 30). Reno's hope is that her photographs, as indexes of the lines, will not only capture the trace of her speed, but communicate its experience. She wants, in effect, to make art that cannot be framed, only experienced. Put this way, Reno's aesthetic commitments echo not only Tony Heizer's motorcycle drawing (in *Circular Surface Planar Displacement*), but also the sentiments of Tony Smith, who famously reformed his view on art after a nocturnal drive on the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. As he describes the scene, the effect of the "dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance... was to liberate [him] from many of the views [he] had had about art... There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it" (Fried 1998, 158). Likewise, Reno's description of her ride emphasizes this experience: "Nothing mattered but the milliseconds of life at that speed. Far ahead of me, the salt flats and mountains conspired into one puddle vortex" (Kushner 2013, 30). Picking up on this shared concern, Ben Lerner describes Reno's art as "a project Smith would have understood and Fried would have hated" (Lerner 2013). When Smith says of the nocturnal drive on the turnpike, "You just have to experience it" he means that the work's meaning is indistinguishable from one's experience of it. Experience, crucially, is "something everyone can understand," (Fried 1998, 158), not unlike the "experience of speed." So, according to literalists like Smith and Reno, the aim of art is—or should be—to produce the right kind of experience. In an ideal case, like the nocturnal drive on the New Jersey Turnpike or speeding across the Salt Flats, the experience of the beholder becomes indistinguishable from, or continuous with, the work. What makes photography attractive to Reno, then, is what she perceives as both its indexical connection to the world — there are no photographs of lines in the dirt without lines of the dirt — and its address to the beholder, who — if the photographs had not been so "ephemeral" — would have experienced the photographs as the experience of speed itself.

In triangulating this relationship between the work of art, the world, and the beholder's or reader's experience of it, the turn to photography in *The Flamethrowers* is particularly clarifying. Insofar as the question of photography has become emblematic of the inseparability of the work from the world, it has also become, as Walter Benn Michaels has recently argued, "a test case for the effort...nevertheless to separate" (Michaels 2016, 9) the work of art from the world and, no less, from the experience of the beholder. In other words, if what makes photography unique as a medium is the fact of its connection to the world, it is also the case, as *The Flamethrowers* points out, that indexicality is no guaran-

I mean here to point out that *The Flamethrowers*, like *So Much Blue*, exploits the illusion of indexicality and immediacy.

tee of the work's ability to transmit the experience of those lines and certainly not their creation, which is what makes them a "trace of a trace." If this point seems practically obvious, it is no less theoretically a problem for photography, and more immediately for the novel at hand, which pins its success as a work of art on its ability to "frame the liberatory and dangerous energies that attend breaking down the frame that separates art and life" (Lerner 2019).

I mean here to point out that *The Flamethrowers*, like *So Much Blue*, exploits the illusion of indexicality and immediacy. And perhaps even more so than in *So Much Blue* the illusion of immediacy should be readily available, considering that Reno's first-person narrative is not the only narrative perspective in the novel. The novel moves between two time periods — the 1970s and an earlier, pre-Fascist moment in Italy. In the earlier moment leading up to WWII in Italy, T.P. Valera joins a group of Marinetti-esque Futurists, becomes a Fascist, founds Moto Valera, and builds a vast economic empire through what amounts to slave labor in Brazil. In the later moment where Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clark haunt the novel's margins, Reno couples with Valera's son, Sandro, heads to the desert, and becomes an unwitting accomplice in the revolutionary attempt to overthrow the empire the elder Valera built. Notably, the earlier moment is narrated in the third-person and reads more like sketches or vignettes of the life of Valera as he makes the short leap from Futurist to Fascist, while the later moment (Reno's) is narrated in the first person by Reno, marked by the illusion of "neutrality." Despite this narrative difference, the parallels between the two moments are unmistakable. When Reno races into a vortex of mountains and desert, her desire to capture the experience of speed evokes not only Tony Smith's reflections on the New Jersey Turnpike, but Valera's early conversion to Futurism in pre-war Italy: "streaming through the dark...under the glow of argon and neon," his velocity is matched only by his commitment to "smashing and crushing every outmoded and traditional idea...every past thing" (Kushner 2013, 43, 74). As Marinetti suggests, then, "the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed," and no less enriched by violence: Poetry, and as the Futurist project would bear out, all art "must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown" (Marinetti 1909).

