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The American Protest Novel in a Time of Terror: Carolyn Chute's *Merry Men*

Gregory Leon Miller

... the open air prison which the world is becoming ...

—Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*

Post-9/11, the radicalism of Carolyn Chute seemed to scare off the media and even the academy, and she still struggles to maintain a steady audience for her novels. Yet Chute's work remains strikingly relevant. Her protest novel, *Merry Men*, especially merits a fuller appraisal than it has so far received. A brief overview of the reception of Chute's rough, realistic, seemingly naïve narratives reveals her to be as provocative and challenging as her most self-consciously postmodern or avant-garde contemporaries.

It is unlikely that Chute will ever find the critics as congenial as they were in response to her first novel, *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*, published in 1985 by Ticknor & Fields, when Chute was thirty-seven. Here was a writer unlike any other—though the novel's rural setting and largely uneducated characters inevitably brought comparisons to Faulkner's Snopes family and Flannery O'Connor's characters. Such comparisons characterize the bulk of mainstream critical response to her books to date.¹ While the book jacket includes Chute's ironic remark that her work was "involuntarily researched," publicity materials nonetheless emphasized the book's comic aspects. Critics tended to follow suit, glossing over the novel's trenchant social criticism in favor of the biographical details of Chute's own life, thereby producing a marketable image of authenticity, but with the reassurance that its author had written her way out of the poverty depicted in the novel. The first national profile of Chute, published in Time-Warner's *People Weekly* (Warner Books would issue the paperback the following year), informs its readers that Chute has paid off "10 years of debts" with her *Beans* earnings; when a writer-friend encouraged her to send the finished draft to an agent in New York, we are told, Chute had to borrow money for postage.

Class condescension (presumably unintended) characterized the book's reception among critics. A review in *People* classified Chute as a

"Mainehousewife" and marveled at the book's "primitive power," while the *Detroit News* declared Chute a "natural writer." A reviewer in the *Washington Post Book World* sounded like an enthusiastic slummer, gushing about the characters' "wonderful, low, brutish appeal" and the "thrilling strength in their shoulders and arms and big hands." But such sentimental celebrations of lower-class "charm" could not be expected to continue as Chute's subsequent work became more insistently dark.

Chute accentuated despair in her next novel. *Letourneau's Used Auto Parts* (1988), which also takes place in Egypt, can be seen as a small-scale version of (or preparation for) *Merry Men*. *Time Magazine* ruefully noted that in *Beans*, Chute "socked the reader with a collection of country characters," whereas in *Auto Parts* her plot-making skills suffer in comparison to Maine's other famous writer, Stephen King. In *People* an exasperated reviewer complained about the plot's "unrelieved despair." He concluded: "By the 100th page, the best thing to hope for is that a giant meteorite will hit Egypt, Maine, and obliterate all these jerks."

Chute, meanwhile, became so frustrated with such misunderstandings of her work, inflected by class prejudice, that she began work on a "finished" version of *Beans*. This revised version was published in 1995; in a postscript, Chute writes:

[A] dangerous chasm in the classes is alive and well in the United States of America. Don't let anybody tell you it's not. And if art can't reveal the universal human heart from one to another beyond the chasm, nothing else can. As an artist, I feel a weighty responsibility. (273)

Later in the postscript, Chute implies that part of the novel's popularity is rooted in such misreadings and, perhaps thinking of certain critics' impatience with *Auto Parts* and the even more sprawling and politically uncompromising *Merry Men* (which had just been published), she rhetorically asks, "Aren't the lives of ordinary people, stressed to breaking point by the crumbling of America's big dream, interesting enough?" (275).

She followed *Merry Men* with the disastrously received *Snow Man* (1999). This novel, her first to take place outside of Egypt, Maine, begins with the assassination of a Massachusetts senator by a member of a far-right-wing militia from Maine known as the "Snow Men." In the course of the novel, the fugitive assassin becomes entangled with the late senator's widow and grown-up daughter. What follows is a portrait of economic turmoil, of desperate acts resulting from policies that dehumanize and trap individuals, policies that render those in different economic circumstances so unknowable to each other that they may as well belong to different species. The novel was doomed from the start, for its publication shortly followed the Oklahoma City bombing. Chute's radicalism was now beyond the pale. The *New York*

Times, having named *Merry Men* one of 1994's "Notable Books," relegated *Snow Man* to the "Books in Brief" section, where it was panned. *Snow Man* is as spare in its presentation as *Merry Men* is expansive, and should really be approached as a fable. Instead, critics assumed that Chute was endorsing terrorism rather than diagnosing the private agonies and political decisions that feed terrorism. Such misreadings are predictable in a society without a viable left-wing presence in the mainstream media or on the political commentary circuit,² and it did not help that the novel's long "acknowledgments" include not only Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn ("Our teachers") but prisoners:

And to my friends Ray Luc Levasseur, who is in sensory-deprivation prison in Colorado, and Tony Ford on death row in Texas, indomitable spirits no one can torture into submission although it is certainly being tried. And to all those "buried alive" in prisons by this government.

Chute's literary career appeared in jeopardy. Chute spent nearly a decade finding a publisher for her next work; *The School at Heart's Content Road* was published in 2008 by Atlantic Monthly Press to mostly positive reviews.³ Her best-seller days now seem irreversibly in the past, and times do not yet favor academic appreciations of her art.⁴ Still, Chute will not depoliticize her work in order to get published: "If it's the wrong word or a boring section, that's one thing. But I see no reason for anything to come out for political reasons. I'm not making political statements. I'm just saying what the people are experiencing" (Lannin). For Chute, "what the people are experiencing" is, above all, a savage and humiliating loss of freedom as a result of late capitalism's depersonalized, and therefore all the more powerful, reach. Adorno's claim—that in the era of late capitalism, "the concept of freedom . . . finally boils down to the right of the stronger and richer to take from the weaker and poorer whatever they still have"—has never seemed more apt (Adorno, "Messages" 36).⁵

It is difficult to conceive of a contemporary novel that illustrates this as forcefully as *Merry Men*. Calling *Merry Men* a protest novel perhaps places it in the tradition of the American proletarian novels of the 1930s.⁶ However, unlike these novelists, Chute generally avoids sentimentality, especially insofar as her novel does without conventional villains; after all, in the world of late capitalism such villains are beside the point. While the seemingly endless war on terror deflects attention from domestic problems, the suffering and fear of impoverished individuals and communities throughout the country—and of those in danger of joining their ranks—constitutes a more widespread and debilitating form of terror than anything generated by the so-called "axis of evil." In the reading of *Merry Men* that follows, I see the inhabitants of Egypt, Maine as afflicted—indeed inhabited—above all by free-floating fear, a fear produced by the

impersonal machinery of economic exploitation in which no individual exerts enough control to be a conventional villain.

