

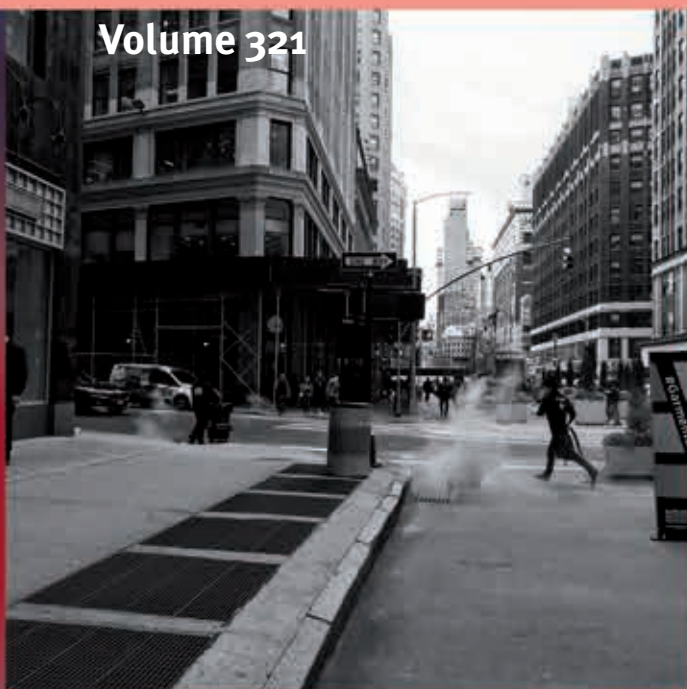
JULIANE GAMBÖCK-STRÄTZ

Corporeal Battlegrounds

Laboring Bodies
and Capitalist Realism

American Studies ★ A Monograph Series

Volume 321



Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg



AMERICAN STUDIES – A MONOGRAPH SERIES

Volume 321

Edited on behalf
of the German Association
for American Studies by
ANKE ORTLEPP
HEIKE PAUL



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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie;
detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet
über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Zugl.: Dissertation der Philosophischen Fakultät
der Universität Mannheim, 2023

COVER ILLUSTRATION

© Juliane Gamböck-Strätz

ISBN 978-3-8253-9534-6

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Imprimé en Allemagne · Printed in Germany
Druck: Memminger MedienCentrum, 87700 Memmingen

Gedruckt auf umweltfreundlichem, chlorfrei gebleichtem
und alterungsbeständigem Papier.

Den Verlag erreichen Sie im Internet unter:
www.winter-verlag.de

Language is compliant; things are resistant.
—Richard Terdiman

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Acknowledgements

Writing a dissertation, the basis of this book, is a curious activity. It is simultaneously the most solitary work I have ever done, yet also a joint effort. Without the continuous motivation, inspiration, critique, support, encouragement, care, help, and guidance of many people, this project would not be the same.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to Prof. Dr. Ulfried Reichardt for supporting me and this project, and for giving me an academic home in Mannheim. Your expertise, mentorship, patience, encouragement, and support have helped this project come into being. In addition, I would like to extend my thanks to Prof. Dr. Regina Schober for your reassurance when I was doubting my work, your intellectual input, and for inviting me into the research network “The Failure of Knowledge – Knowledge of Failure.”

Moreover, this project would not have been possible without Prof. Dr. Rüdiger Kunow who introduced me to body studies in the first place, supported me during my first steps in academia, and remains a mentor and moral support. You also encouraged me to apply for a Fulbright scholarship. The year that I then spent at Clark University marked the beginning of my interest in laboring bodies, which was shaped by Prof. Betsy Huang’s insights.

While moving was a necessary, not always easy part of my professional and personal journey, I am glad that it took me to Mannheim. I want to thank the team of the Chair of American Studies at the University of Mannheim. I want to express my deepest gratitude to Katharina Motyl, who always provided support and critical feedback. Moreover, I want to thank Jan Kucharzewski for reading parts of this thesis and giving feedback. Su Montoya, thanks for being always cheerful, positive, and supportive. Jessica Weimer, your professional help and personal support have been (and continue to be) invaluable. Also, I am glad that I had Stefan Benz and Dominik Steinhilber on my side; that we shared the

experiences of writing (and successfully finishing) our theses. Moreover, I want to thank Ruxandra Teodorescu for always lending a sympathetic ear. The conversations with all of you have helped me form my critical perspective and I value all your help, critique, cooperation as much as the good times we had on- and offline.

Furthermore, I want to thank my family and friends. My mother and father, Heike und Michael Strätz, and both of my grandmothers, Ursula Strätz and Gisela Radecker, for allowing me to go my own way but still be there whenever I needed you. My family-in-law, Claudia, Harald, and Eugen Gamböck, and all the friends that I could always count on for emotional support. My Mannheim family for sharing your lust for life. And, of course, the companion who was always on my side, Tamina.

Finally, I can only express my deepest gratitude to my husband Oskar, who has always been on my side as my biggest support. I admire the way you pursue your dreams and that you can always remain positive. Without you, I wouldn't have had the courage to go this way.

1 Introduction

He had the perfect conviction that killing himself was not only justified now but necessary, that the relief of death was the only reply to the torment of a life that had to be lived as a lost cause, and his mind told him to pull the trigger. But his body, which spoke a persuasive language of its own, singular, subterranean, objected with the most fundamental repulsion, and while he sat with the gun in his mouth, nearly gagging on the barrel, these two opposite wills worked to gain the better of each other in a struggle so primitive that it could not be named. And finally he removed the gun [...]. He lacked the courage and the will – although perhaps he had astonishing amounts of both and was simply defeated again, if barely, on a playing field most people never realize exists until the final days and moments of their life.