No less, in linking these two moments via shared aesthetic project the novel is able not only to move between the Futurist Fascist moment of pre-war Italy and Literalist imperialist moment of the present, but to yoke this shared aesthetic commitment to economic violence. To bear this out, crucially, in the latter moment, Reno's is not the only literalist

project. Sandro, Valera's youngest son, takes up a strand of Modernism Judd understood himself to be inhabiting in "Specific Objects" and that Fried attacks in "Art and Objecthood" to the extent that his aluminum boxes are more or less identical to Judd's milled aluminum works. In this vein, rather than make the appeal to the experience of the beholder explicit, as Reno does, Sandro insists on his desire for works of art that are simply, almost directly quoting Fried, "meant to be the objects themselves" (Fried 1998, 93). Where Reno wants an artwork that is nothing but experience, Sandro wants to make art that is nothing but an object. Despite this apparent difference, however, the aspirations of their art are in a crucial sense indistinguishable insofar as the Literalist work (as I have already argued) "stakes everything on shape as a given property of objects" and thus derives its force from its encounter in "actual space" (Fried 1998, 155) with the beholder. Here again, to speak of objecthood is to speak of the appeal to the beholder and to speak of the experience of the beholder is to conceive of the work in terms of its status as an object. The two most central figures in *The Flamethrowers* — Reno and Sandro — are also its most central figurations of art and in their coupling the novel likewise couples experience and objecthood.

To emphasize Sandro's literalist commitment to the beholder is also to suggest that Sandro and his father — both counter-revolutionaries — are bound as much by an aesthetic genealogy as they are by a familial one. As many critics have pointed out, the novel figures the violence of the post-war economic boom most directly via the history of the Valera company from its strike-breaking production plants in Italy to its slave-labor-based rubber extraction in Brazil. Here, I want to suggest that this regime is no less central to the novel's United States sections and moreover that the link between these two sections is more than contingent. It is, rather, an effort on the part of the novel to grapple with a tectonic shift in the global economy. A number of historians have pointed out how, in the wake of its bankruptcy in 1975, and facing an eroding tax base and default on its debt, New York City turned governance over to an emergency management board that pioneered austerity measures that have become hallmarks of our current economic order: cuts to social programs, privatization, and disciplining labor (Panitch and Gindin 2013, 165). Put simply, the "radical restructuring" of New York in the mid-seventies would lay the groundwork for the radical restructuring of the global economic order around the financial sector.

Thus what binds the Italian and U.S. portions of *The Flamethrowers* is not only the coupling of its principle characters, but the fact that both the "Great Compression" in the United States and the "Italian Miracle"

were likewise coupled by a world-economic system overseen by the United States in the decades following WWII. More accurately, what binds the novel is this postwar economic regime in crisis. Because the United States had ensured the dollar would act as the reserve currency underpinning this system, when United States began to borrow to cover growing domestic (The Great Society) and imperialist (Vietnam) expenditures, it placed tremendous inflationary pressure on the global system, flooding it with dollars.<sup>1</sup> Of course, The United States was forced to borrow not only because of growing expenditures but because rates of manufacturing profit were in steep decline, which is what leads Giovanni Arrighi to argue that deindustrialization and financialization entail one another, arguing that as “profitable niches in the commodity markets” begin to evaporate “capitalist organizations...retreat and shift competitive pressures” to among other areas “the money market” (Arrighi 2003, 51).

What followed from these twinned crises is the by-now-familiar narrative of the pivot from factories to finance in the United States — a transition that I have already begun to suggest was equally pivotal globally, dilating from New York City to the rest of the world. To take advantage of the massive amounts of dollars circulating and the fact that the dollar had become recently “liberated” from gold, two major changes were taking place on Wall Street and globally. First, the SEC began an aggressive program of deregulation to “improve the function of the private financial system” by moving “as far as possible towards freedom of financial markets” (Panitch and Gindin 2013, 149). Second, the decision was made to “make securities an export” (Panitch and Gindin 2013, 148).