A Critical Framework for Reading *Merry Men*

As in her previous novels, Chute sets *Merry Men* in the fictional small town of Egypt, Maine, and its immediate surroundings, including a squalid, ramshackle extension with the perhaps overly ironic name, Miracle City, and a large forest. The name "Egypt" at once suggests the hope and despair of early American history. The Puritans regularly referred to America as "the New Jerusalem," the site of "a new heavens and a new earth" (such associations can be found as early as Columbus, who speculated that Eden may have actually been located on this new continent). But as early as 1637, William Bradford lamented the failure of the Mayflower Pilgrims and those who followed them to adhere to their original spiritual purpose. While John Winthrop saw his Massachusetts Bay Company as "a model for Christian charity," America, as concept and as actual place, was from the very beginning—as Sacvan Bercovitch has argued—entwined with capitalist enterprise.⁷ (Winthrop's own community was composed of Puritan merchants with a royal land grant that obviously disregarded the rights of native Americans.) By 1693, Cotton Mather (who called Bradford a "Moses" for his followers) believed that New England had tragically abandoned its calling.⁸ The bitter irony of Chute's Egypt is that the supposed inheritors of the New Jerusalem instead find themselves at the mercy of contemporary Pharaohs of big business. Chute also advances a revisionist history of New England in the novel's prologue,⁹ as I discuss below. As she once wrote in a pamphlet, "Most of us Mainers are a thieved-upon ruined people, stripped of our culture and life-saving skills, stripped of our land. We are eaten up by heartache and stress and shame."¹⁰

The events depicted in *Merry Men* span almost forty years, from the early sixties to the late nineties. Among the many characters in the book, one stands out as the lead—conventionally so in the novel's first half. In the second half he is more emblematic, more spoken of than present. Lloyd Barrington is a pudgy eight-year-old when we first meet him, already showing signs of the eccentric activist that he will become. Lloyd is given to planting trees in the dead of night in bulldozed stretches that he deems in need of a little nature (more accurately, nature-replacement). He devises an alter ego, Super Tree Man, and he dons a homemade superhero's cape to anonymously perform his good deeds. As an adult, Lloyd's code of integrity keeps him at society's margins. Although he graduates from college (a rare feat among Egypt's working poor), he returns to Egypt and makes his living by a series of odd jobs. He refuses to follow custom and work at Forest Johnson Jr.'s construction company. Forest has veered from his

invalid father's "old-fashioned," humane treatment of his employees in favor of such modern measures as downsizing and cutting employee benefits. Forest winds up victimized by the very forces he has emulated; out-of-town lumber companies move in and drive down prices as they strip the forest to an unprecedented—and once unimaginable—degree. Lloyd is a shadowy figure for most of the book's second half. In essence he becomes a modern-day Robin Hood, furtively redistributing funds and engaging in acts of sabotage against Egypt's most assiduous converts to big-business practices. But Egypt is no Sherwood Forest; Lloyd's good intentions are mere drops in what has become a sea of collective helplessness.¹¹

I want to suggest a multiplicity of approaches to *Merry Men*, a novel so seemingly old-fashioned and straightforward in its narrative that it seems to ward off contemporary methods of narrative analysis (one factor explaining the paucity of scholarly engagement with it). In one sense Chute's novel is perfectly Lukácsian: the broad scale of her social depiction serves to measure the real against an ideal that is always powerfully present yet never in objective reality,¹² to show the limits of extant ideologies and modes of being. At the level of the individual, we might connect the novel's lead characters (including Lloyd, Forest, and Anneka Plummer) to Kenneth Burke's concept of "symbolic inference" as Frederic Jameson understands it. Even the so-called "great aesthetic productions of capitalism," Jameson writes, "prove . . . to be the cries of pain of isolated individuals against the operation of transindividual laws, the invention of so many private languages and subcodes in the midst of reified speech, [and] symptomatic expressions . . . of a damaged subject [in his] vain efforts to subvert an intolerable social order" ("Symbolic" 521).

I wish to adjust Jameson's notion in two ways. First, where he speaks of "isolated individuals," I want to suggest that this isolation is perceptual rather than actual. More useful here, I think, is Norbert Elias's concept of *figuration*, which may be described as the various operative connections—experienced from a human point of view—at all levels of culture and nature in a given society; when these change, a community is thrown into a state of confusion because a profound shift in figuration necessarily entails a change in self-perception. Elias concentrates on the shift between the geo-centric worldview and the ego-centric worldview that emerges in the Renaissance. *Merry Men* chronicles the predatory ruthlessness of late capitalism that has effected a no less profound shift in ways that we still cannot measure fully. The destruction of Egypt's forest—"a river of crushed trees, pouring out of Egypt"—parallels the psychological breakdown of many of Egypt's inhabitants, so that the ceaseless, almost deafening grinding of the paper mill, a cacophonous destruction that haunts the novel's last hundred pages or so, seems to express a mass delirium. Or perhaps we can, following Gregory Bateson, think of it as corresponding to the immanent mind gone mad.¹³

It may be noted that this turn toward delirium brings us closer to Deleuzian (and Deleuzo-Guattarian) territory, and we go further in this direction with a second modification of Jameson. As previously quoted, Jameson speaks of capitalism's inevitable production of "the cries of pain of isolated individuals against the operation of transindividual laws, the invention of so many private languages and subcodes in the midst of reified speech." Here, Jameson may as well be speaking of minor language as defined by Deleuze and Guattari. This creative work, this "invention" of "private languages and subcodes" comprises the fruit of, in Deleuze and Guattari's words, "the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great . . . literature."¹⁴

Minor literature works against a common-sense (*doxa*) understanding of the world that posits a universal subject or that perceives in terms of stability and identity rather than process and becoming. A minor use of language is active rather than reactive, creative rather than representational, and for Deleuze it is through art (and especially literature) that the minor attains its maximum force.¹⁵ And so, for Deleuze, "The aim of writing is to carry life to the state of a non-personal power" (*Essays* 4). While Lloyd Barrington recedes as a lead in the second half of *Merry Men*, his effect persists unabated—indeed, it increases—and Chute's changed presentation of this character accentuates a nonpersonal power, a power that may be identified with the revolutionary energy within the minor.

At times, Chute-the-activist may seem nostalgic for a lost, golden age, as if she were prescribing a correspondingly naïve, utopian future based on a misunderstood past. This line of attacking Chute feeds upon cynicism and a static ontology that threatens to foreclose all but the most paltry social gains. In any case, Chute's art should not be judged by her activist pronouncements; we should, rather, follow D. H. Lawrence's dictum to trust the tale and not the teller. Deleuze's concept of the minor—together with its ontological assumptions—will bring us nearer to the tale, complementing *Merry Men's* Marxist and psychological insights and helping us to apprehend, not patronize, Chute's idiosyncratic style.

Collective Abjection and Minor Style

During the "long ago" time of the prologue (presumably the seventeenth century) Chute draws a parallel between the usurpation of Native American land and the travails of Egypt residents in contemporary corporate America. The prologue's first words establish a connection between territory and survival that remains crucial throughout the novel: "It was a poor piece of land but they made it feed them . . ." (xii). This brief episode conveys the mute sympathy between an Irish immigrant woman and an unnamed old Indian woman who regularly appears when the husband

is away, like a stray animal in need of food; this female solidarity can be read both in conventional terms and as a Deleuzian “other” allied against the dominant (white male) major.¹⁶ The immigrant’s fear of her husband recedes enough for her to regularly give biscuits to the Indian woman. But the husband finds out and, furious about “the wasted flour and lard,” he lies in wait for the Indian woman and shoots her (xiv). Thus the book’s identitarian concerns are firmly anchored to the economic realm. In other words, the book’s victims—at all points of the economic spectrum—can be identified as belonging to particular classes (Chute’s “have-nots” are the working-class poor), but categorization is always contingent upon economic circumstance rather than biology, ethnicity, or any kind of essentialism. We may, for instance, think of the fictional inhabitants of Egypt, Maine, as belonging to a tribe in the way that Deleuze and Guattari speak of the collective or “territorial” investments that bring such groups together, that in effect define a tribe. One such investment would be that of the gun (or “gun culture”). Above all, however, it is through their relation to work (and particular kinds of work) that they define themselves; this sense of identity may be misunderstood by themselves and others as an underlying identity, but in fact the connection is an example of Deleuze’s (via Hume’s) understanding that relations are external to their terms. The Dedication of *Merry Men* points toward a slippage of identity in siding with the “millions who were born to be farmers” but instead find themselves “herded into welfare lines, prisons, or the slavery of Big Business”¹⁷—an outlook that accords with Marx’s understanding of “the everlasting, nature-imposed condition of human existence” (Marx, *Capital* 179). But the novel itself undermines such idealism. If the Indian woman of the prologue functions as symbol and prefiguration (or foreshadowing), her silent presence also projects the “sorrowful freedom” of Lloyd Barrington (686); this connection signals an incipient minor, a Deleuzian minority that has not yet been able to cultivate a viable cooperation.

