Mediations

Journal of the Marxist Literary Group

Volume 28, Number 1, Fall 2014 • **Time and the Labor of the Negative**

Brent Ryan Bellamy. "Figuring Terminal Crisis in Steven Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming*." *Mediations* 28.1 (Fall 2014) 19-34. www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/figuring-terminal-crisis.

Figuring Terminal Crisis in Steven Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming*

Brent Ryan Bellamy

> Variations in a conflict that remains constant...can only be glimpsed *at the level of the cycle*: individual episodes tend, if anything, to conceal it and only the abstract pattern reveals the true nature of the historical process.[1]

> The catastrophe for which we wait is not something of the future, but is merely the continuation of the present along its execrable trend.[2]

This paper tracks a problem that emerges from within a contemporary post-apocalyptic novel, though is certainly not restricted to it.[3] The formal limit to imagining a post-catastrophic future remains a historical one: how can a novel bent on representing an *after*, bent on imagining the movement of history as such, do so "in an age," as Fredric Jameson once put it, "that has forgotten to think historically in the first place."[4] Could it be that historicity, that sense of the present as subject to historical change, is once more returning in the contemporary moment?[5] Indeed, Jameson, Perry Anderson, Lauren Berlant, and Franco Moretti have, in their own ways, all returned of late to the historical novel as a fundamental category of realism with continuing import to the present.[6] For Jameson, realism always entails a negotiation between emergence and dissolution (with George Eliot's *Middlemarch* [1874] as a masterful example of such a dialogue). Anderson, in *The London Review of Books*, identifies the unevenness of cultural forms, locating, for example, a wave of historical novels in Latin America following Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) that catalogue an experience of defeat, while a set of U.S. historical novels written and released during this time had to do with race and empire.[7] Berlant traces the dimensions of the historical novel's "capacity to sense historical experience," through an affective brush with the present.[8] Turning his sights to the past, Moretti's *The Bourgeois* (2013) demonstrates the efficacy of his distant reading and dialectically posits that "the more

indispensable realism is, the more unthinkable it becomes."[9] In each account, form's relation to history remains indispensable. Published just after the 2007-2008 financial upheaval, in the midst of these studied returns to realism, Steven Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming* (2010), struggles to represent the present historically and, in doing so, strikes at the very limits of its own formal capacities as a post-apocalyptic novel, but, despite its realist formal innovation it still suffers from a host of ideological setbacks precisely because it is a post-apocalyptic novel.[10] In light of its innovations and limits, here I will test a formal reading of Amsterdam's novel against descriptions of the historical novel in order to elaborate connections between form, history, and crisis today.

Turning my own sights to the past, the emergence of the post-apocalyptic novel in England followed on the heels of both the science fiction novel and the historical novel. Published just four years after Scott's *Waverley* (1814) and often credited as the first science fiction novel, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) was also published less than a decade earlier than her sole survivor story *The Last Man* (1826). Nearer the end of the century and also credited as the first science fiction novel, H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) threatens the Time Traveller's Victorian present with a bleak and post-apocalyptic future, although the time machine itself, and not the apocalyptic moment, is the conceit of the narrative. Wells's novel is paralleled, and indeed preceded by, Ignatius Donnelly's populist, post-apocalyptic novel *Caesar's Column* (1890), which also dates to the *fin de siècle*. In his novel Donnelly juxtaposes the brutalities of urban industrial capitalism against the rural background of the protagonist, Gabriel Weltstein. The climax of the novel arrives as a working-class revolt overthrows the oligarchic dictatorship of the United States: the infamous, titular column is erected, built out of human bodies surfaced over with concrete. One critic describes the power of this symbol as associative:

> A reader contemporary with Donnelly would have thought of Atlanta and Richmond; perhaps of Haymarket Square; certainly of the Paris Commune. An American reader today might think of Coventry or Dresden, of the German death camps; and then thanks to the curious and ghastly coincidence of visual imagery, he would come to the column of white cloud that towered over Hiroshima. But clearly the symbol has a life of its own; it demands the associations.[11]