---

1 It is worth noting here that not only had the United States already flooded the global market with dollars when it began to take out loans to finance its deficit spending, but oil also continued to be priced in dollars and was spiking in price. All of those dollars needed a home and likewise found their way into the open arms of a financial industry with renewed political power domestically. As Yanis Varoufakis points out in *The Global Minotaur*, United States policymakers did not oppose with any real seriousness the oil price hikes in part because as long as oil was priced in dollars, it would be a boon to the United States economy. To the extent that the aim of floating the dollar was to finance the United States twin deficits — the fiscal deficit from functioning as a global reserve currency and the trade deficit born from its own successes rebuilding the manufacturing capacity of Japan and Germany — US Policy Makers knew they had to entice a windfall of cash back into the nation’s domestic coffers. Cheaper labor from wage freezes and union busting combined with generous interest rates had already begun by 1973 to make the United States attractive to foreign direct investment.

2 For more on the relation between this turn, the value form, and aesthetics, see Sean O’Brien “Aesthetic of Stagnation: Ashley McKenzie’s *Werewolf* and the separated Society” *Discourse* 40.2, Spring 2018, pp. 208-230.



This meant “nurturing” markets at home and abroad — a task the United States outsourced in practice to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) at least insofar as the IMF backed by the US Military could export not only capital in the form of lending, but the conditions that would make that capital profitable. And in 1975-6, the United States pressed the international community to expand the mandate of the IMF so that it included the “surveillance” of individual states to ensure policies designed to secure “a western market-oriented framework,” (Panitch and Gindin 2013, 155) including capital deregulation and trade liberalization. The pivot was not just the transition from factories to finance, but the renewed imperial capacity that followed from it. Arrighi puts the point succinctly when he writes, “the main reason why the monetarist counterrevolution was so stunningly successful in reversing the decline in US power is that it brought about a massive rerouting of global capital flows towards the United States and the dollar” (Arrighi 2003, 53-54). And with that came the ability for the United States to literally rewrite the rules of the global economy and usher in the neoliberal order. It did so, I am emphasizing, both by acting as a place for countries and companies to invest all the dollars that were now circulating globally and then by recycling that capital: As dollars flowed in, banks took advantage of their cash-rich status — and favorable terms imposed by the IMF — by loaning to foreign countries. The result of which, in many cases, was massive debt. According to the Federal Reserve, US commercial banks and other creditors dramatically increased the amounts of loans to Latin American countries: “At the end of 1970, total outstanding debt from all sources totaled only \$29 billion, but by the end of 1978, that number has skyrocketed to \$159 billion. By 1982, the debt level reached \$327 billion (Federal Reserve 1997).”

In pointing to this pivot as central to *The Flamethrowers*, I join a chorus of critics — including, Myka Tucker-Abramson, Andrew Strombeck, and Treasa De Loughry — who have similarly framed the novel. Likewise, these critics have pointed out the ways in which this “fraught and explosive period in which the struggle over the uneven processes of global neoliberalism” is yoked to the “explosion of social and artistic movements that emerged in the lead up to, and fall out from the radical restructuring of New York City as a result of the fiscal crisis of 1974-1975” (Tucker-Abramson 2019, 74-75). To take just one example of the ways in which the novel is bound by the unseen and often unfelt forces of global capitalism, when Sandro laments Italy’s “financial woes,” describing it as a place “applying for an IMF loan,” beset by “inflation, unemployment” and the “oil crisis,” (Kushner 2013, 109) he might well

be describing the United States, which was grappling with all of these things, even an IMF loan in all but name. While Strombeck's analysis is comfortable in relegating the importance of "wide historical forces" (Strombeck 2015, 453) to the structure of the novel, Tucker-Abramson emphasizes the novel's interest in bringing great historical forces "into contact with one another" (Lukacs 1983, 36) and argues that art's role in the novel is to offer "a form capable of mapping and critiquing the modes of development that characterized the shifts and transformations of the 1970s" (Tucker-Abramson 2019, 80). And no doubt one wants to say that this is the case. But in Tucker-Abramson's analysis, the emphasis on the production of the work matters most and thus it is the art of Literalists like Reno and Sandro that does that cognitive work: "Sandro's fascination with industrial objects produced under artisanal conditions stands as an expression of, and rebellion against, the highly exploitative industrial production his family is engaged in that also funds the production of his art" (Tucker-Abramson 2019, 81). And it is because of this relationship that his art, "allegorizes the politics of minimalism's withdrawal from and well as its implicit dependency on, global industrial production" (Tucker-Abramson 2019, 80-81). Likewise, Reno's art, she argues, "literally concretizes" (Tucker-Abramson 2019, 82) not only the experience of speed, but the experience of commodity circulation. Her point is that insofar as it does, or would if it were successful, transmit the experience of speed, it would offer a "site of critique" because it "replicates the processes" (Tucker-Abramson 2019, 82) of capitalism.