Leaping forward to chapter 6 (“Progress”), set in the “late sixties,” danger is the pervasive theme, as the prologue’s promise of fear begins to be realized. Significantly, this is also the chapter in which tourists begin to appear (e.g., 141, 143), signaling the disastrous consequences of “development” which will eventually threaten and quite literally unsettle Egypt’s inhabitants. A few pages earlier, Forest Jr.’s father jokingly refers to an incident when he and his men made a delivery to a customer’s house and accidentally trampled on some juniper bushes, and he reminds his son to be careful and remember that they “are not DINOSAURS!!” (136). Accident and disaster and loss, cycles of pain and violence—such elements permeate this chapter. We are introduced to a minor character, Albion Cole: “[He] still keeps ALBION COLE & SONS on the doors of his logging trucks although two sons died in Vietnam, [and] a third one made it home

to die from a faulty hydraulic of one truck's loader. No sons now. A father who is no longer a father" (146). School friends' telephone conversations flit between remarks on Florida tans and fearful speculation about POWs and torture (163). When Forest Jr. is a teenager, his girlfriend almost gets hit by a car when, out with friends on a rowdy weekend night, she steps in its path and dares its driver to stop:

Trans Am bearing down, headlights full of thunder, engine full of light.

"DON'T CHRISTINE!" one of her dearest girlfriends gasps.

"My god!" another says faintly.

Screams. (166)

Shortly thereafter we learn that Christine has been beaten by a teacher who had apparently been sleeping with her, which could explain her potentially self-destructive act; by dramatizing Christine's step into the car's path *before* (which is to say, *without*) a psychological explanation, Chute more closely aligns us with the viewpoint of her horrified friends, producing suspense from a depersonalized irrationality (171). Meanwhile Forest Jr., whose dubious business practices and anger at economic forces beyond his control propel the narrative's second half, attempts to come to terms with the knowledge that Edmund Barrington (Lloyd's philandering dad), not Forest Sr. ("F. D."), is his biological father. Obsessively, he imagines that Edmund raped his mother, knowing that he did not: "The black of the room. The white. His mother's legs. He imagines it hundreds of times even as it sickens and suffocates him. He starts to imagine it again. And again. For it is, above all else, a comfort" (161). Later, Forest almost rapes Christine ("Forest lands on top of her with his forearm against her throat. He has never been so horny in his life."), and Christine keeps him away with a buck knife (166). The chapter closes with the paper company operating at full force, as development threatens the landscape ("Delicious-view people don't like waiting for dreams"), and Forest channels his desperate anger and confusion into hard work: "[T]his brotherhood with machinery, [. . .] This intercourse of robotized commotion, noise, and fuss. This progress" (176-77).

One might argue that the fear described above is strictly an outcome of narrative insofar as it seems attached to plot and character; one might also see these instances of fear (particularly in those scenes, such as Christine standing against oncoming traffic, that seem peripheral to the main plotlines) as straightforward literary foreshadowing, as strategic moments of suspense. I do not dispute that fear attaches itself to narrative in these ways; I only want to insist that fear works here in other ways as well. By re-orienting ourselves to perceive fear or another affect as an incorporeal body that preexists subjects and acts *through* them, we practice that double vision

whereby, for instance, the subject (or character) is noted as a conventional marker yet ontologically denied. Chute certainly employs fear to generate suspense, but suspense itself works via affects that circulate independently, or pass through, a novel's characters (and readers). Indeed, the production of fear-as-affect, along with other affects, might most readily be sensed at those moments in the novel when supporting characters are featured or peripheral incidents occur, since at such moments readers are less prone to neatly assign emotions and events in terms of fixed subject positions or a particular narrative grid. Because Christine is comparatively unimportant (her brief appearances are limited to chapter 6), the danger and violence we begin to associate with her presence operates throughout the novel rather than being confined to her.

The readers' experience of dislodged danger and violence, then, accords with the free-floating fear that torments Chute's characters. Of course, the characters' fear is also related to specific objects: a ruthless supervisor, a sexual predator, an out-of-state corporation. In the case of the corporation, however, one notes a drifting away from the specific; the object to be feared here is already nebulous, lacking a villainous agent at whom one can readily point. In this case, that is, the feared object is understood and articulated by Chute's characters—with the exception of Lloyd—as a comic-book rendition of the modern corporation, a placeholder for the disembodied, abstract reality. As in Marx's concept of the commodity fetish, agents have been eclipsed by categories; while agents are always locatable behind each category, the system itself ensures the endless replaceability of each agent. It is a system that

has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless infeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation. (Marx and Engels 475–76)¹⁸

In Egypt, this exploitation takes the form of a shifting mode of production that has violently disorienting consequences for public and private lives. The effect is all-pervasive, for, as Marx argues, "[it] is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness" (Marx and Engels 4).¹⁹ Chute's characters have lost their bearings. This alien, amorphous economic exploitation has clouded so many of their previously held assumptions, exposing them to a new kind of vulnerability and effectively dispelling their identities. They have become radically displaced: exiled in their own territory, adrift in a landscape insufficiently populated by discernible subjects and objects, existing in a seemingly paradoxical condition of collective abjection. As Kristeva writes:

To be sure, if I am affected by what does not yet appear to me as a thing, it is because laws, connections, and even structures of meaning govern and condition me. That order, that glance, that voice, that gesture, which enact the law for my frightened body, constitute and bring about an effect and not yet a sign. (Kristeva 10)

As wrenching as the characters' object-related fear is, then, their free-floating fear should be understood as even more significant, for this is where the novel's political and psychological acuity—and its affective power—most resides.

The entirety of chapter 10—"Preeminence"—can be read in terms of its affective power. This short chapter follows the much longer, pivotal ninth chapter, in which the specter of tourists has given way to out-of-state owners who run things from afar, making life a welter of loss and confusion for Lloyd Barrington and other Egypt residents. Chute shifts time periods by rushing through the 1980s in four brief chapters, between the "Mid-Seventies" of chapter 9 and the 1990s of the novel's second half (i.e., chapters 14–16). Late capitalism's disastrous effects upon Egypt were becoming evident earlier in the book, especially in the key chapters—chapter 6 and chapter 9—of the first half; Chute gives us the monstrous fruition of capitalism in the second half of the novel, which covers just five years. She sketches the 1980s with a brief series of vignettes in which fear as affect continues to circulate. The significantly positioned chapter 10 is divided into two vignettes. In the first, set in the parking lot of "MOODY'S VARIETY & LUNCH," a group of men has just returned from a hunt ("one whitetail deer wired to the roll bar against the cab" [270]). Tim Gowen—who is first introduced here and does not reappear after this chapter—boasts about having just killed a lynx: "Obviously the cat didn't have no idea about who was boss" (270). The narration continues:

Tim Gowen tells how the cat almost hooked him in the pants leg with his free paw. He tells how this was the last straw, how he told his boy to go get a limb for a club. Tim Gowen shows you how you show a lynx who's boss. Tim Gowen describes the paw that's crushed in the trap . . . and now the three paws that are "pulped." Tim Gowen tells how he said to his boy, "You want to ride him? I'll let you ride him before I put him down." No, the boy had said. He's still got teeth. "Well, let's smash out his mouth for you," Tim had said. "Not every day you get to ride a wildcat." (271)

The next section presents a frightened visitor—who we soon realize is Tim Gowen—to the "Manpower Affairs" office in Portland. Gowen, we learn, had recently quit his job because the new out-of-state employers

had cut benefits, reneged on a promise of bonuses and began to distribute the paychecks erratically. Gowen (referred to in the narration simply as “the worker”), at an appeals hearing after being denied unemployment, becomes increasingly flustered (“He is *scared*.”):

The tribunal officer and company reps stare at the worker as he answers another question. Their chairs all face his. A tape recorder makes a soft brushing sound on a folding table. It seems the worker has trouble with speech, can’t even say the word “forklift” clearly now. It’s so easy to confuse him, to break him down. (272)

Thematically, these contrasting vignettes can be read as shorthand for the entire novel, a point to which I will return. First, though, note how the affect of fear inhabits the two scenes. As we have seen, this affect recurs throughout the novel as an intensive pulsation: fear is felt as a potentiality and as an incorporeal presence. The whole town of Egypt—and the sprawling netherworld that is Miracle City, itself a symptomatic eruption of Egypt’s blight—chokes on it. Chute’s style is complementary. The language itself is not a dialect but a “foreign” language within the major language, with regional intonations, neologisms, an estranging use of capitalization, and a frequency of clipped, arid expressions: “Company wants the unemployment benefits to stop” (271).

The vignettes also reveal Chute’s effective use of free indirect discourse, functioning as a kind of fourth-person singular that disentangles events from a fixed, subject-oriented perspective (much like Vertov’s kino-eye). Gowen’s tale of how he tortured the lynx is rendered from a collective viewpoint (almost in terms of stage directions), so that the recent brutality described seems to pass into a simultaneity of Moody’s Variety folklore in present and future tense, an enfolding of time that neatly captures the historical novel’s relation to reality. Such an approach depersonalizes Gowen, and the depersonalization continues, though by different stylistic means, in the second vignette. As we have seen, Gowen, now the victim, is not identified right away, and though the scene is presented from Gowen’s point-of-view, readers have not been “inside” Gowen’s head before—and indeed, we know nothing about him beyond his boasting, since the previous scene neither describes him nor tells us anything about his history or thoughts. As a result, the move into his point of view contributes to Chute’s disorienting use of free indirect discourse. Here, readers share the victim’s point of view, but this perspective somehow feels impersonal since we do not know him and, given what has just transpired in the first vignette, we do not especially care to know him. This impersonality, or detachment, is compounded by Gowen’s own disorientation and by the fact that the tribunal officer and “company reps” are themselves depersonalized, Kafkaesque authority figures who, in

turn, do not really acknowledge Gowen as a person. They are uninterested in his situatedness: "Answer only the questions, please" (271).

The point of view is not consistent, however, shifting as it does to the other side of the examiners' table, a move typical of Chute's free indirect discourse and of the depersonalized presentation of Gowen—we get his point of view, but only in fragments. Many of the details that accompany the scene, such as the tape recorder's "soft brushing sound" quoted above, contribute to an overall fragmented texture in which point of view is ambiguous. The clearest visual impression of Gowen that readers are likely to come away with is of his hands spread on his knees "to keep his hands steady." (The studied awkwardness of the sentence repeats "hands" in order to draw attention to them: "The man with the green pants and many shirts spreads his hands on his knees to keep his hands steady" [272].)

Together, these manifestations of minor style engender an a-centered field that de-emphasizes fixed subjects in favor of an ontology of process and connections among characters and community, thus allowing for an especially forceful presence of affects—fear foremost, as I have argued. And by writing in terms of collective investments rather than fixed identity, Chute makes clear the ties between the many forms of aggression and Gowen's mystified economic circumstances, while avoiding a sentimentality that would undermine the novel's representation of Egypt's larger reality. Of course, this method also ensures that reading *Merry Men* will be, at least in part, a painful, almost suffocating experience. We need to consider the representational aspects of the novel more fully in order to see why this pain is ultimately rewarding, and how *Merry Men*—its grimness notwithstanding—carries an affirmative power, after all.

"A Kind of Love"

I have suggested that the two Gowen vignettes, positioned roughly at the center of the narrative, can be said to characterize *Merry Men* as a whole. We can see this in the reversal of predator and prey (Gowen the abuser becomes Gowen the abused), in the reversal of torturer and tortured, and in the perverted form of Gowen's masculinity (the events preceding the lynx episode—especially Lloyd's struggles in the main storyline of chapter 9—have shown us a series of socioeconomically triggered desperate acts by men). Lloyd, on the other hand, divorces himself from dependency upon employers, as much as he can, but to do this he leads a shadowy existence as an outsider who foregoes certain comforts, not least the camaraderie of fellow workers, and his life-choice nurtures a keen awareness of injustice: hence, "the sorrow of his freedom."

But it is too limiting to speak of late capitalism only in terms of sociological and economic injustice. Deleuze and Guattari show us that capitalism

works axiomatically, which is another way of saying, with Lyotard, that capitalism is effectively metaphysical:

In capitalism, infinity is posed as that which is not yet determined, as that which the will must indefinitely dominate and appropriate. It bears the name of cosmos, of energy. It gives rise to research and development. It has to be conquered, to be turned into the means to an end, and this end is the glory of the will, a glory that in itself is infinite. In this sense, capital is the real romanticism.²⁰ (Lyotard 25)

Merry Men can be read as a chronicle of the agonies of loss (and the Dedication sets up such a reading), but we must remember that loss is not presented in nostalgic terms. I have shown how the prologue works against the temptation of nostalgia. The disorderliness and depressions of the first half of the book also work against the inclination to take refuge in notions of a "golden age." Chute's insistence upon the flaws of her characters also works against nostalgia and other forms of idealization. While Chute's activism might occasionally slip into the rhetoric of nostalgia and idealization, the overall force of her art—and *Merry Men* especially—is one of immanence, which rebukes the metaphysical reductions and distortions wrought by capitalism. Chute's fiction conveys a Lawrentian insistence upon the physical; it chronicles and celebrates lived experience, not the will's avoidance or misrepresentation (perversion) of life.²¹

Nostalgia, then, is negated in *Merry Men* from the prologue onward. The novel's first half shows the strengths of community in Egypt—"[e]very road you take, there's somebody to wave and blow the horn" (9). The brief third chapter, "Special Recipe Blackberry Pie" (69–71), jumps forward into the "Early Nineties," and this time lapse emphasizes the importance of tradition while reminding us that community and the passing on of tradition will continue throughout the novel even as both become increasingly threatened. None of these events take place amidst a rural idyll. These people work hard, they struggle and suffer. Lloyd Barrington grows up without his mother, who dies of cancer before the novel begins, and his father, Edmund, is plagued by guilt for having cheated on his wife regularly, even as he continues to sleep with married women, the eight-year-old Lloyd acting as unwitting watchdog outside the women's houses. Sometimes Edmund hints at suicidal thoughts to his son, as when they encounter a blind dog on the road and Edmund considers relieving it of its misery:

Edmund grins fiercely, his dark eyes terrible and teasing. "It's a puzzle, isn't it, how some people get along in this world, how they manage to go so long."