Joshua Ferris, *The Unnamed* 108-09

In this scene from Joshua Ferris' novel *The Unnamed* (2010), the protagonist Tim Farnsworth is on the verge of ending his life. Having the gun barrel already in his mouth, he is depicted as torn between spending the rest of his life as a "lost cause" and the primordial corporeal survival instinct. Rationality and instinct – mind and body – battle each other. Whereas the protagonist rationally concludes that the loss of his sense of purpose represents a valid reason to end his life – and with that his suffering – his body compels him to remain alive. The description further emphasizes that the territory of this battleground is uncharted. The protagonist, as he assumes most other people, even lacks the language to properly engage in this altercation. Interestingly, though, the body does not emerge in this scene as a brute force; it acts as a thinking body¹ that speaks a language of its own. His body, by taking over control, becomes

¹ Joseph Fracchia introduces the term *thinking body* in his discussion of the capitalist labor-process to underline that it is pivotal to understand the body as the locus of thinking in order to avoid the use of a mind-body dualism in the Marxian tradition (38).

alien to him. However, in this short excerpt, the question of what renders the protagonist's life a lost cause and what provokes the internal battle remains unanswered. The passage only expresses that the legitimacy of the protagonist's reasoning is challenged by the persistence of the body.

This scene is indicative of the territory that *Corporeal Battlegrounds* will explore as it opens the discussion of neoliberal cultures of work through the depiction of the laboring body's corporeal struggle. The "lost cause" that the protagonist mourns is his inability to participate in normative wage labor. No longer able to do his previous job due to an illness, Tim loses his sense of self, belonging, and purpose. He is depicted as being confronted with feelings of hopelessness and precarity that result from the fact that he is not only unable to continue his heteronormative, neoliberal lifestyle, but also from the experience that his body becomes a spectacle, a visible sign of failure within contemporary capitalism. However, the notion of failure is even carried further when the text explores the dissociation of mind and body. The body is detached and becomes alien once the protagonist feels betrayed by the sudden experience of corporeal vulnerability. In doing so, *The Unnamed*, on the one hand, illustrates the subjective despair and precarity that emerges from the marginalization of the nonnormative body, but it also opens up a threshold in which we can question the connection between contemporary cultures of work and the role of the normative body.²

In the following chapters, this study will examine how contemporary U.S.-American novels critique normalized late modern assumptions about work through the depiction of laboring bodies and, in doing so, how they draw back on alternative embodied knowledges that question common understandings of the "normal" body's relation to contemporary cultures of work. Divided into four case studies, this thesis claims that

² Throughout *Corporeal Battlegrounds*, I argue that the body in the literary texts functions as a threshold and it does so in the double sense of the term. On the one hand, the fictional body functions symbolically as a gateway to something new as it opens up new perspectives and helps to transgress a previous barrier. As such, however, it is also at times limiting because it represents a particular frame. On the other hand, it is also threshold as "a certain limit or level beyond which something comes into effect" ("Threshold, N."). Hence, these bodies also function as a point that we must reach in order to produce a new understanding, as it is from this point on that we can first see a change, and with that the flaws of what was normalized before.

contemporary realist U.S.-American novels locate human laboring bodies in an area of tension. On the one hand, they identify these bodies as material sites of subjection and domination; however, they also discover them as sites of subversion. As such, the depictions of bodies that are failing to perform at work as expected and which transgress limitations of the norm function as a testing ground through which criticism of normative assumptions about laboring bodies, which are usually required to match specific expectations (such as being healthy, able-bodied, emotionally stable, flexible, self-determined, autonomous, attractive, [explicitly] gendered, and heterosexual) are raised. I argue that the literary representations of material bodies and of the embodied experiences of the protagonists in the novels help to break with the usual abstraction that complicates critiques of contemporary capitalism.

In order to provide a comprehensive view of various aspects, each of the four larger sections will focus on one distinct feature of contemporary capitalism: social acceleration, digitalization, financialization, and 24/7 capitalism (see Crary). In these sections, I will initially question how the novels approach the representability of economic relations and which economic knowledge they mobilize, establish, and challenge. I will then continue by analyzing how the depiction of the laboring body functions to defamiliarize contemporary cultures of work; how it opens up an area of tension to criticize the link between the laboring body, normalized economic participation, and the perception of a successful life. It will become clear that most novels struggle to provide alternatives, which results from their own entanglement in capitalist realism.³ Still, the critical analyses will attempt to track traces of alternative imaginaries. The analysis undertaken in this study is not only significant for uncovering the technologies of power that construct the body, but examining the deviant body is also essential to gaining knowledge about processes of normalization and social reproduction.

To discern the implications of the link between bodies and work, it is first necessary to situate the laboring body within the discourse on

³ The term *capitalist realism*, introduced by Mark Fisher, describes the “widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 2). Building on Fredric Jameson’s work, Fisher outlines a society where the economic logic structures all aspects of life. For further information see chapter 1.3 “Reading and Writing Capitalist Realism.”

biopolitics; a discourse that has for decades critically problematized how life and the physical body have become objects of power in modern societies. Following Paolo Virno, I argue that we can only comprehend biopolitics if we base our understanding of the discourse on the philosophical concept of labor-power (*Grammar* 81). This reveals that capitalist ideology understands laboring bodies through their capacity, aptitude, dynamis. Hence, the theoretical introduction entitled “The Dialectics of Laboring Bodies” elaborates that the laborer’s body is the object of biopolitics as the “body qua potentiality” (Kordela 3). This, in turn, implies that the “living body becomes an object to be governed not for its intrinsic value but because it is the substratum of what really matters: labor-power as the aggregate of the most diverse human faculties” (Virno, *Grammar* 83). Thus, the human body is not only reduced to those abilities that are essential for work but it is further measured against an abstract generality. While the mechanisms of capitalism were always concerned with the subjection and exploitation of laborers, this study particularly focuses on the construction of laboring bodies in contemporary capitalism. Therefore, it explores the changes that characterize this contemporary form of the political economy and how they impact the dialectics of laboring bodies. It becomes clear that advances in the life sciences, financialization, globalization, as well as digitalization have contributed to the realization of more human potential. Simultaneously, these developments have increased the pressure on the individual to become the best version of themselves and to actualize all the potential that is allegedly latent in them.