I mean, then, to point to the ways that *The Flamethrowers* takes this moment of radical restructuring as its political horizon: The worker uprising in Italy and New York art scene are part of the same punishing economic regime. But it is not the experiential art of literalists like Sandro or Reno that grasp that, but the novel itself, which is, like Reno's art, a "trace of a trace." Or, to come at it from another direction, Reno's art "fails" not because it is a trace of a trace and thus too ephemeral, but because its desire to concretize the experience of speed in fact concertizes the experience of regime of capitalism. This is in part Ben Lerner's point in his review of *The Flamethrowers* when, noting the continuity between Reno's art and literalists like Robert Smith, he offers a sense of what is at stake in the return to the 1970s: If what "to a certain degree all historical avant-gardes...have in common is a desire to collapse art into life," Kushner's impulse is to frame that desire (Lerner 2013) Kushner, then, exploits the fungibility of the novel's narrative perspective to call attention to the fact that the "illusion of direct, unmediated experience" is precisely that, an illusion.

## Forms of Experience

Here the question of Literalism's commitment to experience and modernism's commitment to suspend or defeat that experience take on its explicitly political dimension. If "we are most of us Literalists all of our lives," (Fried 1998, 168) as Fried argues, it is because we are all of us subject to the market all of our lives, a point Nicholas Brown makes explicitly into a point about the experience of art and life under capital: Insofar as Literalism aspires "to project objecthood as such," as Fried says, "the claim made by a minimalist work to be...an object that provokes an experience... manifests the structure of the commodity" (Brown 2019, 7). That is, it manifests, or makes concrete, the logic of those networks of trade and capital flows secured by US economic hegemony. The challenge of the work of art, then, is not to "concretize" social forces for the individual but, as Emilio Sauri has recently argued, to "alter our conception of the concrete itself" (Sauri 2018, 252). This is what Lukacs means, too, when he argues that the work of literature is not to transform history into "*mass experience*" (Lukacs 1983, 23) — that is the world, or history, as it is already given — but to "channel this... historical feeling into a broad objective, epic form" (Lukacs 1983, 36). To channel, that is, mass experience into a form that "affords the means to visualize abstract functions" that "ordinary perception fails to see" (Sauri 2018, 251).

Following not only Lukacs, but Marx's critique of Hegel in *The Grundrisse*, Sauri argues that it is a mistake to place individual (or even mass) experience at the center of one's conception of concrete social forces for precisely this reason: It makes the mistake of treating "the real" material circumstances of history as thought "unfolding itself out of itself, by itself" (Marx 1973, 101). In this mental activity, "thought appropriates the concrete [and] reproduces it as the concrete in the mind" (Marx 1973, 101). In fact, as Marx argues, "the concrete is the concrete because it is concentration of many determinations" (Marx 1973, 101) that are not limited to what is perceptible. Even "the simplest economic category," say, the massive expansion of financial tools and networks in the mid-seventies, "can never exist other than as an abstract, one-sided relation within an already even, concrete, living whole" (Marx 1973, 101). Hegel's error, Marx is arguing, is to mistake "the way in which thought appropriates the concrete" for the concrete itself (Marx 1973, 101). If, in other words, the aim of the novel is to bring "into contact with one another," economic structures that US financial hegemony has wrought and thus to make visible the ways those structures

If speed is something that everyone can understand, and pulling the trigger is something very few can, the point of the argument so far is that having an account of either would not help us gain a clearer account of the structures of speed and violence that characterize the world system.

continue to exercise control over the global economy, the aim is no less to represent those great “opposing social forces” (Lukacs 1983, 33) — say, a worker’s strike in Italy, looting during a blackout in NYC, and IMF imposed austerity — in such a way that they are represented, not as the province of experience, but as “circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 2008, 15). Framed in these structural terms, as opposed to experiential or affective relationship, the point is that the appeal to the reader “will not yield a clearer understanding of the concrete” (Sauri 2018, 252). The work of art must not only represent the structures themselves, but “mark the irrelevance of the subject’s experience” (Suari 2018, 252) to them.