Lloyd squints. "I suppose."

"I want you to go back and get my rifle from behind the seat. Then . . . I'll shoot this old dog." He is looking at the dog tiredly, then looks up and grins. "Then . . . the next right thing would be for some good-hearted person to shoot me." (55)

Depression itself functions as an affect in the novel. Gwen's mother, Phoebe, exudes a false cheerfulness, and her mood swings and retreats into her room indicate manic depression (see especially 77, 82, and 119), and when Phoebe's husband dies she is too incapacitated to tell her children, pretending instead that he has gone away despite the arrivals and departures of the doctor and various attendants. It is, of course, indicative of specific individual struggles (later, we will see this especially in Carroll Plummer, one of those "born to be a farmer" but instead condemned to a meaningless existence in the service of a paper mill, bought by an out-of-state company), but it also serves as an indicator of a collective malaise (and an incorporeal entity tied with the fear discussed earlier).

Nostalgia's negation follows from the novel's immanent perspective in general, a perspective most apparent in Chute's insistence on physicality. Characters "beller" (192) and shout, their utterances often rendered in capital letters. When Lloyd's brain-damaged wife, Sherry, is brought outside at the site of her parents' garage sale, Chute draws our attention to the bloody nicks that deerflies have made on her skin (208), and we hear "the weird wet sound of [Sherry's] mouth" (196). Smells are especially emphasized, and at one point Chute provides a catalog of "odors of nearly eighty years of Moody's patronage," winding up with the observation that the upper-class Gwen—newly widowed, just moved to Egypt, and visiting the store for the first time—has an unfamiliar smell: "How is it that the sweetness of home clings to some, while others it doesn't? The widow, it doesn't. However, she's not odorless. What is her smell?" (460). And Chute employs many regionalisms to express a body's movements, its force, as when a character "mashes" a truck's pedal with his foot (466).²² When F. D. (Forest's father) yawns at the supper table "his eyes run with tears" and such yawns "are as much a pleasure to him as his food" (149).

The characters' relation to physical labor is repeatedly emphasized. At its best, such work is ennobling, providing a deeply satisfying connection to the land and a crucial sense of self-worth. It can fuse with Lawrentian eroticism, as with Maybelle Soule's "lust for the beauty of [her husband] working" (179). There is not a trace, however, of Tolstoy's noble peasant about these people. Work can be "a kind of love" (192), generating a sense of interconnectedness in which boundaries (and hierarchies) between man and "beast" nearly dissolve:

He [Lloyd] believes the men sleep deepest. The hard life, they say. He need not witness the strain of their backs to know how these rocks were piled here. Oxen. The nerved-up great horse. Clang of chains. Mosquitoes on the back of the neck. Deerflies. Blackflies. Who could tell one from the other? Who can tell these men from horses in their shared lather . . . (261–62; ellipses in original)

Then there is Joanne Foye, who “knows the work of wool,” who “is the wool” (265; emphasis in original).

Joanna, however, is a factory worker whose alienation from meaningful employment leads to an unproductive, and indeed damaging connection. She suffers from terrible back pain, dismissed as unimportant by “the company’s doctor,” but later diagnosed by a chiropractor as sciatic nerve damage. The chiropractor advises her to take two weeks off, but Joanna fears that the company will frown upon having to pay worker’s compensation; she is “pushing forty” and feeling expendable, and so here she is at the factory: “She needs to show them. Needs to push. Joanne Foye at a kind of wondrous peak, fast and furious, scared” (265). The interconnectedness sensed by Lloyd here becomes a wretched condition whereby a worker is reduced to the level of beasts (as in the Dedication, in which Chute protests that potential farmers are now “herded into welfare lines, prisons, or the slavery of Big Business” [emphasis mine]). In Deleuzian terms, the social conditions leading to Joanna’s plight arise from a conception of life that clashes with an immanent view: the world is seen as transcendent-vertical rather than immanent-horizontal. That is, a sympathetic worldview that would emphasize communal and physical connections gives way to a worldview of division and hierarchy indicated by, for example, the conception of animals as “beneath us” (the very concept of being “reduced” to the level of animals is alien to the immanent-horizontal view).

The transcendent-vertical is absorbed at the level of colloquialism, as axiomatic capitalism encourages a way of perceiving the world—of perceiving *life*—under the spell of transcendent irreality.²³ Here, Cookie explains to Lloyd that the meal she has just prepared him is meager because of developments at her and her husband’s (Danny’s) workplace—namely, changes implemented by the new out-of-state owners:

“They came around last week to announce themselves or something . . . mostly to look the place over, I guess. Nobody introduced themselves to *me*. Everything’s changed. They got rules posted there this morn. Like ‘docking’ you on time. Danny says the rules come down from ‘above.’” She laughs. “Massachusetts is *south*.” (239; ellipses and emphasis in original)

Merry Men understands physical work at an intimate level—"All the labors of fall and winter that build up under your clothes a heat, a dull ache" (267)—so when work as the men and women of Egypt know it is taken away (via corporate downsizing that forces some into unemployment, some into degrading, fundamentally alien employment), the result is sickness, a deformity of mind and body.²⁴ This sickness, or deformity, is both indicated and symbolized by cruelty to animals, a linkage that Chute stylistically reinforces by using the word "pulped"—which brings to mind the paper mill where Tim Gowen and others work—to describe the lynx's mangled paw in the post-hunting scene recounted above. When Forest Johnson succumbs to "buck fever" while hunting for a Thanksgiving deer, his aim fails him; he shoots the deer in the face and the deer hobbles off, its wound described in excruciating detail (see 430).

These Desperate Men

Such efforts to assert control over their animal "lessers" cannot relieve these men from their increasing sense of confinement. In *Merry Men*, prisons are to be taken both metaphorically and literally. The threat is real, especially since prison itself is becoming a "Big Business" within the world of the novel—and the contemporary U.S.—and the residents of Egypt are being pushed into circumstances that will, in many cases, lead to trouble with the law. But there is also a sense in which state power has reduced these people to a confinement that cannot be limited solely to figurative levels. State violence, in the Foucauldian sense, can make criminals of us all—certainly those who wish to resist—and, considering that acts of resistance are in themselves deviant, the expressions of desperation and a sense of comparative powerlessness, one cannot be sure what resistance will generate, or what the limits of resistance should be. In an interview, Chute once declared: "The working-class person values place, interdependence, cooperation, the tribe. Rural working class especially values land. Many of us would *kill* to keep our land, our home, which for thousands of years was not considered a crazy thing to do."²⁵

Lloyd resists the indentured servitude of what full-time employment has come to mean in Egypt. Even Forest Johnson's company, which he inherited from his father and which for years stood for the definition of decent employment for many in Egypt, is suffering. Reaganomics has triggered unprecedented corporate plundering, wreaking havoc on the local community and economy, and Forest's business is increasingly at risk. Forest reacts with measures that his father never would have considered. For example, he denies his employees the occasional Saturday off to hunt (285) and fires employees only to rehire them at lower salaries. The wife of one of these

employees calls Forest's wife, Peggy, hoping that Peggy can use her influence on Forest. Peggy thinks to herself that Forest will probably take Brian back:

He usually takes them back. For all the firing and rehiring he does, you'd think maybe Forest fires these guys in a rage, then cools off. But it's nothing like rage. It is sometimes to get them to agree to lesser pay. Often less than minimum wage. No benefits. Under the table. And it is something in the cold black look of his defective eyes that toys with these people's lives. Like teasing. Like fun. She is perplexed. How villainous he's become. The Forest she married was not villainous. (314)

But Forest remains a sympathetic character, caught up in a web of deceit and decline, twisting in rage and self-loathing. If he is "shrewd with a dollar" (315), the changes in Egypt eventually justify his caution; on the surface he's the intimidating employer of many and he is also Egypt's road commissioner, but in fact he cannot afford to hire a lawyer (369).