Readers of the novel today, too, might think of the billows of smoke from Kuwaiti oil fields lit on fire by retreating Iraqi troops, and certainly of images of the collapse of the World Trade Center Buildings in 2001. *Caesar's Column* shows that the post-apocalyptic novel has a long history in the United States and can be cross-referenced with both science fictional writing and events in the present, even if it predates the

present by well over a century. Certainly, too, Donnelly's novel makes a space for the post-apocalyptic novel to engage and consider political, social, and economic crises and their aftermath; though, the novel also emphasizes problems with reading post-apocalyptic novels as allegories for any crisis in particular. If the column of Donnelly's novel reveals anything about the genre it is the appearance of absolute exchangeability of its tropes, images, and landscapes for any given crisis, fashionable and horrific, of the present.

In "Future City" Jameson offers a way we might characterize the post-apocalyptic novel after anonymously quoting himself,

> Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world. [...] But I think it would be better to characterize all this in terms of History, a History that we cannot imagine except as ending, and whose future seems to be nothing but a monotonous repetition of what is already here.[12]

The future as "nothing by but a monotonous repetition of what is already here" seems to suitably describe the U.S. post-apocalyptic novel, which tend to depict the pre-apocalyptic past as a perpetual and restorable entity. These novels suggest that the same may hold true in the real world and that the shape of the present, and of previous presents, lie ready for just such a reactivation. In so doing, they take part in a larger discursive and ideological struggle over the relationship between period, form, and politics. Post-apocalyptic novels imaginatively work through historical and social contradictions, yet they stage this process within a significantly different framework. They use the conceit of the post-apocalypse as a way of inventing grand narratives after the so-called end of grand narratives, offering beginnings after the so-called end of history, and shoring up U.S. hegemony in the age of its decline.

Peak oil, environmental catastrophe, global epidemics, and massive unemployment index the various fictional worlds described by other post-apocalyptic films and novels. But in Amsterdam's novel we do not see these things head on; we do not witness disaster unfolding from a god's-eye view or through a large cast of characters as is so often the case in recent apocalyptic forms. A good example of the formal impulse to figure catastrophe from the outside is the flashy apocalyptic cinematography in Roland Emmerich's *2012* (2009). The narrative of *2012* seems to be an excuse to screen a series of daring escapes — these sequences happen at least three times in the film — in which a plane takes off from a crumbling runway, the very ground collapsing beneath it as it dodges flying debris, soaring out of the latest danger zone. While the post-apocalyptic novel does tend to limit this type of indulgence, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) offers a sense of the total devastation wreaked by the apocalyptic event:

"The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions."[13] Though the formal style of McCarthy's novel remains sparse, it contributes to a clear depiction of the post-apocalyptic United States — completed by long stretches of highway littered with broken down cars, roaming bands of cannibals, and empty cities with their coffers of food and medicine picked clean. Yet another narrative perspective stands separated from the Emmerich god's-eye-view and Amsterdam's close perspective: this mode is what I call the "global cast of characters apocalypse," where the event is mapped through a number of characters, none much more central to the plot than the others, as in Max Brooks's *World War Z* (2006) or a film like Steven Soderberg's *Contagion* (2011). Contrary to *2012* and *World War Z*, Amsterdam's narrator feels out different aspects of his world from the ground, while he is working to empty houses during the rainy season or acting as a guide for the chronically ill. *Things We Didn't See Coming* thus remains a post-apocalyptic novel even as it moves beyond the formal imperative to reveal, in massive, all-too-direct detail.