So, if speed is something that everyone can understand, and pulling the trigger is something very few can, the point of the argument so far is that having an account of either would not help us gain a clearer account of the structures of speed and violence that characterize the world system. This, I have been arguing, is the structuring logic of *The Flamethrowers*, which posits the limits of what attention to the experience of capitalism might yield at precisely the limits of Reno’s “inaction, observation, and neutrality” (Greenwald-Smith 2016, 192). But it is perhaps *So Much Blue* that more explicitly emphasizes the ways political and aesthetic experience is for art a formal dead end. Kevin, I pointed out at the beginning of the essay, has “no physical memory” of pulling the trigger of the gun that kills the police officer. The entire scene, in fact, is described in ways that disconnect Kevin from the act of killing. The pistol had sent a bullet into [the policeman’s] right cheek and through his head,” he says, “The pistol did it” (Everett 2017, 197). This disconnect is palpable throughout the novel — whether he is describing an affair in Paris or his family’s growing fragility — but it is especially poignant in the El Salvador sections of the novel, especially when it is reflecting on the death wrought by the military. Or more likely, not. In fact, the military and especially an account of why the soldiers and police are marching through the countryside and pummeling the cities is conspicuously absent. The reason, of course, is the U.S. capital-backed military effort to stamp out Left organizing between trade unions, farmers, and students that had been fomenting in the countryside. Not that any of this registers for Kevin; there is no evidence anywhere in the novel that he understands anything about what happened in El Salvador in the first place or when he returns later as part of his late-stage tour of self-discovery. In fact, the silence on the political question seems to be the point: Although the violence has a class character — The United States, driven by efforts to re-establish its economic hegemony in the

region, backed the violent regime because it viewed El Salvador as crucial to market “stability” in the region — attending to Kevin’s experiences in El Salvador won’t yield an account of the world system that is the precondition for that violence. So, rather than an evasion of political content, it is this dialectical movement between the particularity of experience and historical circumstances of that experience that gives the novel its plausibility. And, in turn, this movement allows it to make the question of art’s relationship to its economic and political content central to its form by establishing itself as the other to Kevin’s theoretical mistake. Thus, the violence is nonetheless the spine of the novel, while its plot is galvanized by two competing accounts of the work of art: Kevin’s mistaken Literalist appeal to experience on one hand, and the novel’s effort to attenuate that experience by way of its self-legislating form on the other.

I want to conclude with a final point about what’s at stake in this effort to turn the literalist content of these novels into their frame. Where previous generations of the avant-garde embraced the collapse of art into life, the novels I am discussing mark an effort “to frame the liberatory and dangerous energies that attend breaking down the frame that separates art and life” (Lerner 2013). Framing rather than reproducing the logic of these structures has meant in the present finding new avenues for asserting the unity of the text. As Jennifer Ashton has recently argued, there is no question that postmodernism — what manifests in these novels as literalism — “did indeed consign the idea of modernist autonomy to the past,” it is no less the case that “some version of the commitment to autonomy has survived or reinvented itself” (Ashton 2018, 227). For the novels I am discussing here, this passage through postmodernism is made available in the ways that aesthetic experience becomes the material of the frame.

This aesthetic point is no less a political one. In the contemporary moment, “the return to the commitment to the whole” (Ashton 2018, 227) is, I am arguing, the return to the commitment of grasping (or at least grasping at) the totality of the world system in a way that is both spatial and temporal. It is not just the world system, but the world system through history. This return to the political and aesthetic crises of the 1970s post-2008 ultimately marks an effort to draw a foundational economic shift into the present, not in the sense that this shift is experienced as the present but in the Lukacsian sense that is the precondition of it, “given and transmitted from the past.” By this I mean the financial crisis of 2008 enters these novels obliquely, as its history, traceable from the structural economic crises that emerged nearly 40