In this sense he might even be read as the novel's most poignant victim: capitalist *and* worker, yet neither fully, Forest suffers the fate of both, illustrating Marx's claim that the capitalist seizes the worker's senses but allows his own to be stripped as well.²⁶ Terry Eagleton explains this process in terms of both Marx and Freud:

At one level, capitalism reduces the bodily fullness of men and women to a "crude and abstract simplicity of need"—abstract because, when sheer material survival is at stake, the sensuous qualities of the objects intended by such needs are not in question. In Freudian parlance, one might say that capitalist society collapses the *drives*, by which the human body transcends its own boundaries, to the *instincts* . . . (Eagleton 199–200—emphasis in original)

Forest's estrangement is symbolized by his name itself. As we have seen, the community of Egypt is closely identified with the land. All of them—including Forest, of course—depend upon the land, especially upon the balanced use of the forest that provides the material for their economic livelihood. Forest's name ironically comments upon his antagonistic relationship to the land and to the community—and therefore, inevitably, to himself. The name also suggests a Dantean dark night of the soul, an allusion most powerful during his solitary, increasingly desperate hunting forays into the woods. His sensual estrangement, meanwhile, is already suggested by his physical limitations. It is no accident that Lloyd, who fights the system as best he can, is more at home in his body. Forest's "defective" eyes (mismatched, like Lloyd's father's)²⁷ are complemented by a defective foot (he cannot put his full weight on both feet due to an accident

at work). His limitations are reflected back to him by his son, Jeff, on a visit from his home in California.

If Forest is not the man that his father was, Jeff extends this decline another generation. The F. D.-Forest-Jeff Johnson decline is one of the most compelling threads of *Merry Men's* second half. As the men of Egypt are forced into increasingly demeaning circumstances, their masculinity suffers (another of the novel's Lawrentian echoes). Much of the cruelty in *Merry Men*, at least among the beleaguered inhabitants of Egypt, occurs during the eruptions of these desperate men. While Jeff had seemingly escaped all of this with his cross country move and more contemporary lifestyle, he found nothing substantial with which to replace it, and he has wound up back at his father's house, broke, divorced, petulant, and self-centered. The power struggle played out by Jeff and his father reaches a climax with the two men one night, each in his bedroom with his wife. Jeff has been making noise and, when Forest knocks on the other side of the wall as a signal for quiet, Jeff bangs back, and a torrent of back-and-forth banging becomes an almost primal outlet for unarticulated frustrations. For a moment the banging stops, and "Forest is as naked as Jeff is, waiting, listening, catching his breath, getting second wind for more" (415). During all this, Forest's father (Jeff's grandfather) is in the same house, a silent reminder of all that they are not. In Forest's attempts to bond with Jeff's young son, Eli, we see glimpses of Forest longing for what he never had. He tells Eli about deer-hunting season, but the memories are actually his father's:

And all the guys, then, Dad says, were all muscled up from all that liftin' and pitchin' and squattin' and climbin' they'd done all summer and it 'twas . . . like you were an army. And it was a high feelin' . . . better than Christmas. It 'twas like a . . . like . . . the peak of your life . . . 'cause you *were* in the peak of your life. You were strong as a horse and had a sharp eye. And that meat on the table proved it. And every fall for as long as you could bring down a deer, it 'twas the peak of your life. (355; ellipses in original)

The boy is understandably embarrassed by his grandfather's uncharacteristic intimacy—it feels to Eli like "one of those birds-'n'-bees talks"—so he can only muster a response sure to accentuate Forest's disconnect: "'Yep, that's neat'" (355). As for Forest, he hunts alone, and the last time we see him hunt is that spectacular failure when he contracts "buck fever," loses his glasses, and comes home empty-handed and disoriented. His alienation and financial straits leave him angry and thwarted, filled with "lust and unrelieved yearning" (354), culminating in his rape of Francine Soule and George DiBias's daughter, Anneka (prefigured when they first meet: while hunting, Forest mistakes her for a deer and almost shoots her) (305).

Anneka's rape by Forest parallels Lloyd's furtive sexual encounters with Sherry, his incapacitated, brain-damaged wife. When Sherry becomes pregnant, the Soule family realizes that Lloyd had been sneaking into her bedroom (she has lived with her parents since the operation). When his secret is discovered, he is savagely beaten and, like Anneka, almost shot (228–31). Earlier, the family had suspected Lloyd enough to tell him that it would be "sick" of him to have sexual relations with Sherry; this word, "sick," disturbs Lloyd, makes him wince at this "new image of himself" (195). After the beating spurs him to get a haircut (his "wild" hair had been a major point of tension between Lloyd and his father), he becomes aroused by Madeline as she works on him: "What he feels at the sight of the bared wagging great breasts in the V of her robe he knows is good and right . . . and that what he feels for Sherry, which was once good and right, is now wrong . . . but there's something uneasy about what he feels now, too . . . as if everything you feel is always going to turn around on you" (234).

But then Lloyd exists on the margins throughout his life. As a child, he was called "Poetry Fatty" (195) by some; this "utterly perceptive" boy could hear trees and was sure he had a calling (61, 68). When he reappears as an adult in chapter 9, he is generally well-liked but seen as an eccentric, a "bum," even "supernatural" (195, 266). Because Lloyd pursues truth, and because this pursuit renders him deviant in the eyes of many, "[his] death is clearer to him than life" (215). When Madeline offhandedly remarks, "Only assholes go to prison," Lloyd replies that "it could happen to anyone, really" (235), and indeed he feels that "every act of love [leads] him there" (241). His first act of anonymous charity is on behalf of Madeline's husband, Danny, who has been rashly fired by Forest Johnson: he leaves real "farm butter" at their doorstep, along with little American flags for the children and a note whose quotation from Byron's *Don Juan* emphasizes home and community.²⁸ Other acts of charity follow, at times with the aid of a like-minded friend (usually the "Reverend" David Moody). But Lloyd is a limited Robin Hood, and his "merry men" are hardly numerous and certainly not consistent. There is "lawlessness and enlightenment in [his] eyes" (113), but the *doxa* of the time and place makes Egypt's residents too exhausted to resist or, worse, complicit in their own exploitation, as when the wise men at Moody's liken using food stamps to stealing, claiming support from phantom passages in the Bible (450). Lloyd stands as a minor-becoming against *doxa* and "major" history-making.²⁹ He rejects the "new image of himself," or, rather, he understands his deviance as relative. While Chute approaches sentimentality with Lloyd's ready literary citations (from Blake, Emerson, Milton, Pope, and others), one might read these quotations as minorizing interventions into major discourse—and, incidentally, as a minorizing use of major literature. These moments bring the largely silent Lloyd as close as he will get to his folkloric counterpart, as played by Erroll Flynn.

MAID MARIAN: You speak treason!

ROBIN HOOD: Fluently. (*Adventures of Robin Hood*)

Lloyd's courageous acts of charity are eventually accompanied by inventive (and equally courageous) acts of vandalism. In the novel's last such act, directed at Gwen, one senses that Lloyd has reached a limit, moving from allegorical representations involving human dummies and coffins into something much closer to realism, and hence to violence. The next move for Lloyd may be to become Robert Drummond, the assassin-militia member of Chute's next novel, *Snow Man*.