The first case study, “Disabling Mobility,” continues the discussion of *The Unnamed* and examines the embodied experience of social acceleration as an extensive phenomenon of late modernity. While neo-liberal narratives generally posit mobility as enabling, characterizing it as a preferable skill, Joshua Ferris’ novel subverts assumptions that connect speed, mobility, non-stop accessibility, and ableism with American narratives of success by depicting a character whose mobile body increasingly comes to prevent him from working. The protagonist’s life as a successful lawyer is disrupted when he experiences a condition that causes him to walk without stopping. Even though his mind opposes the uncontrollable walks, his body seems to react to stress with walking. Although he literally becomes more physically mobile than ever before, he is also opposed by a culture of work that is not able and willing to

accommodate his nonnormative body. In the story, the inability to adapt the body to the demands of the normalized workspace pressures the protagonist to leave his former well-adapted, stable, efficient, and ordered life. In doing so, the novel showcases the despair and precarity attached to the nonnormative body, especially at the workplace. Depicting a protagonist whose pace cannot be controlled in a world that is becoming ever faster and who derives neither a sense of self nor meaning from it, ultimately distorts American narratives of mobility. By shifting the critical attention to the supposedly nonproductive body in this chapter, I argue that the trope of disability proposes a counter-narrative to late modern narratives of success. I claim that the novel demonstrates that the trope of disability represents a threshold in neoliberal narratives in which we can question the relationship between contemporary cultures of work and ableism. While weakness, illness, impairment, and other forms of “inadequacy” have no place in normalized configurations of the workplace, the analysis of this disability narrative helps to shed critical attention on the fragility and precariousness of neoliberal notions of efficient laboring bodies.

The second analytic section, entitled “The Digitalized Workplace and the Quantified Laborer,” addresses the social and individual repercussions of the digitalized workplace. It analyzes how the implementation of information technologies has not only altered the way we work, but also how the body relates to the work we are doing. Instead of working physically, workers are oftentimes in multiple ways engaging with information technology, being confronted with tasks that require fast, highly flexible, and interconnected responses. Starting from the premise that the laboring body is no longer the producer of material objects but embedded in processes of immaterial labor, the chapter explores how this “disembodied” work produces supposedly opposing results in the re-materialization of bodies. Labor is digitalized and the human, laboring body is increasingly physically present and disciplined through quantification to cater to the demands of the labor market. Dave Egger’s novel *The Circle* (2013) addresses and meticulously showcases the co-evolution of laboring bodies and the corporation through processes of quantification. In doing so, it investigates the uncritical submission of the worker to the corporation, its consequences, and the inability to challenge and problematize corporate governance. Not only does the novel reveal the impact of (self-)disciplining means facilitated by innovative, and at

times invasive, technology, but it also discloses their significance in a corporate setting and concerning corporate growth. Analyzing the laboring body in the corporate setting can furthermore be enriched by acknowledging the striking kinship between churches and commercial institutions as it was suggested by Amanda Porterfield. This will help to uncover that the great success of corporate organizations is anchored in their recasting of distinctly Christian ideas and practices. Thus, casting a view that bears in mind the contours of Christian churches adds another important layer to the analysis of the relationship between the quantified self, its body, and cultures of work.

The third analytic section, named “The Making of Indebted Women: Motherhood, Precarity, and the Logic of Financialization,” examines the impact of financialization on care work, more precisely maternal work, and as such on a form of labor that is oftentimes not sufficiently addressed in literary and cultural analyses of work cultures, especially not in relation to the highly male-coded financial sector. To do so, the chapter examines how Lydia Kiesling’s *The Golden State* (2018) negotiates the logic of financialization. In its exploration of the correlation between motherhood and precarity, the text posits that the maternal body, which is intimately bound to the child, comes to function as a signifier of risk, inadequacy, and failure in relation to contemporary finance capitalism. In doing so, it also registers and questions how abstract processes of financialization have infiltrated the family, parenting, and education. The plot of the novel unfolds as a mother experiences a personal situation of emergency and distress. Her crisis, however, is not self-induced but it signifies larger structural problems which reveal how interpersonal relations, especially those furthering the social equality of women, are ignored over financial, economic, and political interests. By demonstrating that being responsible for the upbringing of a child opens up an area of tension that oscillates between the socially acknowledged, normalized behavior of social reproduction and an intimate embodied maternal knowledge, *The Golden State* highlights how the family becomes a site of failure of neoliberal governance. Applying a lens that reads the texts in conversation with the logic of financialization allows for the interpretation of the character’s desire to achieve and secure a material reality that accommodates her basic needs. Even though the fictional mother is not responsible for her predicament, she fights to regain control and obtain a fortunate future for her child and family. Through the depiction of the proactive crisis man-

agement of the mother, the novel explores social alternatives which unfold not only in the interaction between the biological mother and the child but also through the deliberate solidarity among women.