Georg Lukács, in his summary of Sir Walter Scott's historical novels, uncannily discloses the manner in which I read *Things We Didn't See Coming*:

> [Scott] presents history as a series of great crises. His presentation of historical development…is of an uninterrupted series of such revolutionary crises. Thus if Scott's main tendency in all of his novels …is to represent and defend progress, then this progress is for him always a process full of contradictions, the driving force and material basis of which is the living contradictions between conflicting forces, the antagonisms of classes and nations.[14]

For Lukács, the Scottian historical novel represents and then resolves or defers these historical antagonisms through two characters: first "the middle way hero" who has an equal stake or personal investment in each of the opposing camps and, because of this standpoint, plausibly mediates the social totality of the novel; *and* second "the world historical individual" who remains at a remove from the nitty-gritty business of the former, but at a crucial moment acts as the motor of historical change by causing history to happen, thereby resolving said antagonisms. The historical novel, then, formally registers the movement of history through the crises generated by class antagonisms — in the case of Scott's novels, the crisis was the aftermath of the French Revolution — in a way that philosophical thought had not yet managed to do.[15]

While Lukács treated Scott's novels as a working-through of how historical change took place in the transition from the fall of the aristocracy to rise of the bourgeoisie in France and a response to the economic change of the Industrial Revolution in England, I read Amsterdam's novel as a response to mounting contemporary crisis: the terminal crisis of U.S. hegemony and capital itself.[16] This crisis appears symptomatically, on a political register, as the withering of concessions to the public from the United States

under sweeping privatization (e.g., healthcare, education, women's reproductive rights, and so on) and, on an economic register, as the fallout of financial solutions to material problems (e.g., capital's inability to combine increasing amounts of surplus capital with similarly bulking populations of surplus laborers), which have both been thoroughly critiqued by Giovanni Arrighi and David Harvey among others.[17] Further, groups like Wertkritik, Théorie Communiste, and Endnotes describe a "secular crisis" that emerges from within the crises of capitalist accumulation, defining it as a "*crisis of the reproduction of the capital-labour relation itself*."[18] If, as Lukács argues, the historical novel creates a narrative place for bourgeois subjectivity after the French Revolution, then I read *Things We Didn't See Coming* as an attempt to reconcile a loss of any such place for the bourgeois subject at the end of the welfare state. Amsterdam's novel further enables this interpretation in the way that it formally registers the category of crisis, which marks not only an inability to imagine an egalitarian future, but also highlights a fundamental question for the left: does capital need to narrate its own future?[19]

Things We Didn't See Coming follows an unnamed protagonist through nine vignettes, each with its own setting, plot, tone, and signs of the apocalypse. The novel begins with "What We Know Now" on New Year's Eve 1999, with the narrator and his parents preparing to leave the city to avoid the impending Y2K disaster; this places the novel at a temporal remove from the present and along a timeline roughly corresponding to our own. While it is never explicit about what disaster takes place, as the plot progresses it becomes clear that some form of environmental devastation has occurred — if not as a result of Y2K (a false alarm that still portends problems to come), then from some similar demand of infrastructure and economy that humanity is eventually unable to manage. Throughout each vignette, the narrator remains the only consistent feature of the novel, while other characters, places, and events fade in and out of significance. From an expedition on a horse bred to withstand an exceptionally harsh rainy season in "Dry Land" to a struggle for survival with his sometimes partner Margo in the badlands during a drought in "Cake Walk," the circumstances of the narrator and those around him exist in a state of flux. Organized in this way, the novel registers a tension between the narrator and his disparate and changing surroundings. The narrative context changes so drastically in each vignette, and there is no sustaining system of meaning — no figured city with its dense architectural codes, no global connections knitting the world together, no set of social relations with any consistency *even on the level of character* that could provide the narrator with purpose or motivation other than individual survival.

Each vignette has its own crisis of destruction and redemption, and signifies in its own small way that something has passed away, while what replaces it always remains unclear. The perceived Y2K disaster in the opening vignette finds the family traveling out to the countryside to spend the evening with the mother's parents. However, it ends not with an insistence that this time of crisis requires that the family

pull together, but with the father and son alone in the woods withdrawn from the scene of the unrepresented event.[20] We are given some clues as to what happens after Y2K at the start of the next vignette, but these do not depict the apocalypse in any direct or unmediated way. In this way, each vignette marks a shift where one set of expectations passes away and is replaced by another: the novel acknowledges that a complete representation of catastrophe remains at a remove, mediated through the experience of the narrator.