Merry Men's very long final chapter, "Triumph of the Beast," dispenses with subtlety altogether. Chute's fury takes over; she makes her political points in increasingly didactic fashion as the novel hurtles to its grim conclusion. Anneka emerges as a central character, and we painfully watch this fiery, perceptive, impatient teenage activist get beaten down by an unforgiving environment (she invents a board game—"The Minimum Wage Game"—which is part Life, part Monopoly, but in this game everyone loses). As a woman, her options are especially limited. In the final chapter she has become a waitress. She marries Carroll Plummer, surely a pragmatic acknowledgement of her dead-end road, yet she valiantly struggles to help Carroll with his depression, which she diagnoses on her own, though the couple can ill-afford the recommended medication. The death of her son due to inadequate treatment—an event drawn from Chute's own experiences³⁰—is a final outrage.

Them!

The name "Egypt," as discussed earlier, simultaneously evokes the Biblical persecution and America's Puritan origins. It also enfolds geographical location, bringing to mind New England and a faraway, foreign land. And does not Carolyn Chute herself embody Jameson's characteristic "third-world intellectual" who "produces both poetry and praxis"? ("Third-world" 323). For Jameson, the meaning of "cultural revolution" turns on the phenomenon of subalternity, and he deftly analyzes cases in modern China and czarist Russia in the essay under discussion, while more recently he has investigated Thai film and contemporary Japanese fiction—perhaps overlooking, like Dickens's Mrs. Jellyby, what transpires closer to home.³¹ He may as well be speaking of Egypt, Maine, when he writes, "[T]he primordial crime of capitalism is [. . .] not so much wage labor as such, or the ravages of the money form, or the remorseless and impersonal rhythms of the market, but rather *this primal displacement of the older forms of collective life from a land now seized and privatized*" (334; my emphasis). We can say that Egypt, Maine, is third world in a minor sense

without ignoring specific differences. In *Merry Men* we see a forced metamorphosis that leads to the need for resistance; the outcome, as always, hinges upon what form the metamorphosis will take. How will it actualize itself? Capital engenders deterritorializations, and *Merry Men* provides a representation of a deterritorialization at its nascent moment. Deterritorializations open onto unknown territory, and in each instance, at every level, we must determine our alliances, for, as Rosi Braidotti's writes, "the emergence of new subjects is always a collective enterprise" (7).

While late capitalism cannot help but produce that which it cannot fully contain, and which therefore threatens to oppose it, it primarily operates as a homogenizing force. This opposition to difference renders it primarily, inherently violent: capitalism generates the new only to kill it by absorption, and to regurgitate it as product. When Deleuze conceptualizes the Other as a possible world, we can see quite clearly that capitalism aligns itself against the Other.³² In this sense, late capitalism is fundamentally perverse; indeed, it is a machine that produces pervers. For Deleuze, "[a]ll perversion is an 'Other-cide,' and an 'altrucide,' and therefore a murder of the possible" (*Logic* 320). The characters in *Merry Men* suffer from having possibilities stripped away from them; because they are violently plunged into unfamiliar, diminished circumstances, they mistakenly sense that the possible itself has been removed. Virtually all of the deviant behavior in the novel can be seen in this light, from destructive deviance (behavior and mental disorientation that oppresses oneself and others, as exemplified by Forest Johnson's downward spiral) to affirmative deviance (Lloyd and Annaka). "The world of the pervert is a world without Others, and thus a world without the possible. The Other is that which renders possible. The perverse world is a world in which the category of the necessary has completely replaced that of the possible" (Deleuze, *Logic* 320). Without belief in the possible—without belief in *this* world—we slide into perversion.

We need, then, a kind of double vision capable of acknowledging the pervasive force of reification and yet also recognizing that all is not lost to us. One sympathizes with Adorno's critique of literary realism—"If the world is to be seen *through*, it can no longer be looked at"—yet ultimately his objection rests upon a duality that a more immanent view of the world might challenge (*Notes* 1: 128). At its best, the glory of literary realism lies in its insistence upon such an immanent view.

Consider a moment from the half-way point in *Merry Men*: Lloyd Barrington sits alone at the kitchen table, in the dark, mulling over the past and anxious about the future, turning over all of the history he learned at school and trying to apply it to the condition of Egypt. We are about to take our leave of Lloyd, though we don't know it yet; almost two hundred pages will go by before we see him again. In the meantime, he will be alluded to and spoken about by others, more force than actual presence. As

he sits and ponders, Lloyd eats an orange, and he “arranges the peelings and seeds in a meticulous circular design on the painted wooden table” (263). After he finishes the orange, there remains “a pattern of seeds and peels in the dark [and] the glory of its odor that resembles nothing else.” As he thinks, he “rassles” loose the “orange pulp caught in his back teeth” (264). It is a lovely, tender, intimate scene, a rare moment of stillness in the novel, and it provides for readers a concrete, lived-in encounter that implicitly rejects Adorno’s absolute denial of unmediated experience.

Still, if it is to represent adequately the perverting power of the political major, literary realism must understand that “villains” are themselves produced by impersonal forces. To this end Chute avoids, for example, Balzac’s reductive trafficking in villains; Adorno rightly complains that Balzac “conflate[s] those who present the bill with monsters” (*Notes* 1: 133). The “beast” that is capitalism resembles nothing so much as the impersonal legal web that dominates *Bleak House* (it can hardly be a coincidence that one of Peggy Johnson’s horses is named Bleak House [243]). As both artist and activist, Chute well understands that axiomatic capitalism reconfigures villainy in impersonal terms. Late in the novel, Lloyd reflects that he

[...] can never really get to *them*. Not ever. Even just to play a dazzling clever trick. And therefore, he will never ever be able to get back from *them* what they have taken. There is no touching *them*. You can’t even know *them*. There would be ways you could know one or two of these guys. But *each* one of them is not the same as *them*. Because *THEM* is the whole, the corporate conscienceless IT. And IT is the true evil. (682)

The language brings to mind the world of monster movies—such as the murderous, A-bomb-generated giant ants of *Them!* (1954)—but, paradoxically, this “enemy” is physically unlocatable, ontologically incorporeal, and therefore more horrifying. Fittingly, *Merry Men* ends with the disconsolate Anneka Plummer attempting to numb herself with a television showing of *Godzilla*. The unsubtle irony adheres to the last chapter’s didacticism, and one might protest that, at such moments, Chute’s activism trumps her artistry. Certainly her activism—still brave, still relevant—has encouraged approaches to her work that focus on Chute as “personality,” (as noted at the beginning of this essay, this “product” seems well past its expiration date). Yet we have *Merry Men* itself, this challenging and energetic novel that suggests new possibilities for contemporary *literature engagée* and for art’s role in the production of new subject groups.

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NOTES

1. See the paperback editions of Chute's novels for typical blurbs. The paperback edition of *Letourneau's Used Auto Parts*, for example, has a back cover chorus on behalf of *Beans* and *Auto Parts*, including Doris Grumbach (who calls *Beans* "powerful American-Gothic stuff"), Margo Jefferson of *Vogue* (who invokes the "grotesque" in likening Chute to Diane Arbus), the *Village Voice* (Faulkner), and so on. Paperback editions of subsequent novels proceed along similar lines. See also Renny Christopher's "Lower-Class Voices and the Establishment: The Reception of Carolyn Chute." Christopher covers Chute's first two novels.

2. I distinguish here between *liberal*, *left-wing*, and *radical*. While overlap exists in many specific cases, these three terms—and especially the latter two—are routinely collapsed into one category in so much of our public discourse, thus proving my point about the lack of a viable left-wing, let alone radical, presence in mainstream American culture.