The fourth case study, “Revolt Qua Passivity?”, moves away from the analysis of actually laboring bodies to the depiction of the avoidance of work. Doing so, it addresses the dyad between production and consumption and thus ties in with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s famous observation that “amusement is the prolongation of work under late capitalism” (109). To deconstruct this correlation, I read Otessa Moshfegh’s novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), which features a protagonist who revolts against a 24/7 work culture by settling into an absolute form of passivity. Not participating in wage labor, postponing supposedly important tasks, and trivializing not only work, but also consumer culture becomes a form of revolt. However, the text does not simply construct its criticism of contemporary cultures of work by revealing the advantages of a relaxed, carefree lifestyle. Instead, the novel picks up methods that are usually deployed to secure social reproduction and takes them to the extreme. By exaggerating American ideas of sleep as restorative and of sleep medicine as an additional enabler, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* not only discloses the dangers, inconsistencies, and absurdity of these narratives; it also reveals how sleep and relaxation come to be intimately entangled in contemporary cultures of work. To further this critical discussion, the novel is read alongside “Bartleby, The Scrivener” by Herman Melville, whose protagonist is one of the most famous workers of U.S.-American literature, and whose form of revolt resembles the one in the novel. This not only contributes to deconstructing the trope of passivity, but also reveals an interesting link in American literary history.

Overall, this thesis critically investigates how fictional representations of the laboring body are utilized as sites of experimentation for deconstructing late modern cultures of work in contemporary U.S.-American novels. While all case studies are concerned with different aspects of current work cultures, the analyses of the texts register similar narrative modes to narrate capitalist realism, and they uncover structural similarities in the construction of critique through the representation of the protagonists’ bodies. All depict practices of social reproduction, which they distort by staging bodily “failure” or deviance. The body thus serves as a figurative barrier keeping the subject from limitless capitalist

participation and, in that way, discloses the reality that most bodies cannot live up to neoliberal expectations; that the ideal of *homo oeconomicus* is not only unattainable but also marked by many inconsistencies, paradoxes, and even absurdity. In their, at times, violent investigations into the question of the disposability of bodies, these novels simultaneously experiment with the subversive alternatives that surface once these laboring bodies are marginalized. Being confronted with the boundaries set by their bodies, the protagonists are forced to confront their own embodied being. These experiences are intimate, painful, life-changing, isolating, but also illuminating and constitutive of gateways towards social alternatives which counter a late modern society that is solely concerned with success, efficiency, flexibility, and perfectionism.

1.1 Reading Laboring Bodies

Words do badly at bodies.
—Richard Terdeman

Taking the depiction of material bodies as its focus, this study is inevitably confronted with an inadequacy that results from the supposed incompatibility of materiality and text. Already the premise of ascribing a critical potential to the fictional representations of laboring bodies could thus be seen as open to contestation, opening up a debate that has been discussed since antiquity and that has gained renewed interest through the discourse associated with the material turn. It is clear that “there are no bodies in literature” (3) as David Hillman and Ulrika Maude also observe starting their inquiry into the matter:

Not only there is no obvious way for the concrete materiality to be fully present in or on the written page; even more profoundly, there would seem on the face of it to be an apparent mutual exclusivity of the body and language – the one all brute facticity, the other presupposing precisely the absence of matter. (3)

While navigating the difficulty of language’s inability to represent non-linguistic forms of experience, this study is driven by “the feeling current among many researchers [,]” as Diana Coole and Samantha Frost note,

“that the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis is inadequate for the thinking about matter, materiality, and politics in ways that do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitics and global political economy” (6). Thus, by reading fictional depictions of laboring bodies, it will attend to the material body in late modernity as an era that strongly operates through biopolitical means. In addition, the study acknowledges the potential of literary texts to provide insight into the subjective, lived effects of contemporary cultures of work that are otherwise marginalized, not sufficiently mapped, distorted, or even ignored on a large scale. Thus, the following analysis is based on the assumption that while matter and text may be “the other to each other” (Terdiman 171), this otherness should not be mistaken for disjunction. Richard Terdiman proposes that in order to engage this difference more productively, one might think of both as “constitutively relational”: “otherness then means that neither element in the two-part relation can ever provide by itself the medium for apprehending both of them or their connection” (171). For this reason, many literary critics have mobilized literary depictions of bodies in order to better understand the embodied experience.

In the words of Terdiman, an important incentive of body studies remains “the brute and often brutal difficulty of materiality” (14), which originates from the struggle to theorize something that is not only constantly changing, but that generally resists being defined by means of language. Responding to the poststructuralist celebration of “pure semioticity” (27), Terdiman contends that bodies not only resist semiotization, he even considers them *the* emblem for anything that withstands verbal representation (27), thus highlighting their role in the new materialist discourse. But while language might not be able to capture the entirety of embodied experience, literary language can still help us to learn more about matter’s “restlessness and intransigence” (Coole and Frost 1) and Theodor W. Adorno’s work can help us to better understand why.

As Adorno contends famously in *Negative Dialectics*, neither is it possible to bridge the gap between concept and object, between being and thinking, nor can either of them be understood independently from one another. What we can, however, understand is that there will always remain a space that eludes definition, conceptualization, and full compre-

hension. Adorno refers to this space as *nonidentity*.⁴ Nonidentity is essential to his method of negative dialectics, which

sets out to be a dialectics not of identity but of *non-identity*. We are concerned here with a philosophical project that does not presuppose the identity of being and thought [*die nicht den Begriff der Identität von Sein und Denken voraussetzt*], nor does it culminate in that identity. Instead it will attempt to articulate the very opposite, namely the divergence of concept and thing [*das Auseinanderweisen von Begriff und Sache*], subject and object, and their unreconciled state [*Unversöhntheit*]. (Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics* 6; Adorno, *Vorlesung Über Negative Dialektik* 15-16)

In doing so, Adorno opposes German idealist philosophy arguing that any philosophy that does not consider the conditions of experience cannot be coherent; the “more relentlessly our identarian thinking besets its object, the farther will it take us from the identity of the object” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 149).⁵ Thus, the “inexpressible” takes a central role in his reasoning as thinking about this gap opens up possibilities to get a more comprehensive understanding of the object of investigation, and, hence, to bridge the “ontological divide” (Bennett 14).⁶ Negative dialectics is then the method that helps to gain access to the inexpressible:

⁴ In some translations, it is spelled with a hyphen as *non-identity* (see, for example, Adorno, *Lectures on Negative Dialectics*).