years earlier. As I have been tracing this history, the expansion of US global hegemony in the 1970s hinged on the expansion of financial markets by attracting investment back into the United States via Wall Street and then exporting not only that cash in the form of credit, but the austerity measures that would make sure that credit was profit-generating for the United States. The consequences of this — for instance the Latin American debt crisis — are myriad. And it goes almost without saying this meant the fate of nations was tied to American banks so when the bottom fell out in 2008, it did so globally. Yanis Varoufakis puts it succinctly: between 1975 and 2008, “Wall Street had managed to set up a parallel monetary system...underwritten by...capital inflows” to the United States. “The global economy became hooked on that toxic money, which by its nature, divided and multiplied unattainably. So when it turned to ashes, world capitalism crashed” (Varoufakis 2011, 147). And just as it did in the 1970s, this crash precipitated a massive redistribution of wealth upwards as the financial crisis decimated middle-class savings and wages stagnated, despite relatively low unemployment.

No less, if what differentiates these works by Kushner and Everett from those of their contemporaries is the effort to overturn the commitment to unwinding the ontology of the work of art, the assertion of an internal aesthetic logic, or self-legislating form, is the means through which the work of art can render a picture of the period that does not depend on atomized experiences of a world system defined by US financial hegemony. In mediating the world of financial hegemony, these novels not only “alter our conception of the concrete” but make it clear that doing so demands bracketing questions of experience. The novels I have been discussing here thus return to the period neither to elicit nostalgia, nor to evoke sympathy for the victims of class violence of the period, but to formalize the structural shifts in the economy that produced it. So unlike Nicholas Dames who imagines the path to reimagining the period runs through a nostalgic reassessment of its failures, or former President Jimmy Carter who, in a similarly affective vein, characterized the fundamentally economic failures of the period as a “crisis of confidence,” the aesthetic and political vision of these novels is of a world that does not depend on our relation to those structures. It’s not just the New York City blackouts, or the rubber factories, or the worker strikes in Italy that matter, but the structure that binds them. It’s not only the history of violence in El Salvador that matters, but the imperial presence of the United States in Central America — a presence made necessary and possible by its developing

No less, if what differentiates these works by Kushner and Everett from those of their contemporaries is the effort to overturn the commitment to unwinding the ontology of the work of art, the assertion of an internal aesthetic logic, or self-legislating form, is the means through which the work of art can render a picture of the period that does not depend on atomized experiences of a world system defined by US financial hegemony.

financial hegemony. And insofar as the novel, as art, is capable of grasping this history, it is not our relation to the work that matters but the particularity of literary form.

## References

- Arrighi, Giovanni. 2003. "The Social and Political Economy of Global Turbulence." *New Left Review*, 20.
- Ashton, Jennifer. 2018. "The Promise of the Present" in *Michael Fried and Philosophy* ed. Mathew Abbott. New York: Routledge.
- Barth, John. 1984. "Literature of Exhaustion." *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Barth, John. 1984. "Literature of Replenishment." *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Barth, John. "Hawkes and Barth Talk about Fiction." 1979. *The New York Times*, April 1. <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/04/01/archives/hawkes-and-barth-talk-about-fiction-on-fiction.html>
- Brown, Nicholas. 2019. *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Dames, Nicholas. 2015. "Seventies Throwback Fiction." *n+1*, 21 (Winter). <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-21/reviews/seventies-throwback-fiction/>
- De Loughry, Treasa. 2020. "FAC UT ARDEAT": Rachel Kushner, the World-Historical Novel, and Energetic Materialism" in *The Global Novel and Capitalism in Crisis* ed. Treasa De Loughry. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Everett, Percival. 2017. *So Much Blue*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press.
- Fried, Michael. 1998. "Art and Objecthood" in *Art and Objecthood*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Federal Reserve. 2013. <https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/latin-american-debt-crisis>
- Greenwald Smith, Rachel. 2016. "Six Theses on Compromise Aesthetics." *Postmodern/Postwar and After: Rethinking American Literature*, eds. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden. Iowa: Iowa University Press.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1992. *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP.