3. An automobile accident (also affecting her husband) in 2005 and other health problems since have exacerbated her financial woes (see Lannin and Kerr). *The School at Heart's Content Road* had been the working title of a 2,600-page novel based on The 2nd Maine Militia. Chute revised and divided the novel into five parts, the first of which was published with the title of the work as originally conceived. Writing for *The New York Times*, Stacey D'Erasmus judged the novel "beautiful . . . polemical . . . [and] messy" (D'Erasmus). In a review for *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, I wrote, "In terms of craft alone, this is certainly Chute's best book to date" (Miller).

4. To date, I count six academic articles on Chute; only two of these (see Gremore and Adams) are single-author interpretations. Carole Taylor (a professor of English at Bates College in Maine who has invited Chute to speak to her creative writing seminar students) is working on a collection of essays on Chute's work (see Lannin).

5. The gap between rich and poor in the U.S.—already at record levels by the time *Merry Men* was published—keeps growing. Currently, nearly 20 percent of American children under five live below the poverty line, while it is projected that three-quarters of all Americans between the ages of 20 and 75 will spend at least a year in poverty (see Rank 25–28; 92–95). Works by Glasmeier, Rank, and Shieler provide a good representation of recent poverty knowledge scholarship. Such evidence tragically illustrates "the indifference of each individual life that is the direction of history . . . [in this] world whose law is universal individual profit" (Adorno, *Negative* 362).

6. See, for example, Clara Weatherwax's sentimental, heavily schematic 1935 novel, *Marching, Marching!*, about striking lumber workers in the Pacific Northwest.

7. See Bercovitch, "The Puritan Vision of the New World," to which this paragraph is indebted.

8. The relevant text here, as discussed by Bercovitch, is Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*. Bercovitch argues that mainstream Puritanism survived in significant part by resisting spiritual purists like Mather and absorbing a "corporate ideal [that] resolved ambiguities" (40), whereas alternative visions of America, from Mather and others, provided the ground for Emerson and his heirs.

9. The prologue begins with an epigraph from Felicia Dorothea Hemans's "The Landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in New England": "The breaking waves dash'd high / On a stern and rock-bound coast, / And the woods against a stormy sky / Their giant branches toss'd" (xiii).

10. Quoted in "Chute as in Chickadee."

11. See Lardner for a good overview of corporate trends in downsizing and outsourcing. Lardner's discussion—which includes a survey of recent books on the subject—focuses on present times as shaped by business trends that gathered momentum in the years in which the second half of *Merry Men* takes place. Now these trends are so established that, for instance, the new CEO of Stanley Works can remark with casual fecklessness, "Layoffs and plant closings are not such a rare event anymore that one generally makes a big deal of them" (quoted in Lardner 62).

12. That is, reification, defined by Georg Lukács as "a relation between people [that] takes on the character of a thing, and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity'" (83).

13. See Gregory Bateson, *Steps To an Ecology of Mind*. The phrase comes from a speech given by Bateson entitled "Form, Substance, and Difference." "I now localize [continues Bateson] something which I am calling 'Mind' immanent in the large biological system—the ecosystem. Or, if I draw the system boundaries at a different level, then mind is immanent in the total evolutionary structure. If this identity between mental and evolutionary units is broadly right, then we face a number of shifts in our thinking" (466). Bateson goes on to critique various disciplinary conceptions of the mind: "It is the attempt to *separate* intellect from emotion that is monstrous, and I suggest that it is equally monstrous—and dangerous—to attempt to separate the external mind from the internal. Or to separate mind from body" (470).

14. I repeat my objection, however, that what Jameson terms "isolated" is in fact already part of a collectivity—real and virtual assemblages that cut across a given collectivity. The quote from Deleuze and Guattari comes from their book, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (18).

15. I suggest that Deleuze's concept of "the minor" may be seen as the fulcrum of his philosophy in its practical (and hence political) mode. While the term itself was introduced with Guattari, the concept is implicitly present at least since Deleuze's 1962 book, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. In its extra-linguistic mode, the minor may be understood within the framework of Deleuze's ontology, which can be seen as an idiosyncratic yet consistent version of process philosophy.

16. Here, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the minor coincides with the racial and ethnic sense of *minority*. It is important to note, however, that the minor is determined by relations rather than by fixed identity.

17. Chute's Dedication in full: "Please let me honor here all the farmers who still work the land themselves, who are not agribusinessmen or agribusinesswomen, but *farmers*, who know family and community interdependence . . . America's last vestiges of freedom. And honor to all those millions who were born to be farmers, as they have been for thousands of years, but because of modern 'education,' Big Business and Mechanization they cannot be and will never know their true gift but instead are herded into welfare lines, prisons, or the slavery of Big Business . . . may they find it—the gift—in another life, another world" (emphasis and ellipses in original).

18. Originally in *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

19. Originally in Marx's preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.

20. For Deleuze and Guattari on the axiomatic of capitalism, see *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Volume Two*, especially chapter 13, "7000 B.C.: Apparatus of Capture" (424–73).

21. Like Matthew Arnold, Deleuze considers what role art may have in a society stripped of belief; but, as Deleuze explains in a conversation with Antonio Negri, it is belief in *this* world that we need: "What we lack most is a belief in the world, we've quite lost the world, it's been taken from us. If you believe in the world you precipitate events, however inconspicuous, that elude control, you engender new space-times . . ." (*Negotiations* 176).

22. Chute also employs neologisms and slang for this purpose.

23. Here I'm using "irreality" in a phenomenological-Marxist sense, as that which arises when the distinction between what is seen (reality) and what is imagined (unreality) is erased or effectively ceases to matter.

24. Gwen Doyle (née Curry), whose bourgeois lifestyle contrasts with these manual laborers, meets with a psychiatrist who afterward complements her on her "hard work" throughout the session ("Teamwork, he calls it" [273]). In the context of the novel, such references to work seem ridiculous, even insulting.

25. See "Interview with Carolyn Chute," newdemocracyworld.org/chute.htm.

26. See *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, especially section 4 of "Private Property and Communism" (Marx and Engels 81–91).

27. Heterochromia, most likely.

28. "'Tis sweet to hear the watch-dog's honest bark Bay deep-mouth'd welcome as we draw near home; 'Tis sweet to know there is an eye will mark Our coming, and look brighter when we came" (241; no line breaks in the original).

29. For a less politically loaded example of the opposition between an immanent orientation ("belief in *this* world"—see note 17) and "major" constructions of history, refer to Gwen's struggle to remember her recently deceased father, who she sees "fading" again due to others' sanitizing acts of memory.

30. Chute became pregnant with her first child early in her marriage, but her son—named Reuben—was born dead. She blamed his being stillborn on her lack of health insurance: the hospital would not admit her during early labor even though she had a high fever and the baby was a month overdue. The tragedy radicalized Chute and led her to devote even more time to writing. This event helps to explain why, for Chute, writing and "radical" politics have always been interlocking activities. See Lannin.

31. See, for example, Frederic Jameson, "Pseudo-Couples," a review of Kenzaburo Oe's doomsday-cult novel, *Somersault*, which seems to engage with the idea of the novel more than the novel itself. I am not, of course, suggesting that Jameson's eclecticism is anything less than admirable, but I wonder if he too easily segregates his theoretical work from his more topical political interventions.

32. "I think I've found a concept of the Other, by defining it as neither an object nor a subject (an other subject) but the expression of a possible world" (*Negotiations* 147).

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