⁵ In his criticism, Adorno particularly turns against the use of *identity* as the conflation between concept and object. As Brian O'Connor highlights, he, slightly confusingly, criticizes two understandings of the concept of identity: “*de facto identity* posits the exclusive meaningfulness of concepts. No claim is made with respect to the identity of object and concept, but since concepts alone are explained as the meaning element of the relationship it follows, *de facto*, that the object is what is only as articulated through concepts. The object is hereby identical with its concepts [...]. *De jure identity* misconstrues the subject-object relation as one of exhaustive correspondence. In this case there is an alleged identity between concepts and the inherent determinations of the object” (O'Connor 17-18).

⁶ Several scholars, such as Bennett and O'Connor, have remarked that his strive to gain access into nonidentity can be read as the idealistic element of his philosophy (Bennett 13; O'Connor 17).

What we may call the thing itself is not positively and immediately at hand. He who wants to know it must think more, not less, than the point of reference of the synthesis of diversity [*als der Bezugspunkt der Synthese des Mannigfaltigen*], which is the same, at bottom, as not to think at all. And yet, the thing itself is by no means a thought product. It is nonidentity through identity [*das Nichtidentische durch die Identität hindurch*]. Such nonidentity is not an “idea,” but it is an adjunct [*Solche Nichtidentität ist keine “Idee”; aber ein Zugehängtes*]. (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 189; Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* 189)

Adorno acknowledges that any unmediated apprehension of the object is unattainable; the object does not positively disclose its identity. In order to gain a deeper insight, however, one should reflect on an object’s nonidentity more thoroughly. That also means that he rejects that any sensuous encounter and perception itself can lead to apprehension.

In Adorno’s remarks, the concept of nonidentity itself remains difficult to pin down since it is tied to the object, yet impossible to conceptualize, and not positively derived from the identity of the object.⁷ Instead, it is located in the dialectical relationship between subject and object, “they reciprocally permeate each other” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 139). The space in between can, however, be better glimpsed into through mediation (*Vermittlung*): “Mediation makes no claim whatever to exhaust all things; it postulates, rather, that what it transmits is not thereby exhausted [*postuliert, was durch sie vermittelt wird, ein nicht Aufgehendes*]” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 172; Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* 174). Hence, mediation does not simply serve to describe the connection between the two separate entities of subject and object, concept and thing, but Adorno considers it constitutive of both, subject and object. While he thus contends that the “duality of subject and object must be critically maintained” (*Negative Dialectics* 175), mediation and, in doing so, capturing the meaning-making qualities of both sides offers a more comprehensive understanding as both sides can only be thought through one another (O’Connor 48). All the while, mediation remains

⁷ Jane Bennett explains Adorno’s *nonidentity* as an “elusive force” which is not “wholly outside of human experience,” “a presence that acts upon us: we knowers are haunted [...] by a painful, nagging feeling that something’s being forgotten or left out,” a “discomfiting sense of the inadequacy of representation” (Bennett 14).

aware of what eludes apprehension. Thus, Adorno's concept is built on the premise "that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder [*daß die Gegenstände in ihrem Begriff nicht aufgehen*]" (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 5; Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* 17), that life will always exceed verbalization, conceptualization, and, ultimately, accessible knowledge.

Jane Bennett observes that Adorno's materialist theory contains a pedagogy built on "intellectual as well as aesthetic exercises" which help to become "more cognizant that conceptualization automatically obscures the inadequacy of its concepts" (14). Epistemically, the awareness of this inadequacy opens up the possibility to better apprehend the presence of nonidentity and the shortcomings of concepts. It thus also includes a self-reflexive moment that emanates from the aesthetic attention towards the presence of the object (Bennett 15). Secondly, Bennett remarks that this pedagogy also entails an exercise of utopian imagination because the practitioner of negative dialectics is challenged to trace what has been obscured in the process of conceptualization, thus in the departure from the object (15): "The means employed in negative dialectics for the penetration of its hardened objects is possibility – the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one" (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* 52).⁸ This critical potential, that results from imaginatively exploring the object anew and in distance from conceptualization, then also connects this method with literary texts.

I argue that one can consider literary texts as a form of mediation between concept and object, thinking and being, as they help to reexplore the thing itself while being still aware and self-reflexive about their own inadequacy. Literary texts not only allow for imagining alternative worlds but also expand our view of the world and everything in it. By zooming in, creating new contexts, and bringing diverse objects and beings into conversation, they can push the boundaries of how we understand the world. Moreover, literary language leaves space to incorporate more nuances of nonidentity than scientific language can capture.

The premise of attending to materiality then also reflects Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman's influential remarks that "[f]ocusing exclu-

⁸ In the German original, it says: "Womit negative Dialektik ihre verhärteten Gegenstände durchdringt, ist die Möglichkeit, um die ihre Wirklichkeit betrogen hat und die doch aus einem jeden blickt" (Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* 62).

sively on representations, ideology, and discourse excludes lived experience, corporeal, practice, and biological substance from consideration” (4) which would make it impossible to utter a productive critique since it would lack a “robust understanding of discursive production itself, since various aspects of materiality contribute to the development and transformation of discourses” (4). Therefore, a critique of the material circumstance of late modernity can only be possible by understanding matter and representation as “constitutively relational” (Terdiman 171), as emergent through one another.