- Judd, Donald. 1965. "Specific Objects" in *Writings*. New York: David Zwirner Books.
- Kushner, Rachel. 2014. *The Flamethrowers*. New York: Scribner.
- Lee, Jonathan. 2014. "Rachel Kushner: The Useless Truth." *Guernica*, February 17. <https://www.guernicamag.com/the-useless-truth>
- Lerner, Ben. 2013. "A Trace of a Trace." *Frieze*, October 18. <https://frieze.com/article/trace-trace>
- Lukacs, Georg. 1983. *Historical Novel*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso. 1909. "Manifesto of Futurism." Originally published as the preface to his poems in 1909, it was then published in the *Gazette dell'Emilia* and *La Figaro* that same year. [www.societyforasianart.org/sites/default/files/manifesto\\_futurista.pdf](http://www.societyforasianart.org/sites/default/files/manifesto_futurista.pdf)
- Marx, Karl. 1973 (1939). *Grundrisse* trans. Ben Fowkes. New York : Penguin.
- Marx, Karl. 2008 (1852). *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. 2016. *Beauty of a Social Problem*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
- Panitch, Leo and Gindin, Sam. 2013. *The Making of Global Capitalism*. New York: Verso.
- Tucker-Abramson, Myka. 2019. "The Flamethrowers and the Making of Modern Art" in *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature*, eds. Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro. Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth University Press.
- Sauri, Emilio. 2018. "The Abstract, the Concrete, and the Labor of the Novel." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 51(2).
- Stein, Gertrude. 1998. *Writings 1903-1932*, eds. Catharine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman. New York: Library of America.
- Stein, Judith. 2010. *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Strombeck, Andrew. 2015. "The Post-Fordist Motorcycle: Rachel Kushner's *The Flamethrowers* and the 1970s Crisis in Fordist Capitalism." *Contemporary Literature* 56(3).
- Varoufakis, Yanis. 2011. *The Global Minotaur: America, Europe and the Future of the World Economy*. London: Zed Books.
- Wood, James. 2013. "Youth in Revolt." *The New Yorker*, April 1.



DAVIS SMITH-BRECHEISEN is an Assistant Professor of Literature at the University of Texas at Dallas. He is currently at work and book manuscript titled *Mode of Address: The Novel and Theory after Postmodernism* which argues shifting attitudes about the reader among novelists and literary theorists in the 1960s and 1970s played a crucial role in reconfiguring our understanding of the novel as art and continues to shape contemporary reading practices. His work has appeared in *ASAP/ Journal*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *nonsite.org*, *Mediations*, and *Studies in American Fiction*.

**Address:**

Davis Smith-Brecheisen  
Assistant Professor of Literature  
Bass School of Arts, Humanities, and Technology  
The University of Texas at Dallas, JO31  
800 W. Campbell Road  
Richardson, TX 75080-3021  
**email:** brecheisend@utdallas.edu

**Citation:**

Smith-Brecheisen, Davis. 2023. „The Pivotal Decade Revisited, or the Contemporary Novel of the Seventies.” *Praktyka Teoretyczna* 4(50): 25–49.  
**DOI:** 10.19195/prt.2023.4.2

**Autor:** Davis Smith-Brecheisen

**Tytuł:** Zwrotna dekada raz jeszcze, albo o powieści współczesnej w latach 70.

**Abstrakt:** Niniejszy artykuł podejmuje niedawny zwrot we współczesnej powieści ku estetycznym i ekonomicznym debatom lat siedemdziesiątych jako sposobom tematyzowania ich własnych estetycznych i politycznych ambicji. Zwracając się ku odczytywaniu sztuki w matrycy globalnych relacji ekonomicznych, argumentuję za politycznym znaczeniem dwóch niedawno wydanych powieści - *So Much Blue* Percivala Everetta i *The Flamethrowers* Rachel Kushner - które nie tylko dramatyzują konkretny moment przemocy ekonomicznej w latach siedemdziesiątych (ekspansja hegemonii USA za pomocą instrumentów finansowych), ale także formalizują estetyczny przewrót epoki (zwrot od modernizmu do postmodernizmu). Czyniąc to, oferują wizję polityki literatury, która nie jest zależna od naszego doświadczenia kapitalizmu, ale która zamiast tego spogląda na kształtowanie się politycznego i ekonomicznego reżimu, który zaczął rządzić światowym systemem kapitalizmu w XXI wieku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** modernizm, powieść współczesna, lata 70., wartość, neoliberalizm, doświadczenie, sztuka