This emphasis on the narrator reveals that his is an individual and a social crisis, that is, it is a crisis of the contradictory bourgeois subject negotiating the future of the individual at the cost of the future of the collective. Here, the lack of consistent social relations, in the form of the missing city or lack of consistent nameable secondary or minor characters, indexes another foreclosure of the possibility for historical change à la Lukács: the world historical figure could not emerge even if it was structurally possible to know what comes next, because there is no way to aesthetically or epistemologically ascertain the system, code, or law that could ground the subject's experience. Despite this limit, the novel struggles to mediate the complex, indirect relation between individual and social totality. *Things We Didn't See Coming* maintains a narrative apparatus related yet distinct from the historical novel: the social totality is mediated by a focalizing character, which makes noticeable the absence of the world-historical individual. What was a structural possibility for Scott precisely because he knew what historically came next becomes impossible for Amsterdam, or for fiction that attempts to think the contemporary in the form of a historical novel, because one cannot possibly know what is to come. What *Things We Didn't See Coming* accomplishes is a realistic narrative exploration of the world in which the absolutely new, unrepresented event is a smoke-and-mirrors show, a displacement of the current historical impasse onto a post-apocalyptic landscape that, crucially, cannot then be resolved by the daring play of any individual, world-historical or not. This accomplishment of the novel places it in line with what Jameson calls "characteristic SF," which "does not seriously attempt to imagine the 'real' future of our social system"; instead, "its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come."[21] My continued engagement will focus on whether or not *Things We Didn't See Coming* offers an apprehension of the present as history.

The coincident absence of the world historical individual and the nameable apocalyptic event is only registered across the shifting landscape of the vignettes through so many small signs of the end; even parsing together the end of oil, massive environmental changes, and the stark division between city and country does not fully map out the source of destruction in the changing world. In each case, the absent process itself — the apocalypse — pushes the plot not towards the next step in a narrative sequence, but replaces one crisis — intense rains and flooding — with another — groups of displaced refugees. In each instance the narrator comes to terms

with the new situation, only to be cast out once more into a new crisis. For instance, in “Predisposed,” his medical history is included, with one standout, cryptic detail: “*Male Caucasian 36 years, Exposure within North America: Duration 36 years (?other exposures unknown)*.”[22] One could think of *Things We Didn’t See Coming* as a sort of narrative reflection on Walter Benjamin’s musings about Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus* — the narrator sees the debris and detritus of modernity but cannot locate its source or begin to untangle the relationships between the varied objects in the heap. Without the world-historical individual waiting in the wings to resolve the contradictions of the overdetermined crises of the present, all the middle-way hero can do is bear witness.

In a patently formalistic, mediated way, Amsterdam’s novel preserves a desire to reveal the totality. During their escape from the city on New Year’s Eve, the young narrator’s father attempts to explain what is happening: “The world is large and complicated, with too many parts relying on other parts and they all octopus out.”[23] This cephalopodan image, interestingly, prompts the narrator to imagine things from the Emmerich perspective,

> I wish I was on a plane over everything. We’d be flying west, going through all the New Year’s Eves, looking down just as they happen. I’d have to stay awake for twenty-four hours of night-time, but I’d be looking out the little window and watching ripples of fireworks below, each wave going off under us as we fly over it.[24]

The boy’s romantic relation to celebrations around the whole world is trumped later in the vignette, as his father fills in the grim details of his totalizing metaphor: “In your time there’ll be breakdowns that can’t be fixed. There will be more diseases that can’t be fixed. Water will be as valuable as oil. And you’ll be stuck taking care of a fat generation of useless parents”; he continues:

> [T]he future is a hospital, packed with sick people, packed with hurt people, people on stretchers in the halls, and suddenly the lights go out, the water shuts off, and you know in your heart that they’re never coming back on. That’s the future, my friend.[25]

This moment in the first vignette takes the widest view of the end: what passes away here is the future itself. The present is figured in terms not dissimilar to Eric Cazdyn’s description of a new chronic temporality, visible in palliative care, future markets investment, oil-bound cultural habits, and so on, where the future as change or difference is cut off in allegiance to the present.[26] The rest of the novel is spent catching up with this fact.