Moreover, these material feminist critics as well as Adorno help to recognize that whenever we invite the material to the conversation, it is imperative not to get caught up in binary oppositions of merely inverting the logic of the linguistic turn. Instead, Christopher Breu cautions that if

we really want to be attentive to the challenges that the heterogeneity of materiality presents to critical theory, to the study of literature, and to everyday life, we need to think about how various forms of materiality differ from, intermix with, and place limits on the cultural and linguistic, rather than merely supersede or replace them. (Breu 3)

Thus, just as the following analyses will take laboring bodies as their focus, they will also attend to the effects of discursive inscriptions. Approaching the literary texts, these case studies will cast a view that draws from the intersection of both perspectives, recognizing the critical potential of the dialectical relationality: a social constructivist perspective of examining how effective ideologies, discourses, and cultural practices shape the body will hence join a conversation with the intransigence and inscrutability of bodies.

Moreover, in their dialectical entanglement between materiality and representation, between concrete matter and abstraction, fictional bodies conceptually share a common problem with laboring bodies which unfolds in the tension between actuality and potentiality. Just as literary imaginations and literary language can hint at the nonidentical, that which eludes conceptualization, laboring bodies are caught up in a dialectical relation between lived experience and abstraction.

Therefore, in a first step, one needs to be aware that *abstraction* in relation to bodies poses an even more pressing problem when it serves as the gateway to an analysis of contemporary capitalism as an era that heavily focuses on biopolitical governance and that also oftentimes eludes

criticism through the implementation of abstractions on many levels. Capitalism affects the organization of society, structures the flows of social reproduction, and thus subjects social relations to economic paradigms. Thus, the body is enclosed in a culture that is deduced from economic relations. Life is reconfigured in terms of the capacity and eligibility to work. While laboring bodies are subject to disciplinary regimes, this study attends to the reality also described by Silvia Federici “that the human body has powers, needs, desires that have developed in the course of a long process of coevolution with our natural environment and are not easily suppressed” (*Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* 77). Consequently, the laboring body must be located in an area of tension. On the one hand, it is the material site of discursive subjection and domination. On the other, however, through its material situatedness, it thwarts complete domination and constructability, thus resisting the absolute incorporation into the capitalist system.⁹ This dialectical entanglement is also built into the concept of labor-power which, in order to be criticized, must be introduced more deeply in the following.

1.2 The Dialectics of Laboring Bodies

“Labor-power” is not a proper noun; it is a common noun.
—Paolo Virno

To discern the implications of laboring bodies, which unfold in the entanglement of abstraction and materialization, it is first necessary to situate the laboring body within the discourse of biopolitics; a discourse that has for decades critically problematized how life and the physical body have become the objects of power in modern societies. Following Paolo Virno, I will argue that since we can only rationally comprehend the term biopolitics if we understand the philosophical concept of labor-power (*Grammar* 81) and since this concept, in turn, refers to generic

⁹ Similarly, in *Caliban and the Witch*, Silvia Federici argues that “the promotion of life-forces turns out to be nothing more than the result of a new concern with the accumulation and reproduction of labor-power” (*Caliban and the Witch*). The (female) body, she argues, must be revisited as the viewpoint from which to evaluate the rise of capitalism because this will reveal the sites of capitalist exploitation and resistance alike.

human potentiality rather than actuality, we have to understand laboring bodies also through their “aptitude, capacity, dynamis” (81).

Before discussing Virno’s additions and objections to more widespread approaches to biopolitics,¹⁰ however, I want to briefly sketch the roots of the concept as it was popularized by Michel Foucault in the 1970s¹¹ in order to “understand the assortment of techniques of normalization working on human bodies as figures of intervention, and to simultaneously emphasize the political import of these normalizations” (Kunow 178). In this concern, it is necessary to note what many writers have observed, that his “writings on biopolitics involve shifts, feints, changes in focus and direction – perhaps even [...] ‘deceptions’” (Campbell and Sitze 7).¹² Therefore, critics must be attentive not only to

¹⁰ The concept of *biopolitics* (sometimes also spelled *bio-politics*) carries competing meanings. While my approach focuses on the adoption of the concept by poststructuralist and neo-Marxist scholars, the term was also used to label a subdiscipline of US-American political science which emerged in the 1960s after being introduced by the Swedish scholar Rudolf Kjellén in the 1920s. These theorists were, however, not interested in the intersections of power and life but rather in an interdisciplinary approach that combined political and life sciences. In doing so, they wanted to acknowledge that the political person is also a complex, emotional, and biological being. With the academic boom of Foucault’s theories in various disciplines, including also the political sciences, the term biopolitics has by now almost entirely lost this denotation (see Liesen and Walsh).

¹¹ Foucault is, in fact, not the first scholar to use the term biopolitics. Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Schopenhauer, Henri Bergson, and the aforementioned Rudolf Kjellén are early representatives of similar approaches concerning the philosophy of life. Very generally, they used a concept of life as a criterion to evaluate processes of rationalization, civilization, mechanization, and technologization concerning their hostile effects (Lemke 19). As Foucault’s approach, however, initiated what has been referred to as the “biopolitical turn” (Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth* 132), it will suffice to begin my investigation here.

¹² They continue to argue that Foucault does not present a linear, conceptual mapping of biopolitics in his writings. Instead, he self-reflexively returns to his earlier writings, rethinking continuous issues. What might thus seem as critical innovations, should rather be questioned and oftentimes revealed as recurring problems which he encounters in his reflections (Campbell and Sitze 7).

what he writes and says but also to the blank spaces; the problems that are left to be solved (7). However, Foucault's analyses on the topic, which can be found especially in *The History of Sexuality I* and his lectures at the Collège de France, are usually considered as *Urtexte*, which have shaped the discourse after the biopolitical turn and are thus also significant for this discussion.

In his examination of the reconstitution of sexuality as a discursive object, Foucault observes that the *dispositifs*¹³ of power and knowledge increasingly focus on the processes of life and the feasibility of managing, regulating, and normalizing them. His concept is therefore based on the assumption that biopower represents a rupture in politics as it has changed its core by reformulating and subordinating political sovereignty to another form of political knowledge which he calls governmentality. To be more precise, "by sovereignty he means the transcendence of the single point of command above the social field, and by governmentality he means the general economy of discipline that runs throughout society" (Hardt and Negri, *Empire* 88). These modern forms of power are thought from the perspective of life itself.

In the final part of *History of Sexuality I*, entitled "Right of Death and Power over Life," Foucault presents arguments that establish a basis of what is commonly understood as biopower and biopolitics. Here, he argues that during the eighteenth century, politics transformed from being based on sovereign power to a new regime in which life itself became the object of power. In order to understand these new regimes of power which are directed towards the management of life, he traces the transformation from negative conceptions of power toward modern power as affirmative and active. Up until the eighteenth century, power in the West was predominantly "exercised [...] as a means of deduction" (Foucault, *History of Sexuality I* 136) featuring the sword as the ultimate symbol of sovereign power: "The right which was formulated as the 'power of life and death'

¹³ In Foucault's writing, the term *dispositif* "generally denotes a device or a mechanism, but it is also used to refer to the projected implementation of particular measures, to plans [...]. The term is derived from the French verb *disposer*: to arrange, to set, to lay out" (Lazzarato, "From Biopower to Biopolitics" 11). The term is oftentimes translated as "apparatus," "deployment," or "dispositive" (Raffnsøe et al. 191). However, these translations do not bear the full range of meanings of the original as the translator Ivan A. Ramirez notes (Lazzarato, "From Biopower to Biopolitics" 11).

was in reality the right to *take* life or *let* live” (136). Partially derived from the ancient Roman law *patria potestas*, the sovereign had the right to decide over life and death. Thus, in case of invasion, for example, they could legitimately claim their subjects to participate in defending the state. “Power in this instance was essentially a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself” (136), based on domination and repression. This power was characterized by negativity since “it is a power that only has the force of the negative on its side; a power to say no; in no condition to produce, capable only of posting limits, it is basically anti-energy” (85). However, these mechanisms of sovereign power underwent structural changes as Foucault describes: “One might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death” (138). While power operated mainly through a patronizing force that was imposed on subjects formerly, it was then exercised through the purposeful normalization, regulation, and management of the individual’s life.

Western man was gradually learning what it meant to be a living species in a living world, to have a body, conditions of existence, probabilities of life, an individual and collective welfare, forces that could be modified, and a space in which they could be distributed in an optimal manner. For the first time in history, no doubt, biological existence was reflected in political existence; the fact of living was no longer an inaccessible substrate that only emerged from time to time, amid the randomness of death and its fatality; part of it passed into knowledge’s field of control and power’s sphere of intervention. (Foucault, *History of Sexuality I* 142)

Foucault here traces the reconfiguration of the dispositifs of power as life becomes enmeshed with politics. This transformation also includes that the individual perceives itself as being part of a species, a collective, and recognizes that it is part of a living world (Campbell and Sitze 9).¹⁴ As

¹⁴ Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze argue that the openness of this statements has led to many interesting interpretations that explore the repercussions of life being constructed within the political domain. They contend that theories by thinkers such as Giorgio Agamben, Peter Sloterdijk, and Donna Haraway emerge from the following questions implied in Foucault’s remarks: “What meaning can ‘life’ have in an epoch when life itself is no longer outside of history, if it ever was, but is now simply an effect of history itself, one of its

Keith Crome comments, Foucault was “concerned to develop a properly ontological, rather than ontic,¹⁵ analytics of power” in order to “grasp power in terms of what *it can do*,” “viewing power from the perspective of its becoming” (51). To follow his line of argumentation, it is necessary to note that “power is not to be identified with a set of institutions which take the form of legal – as opposed to illegal or non-legitimised violence – and that is given as a unified system of domination” (Crome 51). Instead of existing “with its own distinct origin, basic nature, and manifestation” (Foucault, *Power* 336), power must be considered inherently relational. It is effective, active, and inherently dynamic through the relations it creates. Power, in this sense, “enacts itself: power empowers itself” (Crome 52); it resembles a network. It is also important to note that since this power is no longer enacted through unilateral relations and totalitarian domination, the individual is also not necessarily “trapped in the dispositifs of power” (Lazzarato, “From Biopower to Biopolitics” 14), but, in some ways, is compliant with the process. The subject is both, produced and producing through the forces of power (Liesen and Walsh 7). Interestingly, this novel paradigm of power is inherently characterized by its biopolitical nature, and the political importance of the body, in turn, increases as Maurizio Lazzarato summarizes:

Every force in society exercises power and that power passes through the body, not because power is “omnipotent and omnipresent” but because every force is a power of the body. Power comes from below; the forces that constitute are multiple and heterogeneous. What we call power is an integration, a coordination and determination of the relations between a multiplicity of forces. (“From Biopower to Biopolitics” 14)

Hence, power reciprocally operates through strategic relations; it derives from multiple and heterogeneous forces. Importantly, this multitude of forces also complicates its operations, renders it harder to comprehend,

variables and contingencies? What meaning can living have when no element of life is outside of the domain of politics, and no political interest can be found that does not in the last analysis concern life?” (9).

¹⁵ Heidegger offers a detailed examination of the distinction between ontic and ontological in *Being and Time* “where the former is concerned with facts about entities and the latter is concerned with the meaning of being” (Wheeler n.p.).

and, in turn, more difficult to destabilize. Foucault continues to specify that this “power over life” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality I* 139) unfolds in two basic ways that are not antithetical but rather represent two poles of development that are still linked by an assemblage of relations: anatomo-politics of the human body and biopolitics of the population.¹⁶

Anatomo-politics focus on the individual, physical body. The body is subjected to a constructivist perspective and what remains of concern is “its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality I* 139). This, in turn, entails not only that the physical body becomes the object that power occupies, but it also implies that through its body, the individual intimately encounters an embodied experience of power. The individual’s sexuality is, for example, controlled by prohibiting conducts such as masturbation and designating them as perverted or, on the other hand, by proclaiming conducts like heterosexual sex as natural and preferable (Liesen and Walsh 6). The individual may then experience a conflict between their desires and the behavior deemed appropriate. By controlling the construction of narratives of knowledge and truth, self-perception and behavior are regulated.

While the objective of anatomo-politics is the management of the individual body, biopolitics aims at the “species body” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality I* 139). At the level of society, biological processes such as “propagation, birth and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity” (139) are supervised, managed, regulated, and normalized. Through biopolitics, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri note in *Empire*, society is subsumed within the image of a single body, as all the bodies integrated into the larger body of society act accordingly (24). Here, it is obvious that biopolitical mechanisms can hardly be separated from anatomo-politics. Just as narratives, such as, for example, that of “ideal” motherhood, shape the behavior of the individual, they simultaneously aim at regulating the population to promote the desired outcome. Hence, the “administration of bodies and the calculated management of life” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality I* 140) not only operate through a cluster

¹⁶ Whereas Foucault uses the term biopower as an umbrella term for anatomo-politics and biopolitics, other writers confound this distinction. Hence, biopolitics is oftentimes used as a general term that incorporates both poles of biopower.

of power relations but also focus on the body of the individual on different levels; one disciplines the body, the other manages populations.

Just as biopower must be considered important for the formation of modern societies, its normalizing impulse is also pivotal for the functioning of capitalism: "This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes" (Foucault, *History of Sexuality I* 140f). Hardt and Negri tie in with this observation on the "material functioning of imperial rule" (Hardt and Negri, *Empire* 22). Following, they phrase an objective for critical theory addressing biopolitical phenomena, which is, in turn, also crucial for the analysis of laboring bodies: "Our analysis must now descend to the level of that materiality and investigate there the material transformations of the paradigm of rule. We need to discover the means and forces of the production of social reality along with the subjectivities that animate it" (22).

However, exactly at this point, at the analytic level of materiality, one must also be very critical of Foucault. While he initiated a reconsideration of the biopolitical role of the individual body, his concept of the body itself is mostly based on a constructivist perspective that does not address the materiality of the body. In many of his discussions, the body remains a passive object that is constructed without much immanent resistance. Hence, he does not attend to the resistant capacity originating from human drives and desires (Kunow 180) or even from matter's intransigence.¹⁷ This can be observed in the language used when he, for example, likens the construction of the docile body to a machine: "The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 138). What is even more important for the perspective of American Cultural Studies, as Rüdiger Kunow continues, is that Foucault's understanding of norms "brings with them not only a restrictive vision of the human body but also an often myopic view of the role of culture in setting, questioning, revising norms" (Kunow 180). Largely ignoring the functioning of cultural practices and

¹⁷ Putting this argument forth, Rüdiger Kunow elaborates that Foucault's vision of the body in his writing on sexual practices marks a notable exception. Here, Foucault mentions the effects of desires and drives, however, only "by the wayside of [his] critique" (Kunow 180).

their impact on social negotiations of norms, Axel Honneth remarks that Foucault “argues in terms of a historically guided functionalism that steadfastly regards cultural traditions, and thus historically shaped ideas and values, only from the perspective of the objective function they perform in a systemic process characterized by the increase of power” (163). Hence, Foucault’s approach falls short in two respects: it does not attend to the living body, and it fails to acknowledge the socio-cultural impact on discursive practices and the consolidation of power.

As much as the contributions of Foucault’s biopolitical theory remain foundational, it is also pivotal to acknowledge its limitations. I would add to the criticism brought forth that the Foucauldian perspective does not help break with capitalism’s abstractions because it also builds on abstractions and generalizations. As this study argues that the depiction of laboring bodies can break with the abstracting tendencies of capitalism, it will thus be necessary to draw on a materialist perspective of biopolitics that accounts for embodied experiences and their subversive potential.

In order to do so, I will follow Virno’s objection that we should turn to the complex concept of labor-power (*Arbeitskraft*) as a foundation for understanding biopolitics. Even though the social sciences invoke the concept frequently, its paradoxical and complicated nature is oftentimes evaded. To reconstruct the concept and to understand the individual and social repercussions involved, it is necessary to refer back to Karl Marx as he introduces the term labor-power in his critique of the political economy. Before that, however, I briefly want to trace the conceptual development of his definition of work.

Marx’s definition of work changes and gains in complexity over time, culminating in the intricate distinction between abstract and concrete labor. In his earlier writings in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844), he uses a more simplified approach that follows the Hegelian tradition. Here, he describes work as an intentional activity that causes a change in the material world. In contrast to animals, humans can mediate their needs and desires through work and can postpone their fulfillment. Marx describes this quality as essential to human nature. By working on the material world, humans not only overcome their desires but they furthermore “fashion and shape the object, and give it a human form. [They] thus ‘duplicate’ themselves in the world” (Sayers 34). For this early Marx, it is crucial that by working, human beings create a relation to the natural world. In this way, human power can be recognized