Indeed, by the final vignette, “Best Medicine,” a fully privatized health system

appears as the narrator becomes a sightseeing guide for the terminally ill. He calls them the "last-hurrah set, folks with at least two primary cancers" and says that "the money [he's] taking home is criminal."[27] The masses of refugees pictured earlier in the novel conspicuously vanish in a return of the personal situation from the first vignette. The narrator is convinced by his tour group to change their plans and leads a visit to see his father who is now an alternative healer living off the land in some backwater region. This return indexes the significance of the father-son relation to the novel, which now seems to function as a compass or a map for the narrator's relation to the social. Despite the novel's insistence that it has some purchase or insight available to it, the only thing it seems to offer is a false promise of futurity and care that eclipses both the maternal relation of care and social reproduction within the family and the chance of creating a new social form capable of collectively shaping a viable, equal future outside of the family.

In a section of *Cruel Optimism* titled "Aesthetic Histories of the Present," Berlant describes the movement of figures "across spaces, quickly and lingeringly, reflectively and in the flesh, projecting and sensing atmospheres and impacts to which they have to catch up and respond" and, in some sense, she is also describing the doubled movement of Amsterdam's narrator and reader.[28] Berlant's descriptions of affective attachment are mirrored by Amsterdam's narrator when, in "Uses for Vinegar," while working for a government relocation agency, he muses that these people cannot think beyond the immediate crisis, "they're laughing about their dumb luck for surviving. But they have this newborn worry in their faces. They may not know it yet: It's permanent."[29] Here, some survivors act on the naive belief that the current crisis is the only crisis, whether it's a fire, a flood, or a drought; the thinking seems to go, once one crisis is resolved those facing it will be able to start over with daily life fully intact. The narrator explains this as he talks about government Grief programs that sprang up to help refugees: "The thought is nice: You'll have a clean slate, a world of opportunity, you'll never look back."[30] But he sees through this short-sighted version of survival to a time when survival becomes, in his words, "permanent." He continues, "nothing really heals because, if you lose everything once, running becomes part of you."[31] Berlant transcodes these behaviors: for those "occupying the long middle of a crisis, their ambitious pursuit of an understanding of the presenting situation produces *a personal, political, and aesthetic ambit that pushes the ongoing event into something that has not found its genre*."[32] The narrator reveals a nuanced understanding of crisis as an event that seems to be consistently replaced by newer crises, which, in turn, inform a future that is punctuated only by ruin: a state of disaster becoming permanent.

"Uses for Vinegar" critically splits and fractures perceivable futures into three acts of crisis that sequentially upstage one another. First, the refugees have their focus on an *immediate* crisis; second, the narrator emphasizes survival through *a long wave* of crises, like Scott's fiction; and finally there is *the future "real,"* a crisis

the novel cannot represent. This third crisis can only be detected through its very unrepresentability. In words hauntingly similar to Amsterdam's "permanent crisis" and Berlant's "understanding of the presenting situation," Benanav describes the "permanent crisis of working life":

> For Marx, the fundamental crisis tendency of the capitalist mode of production was not limited in its scope to periodic downturns in economic activity. It revealed itself most forcefully in a permanent crisis of working life. The *differentia specifica* of capitalist "economic" crises — that people starve in spite of good harvests, and means of production lie idle in spite of a need for their products — is merely one moment of this larger crisis — the constant reproduction of a scarcity of jobs in the midst of an abundance of goods.[33]

In light of this description, the novel's story, in a narratological sense, generated within and structured by the vignettes, begins to come together, rather than octopus out. Recall Moretti's comment from the epigraph: "Variations in a conflict that remains constant...can only be glimpsed *at the level of the cycle*: individual episodes tend, if anything, to conceal it, and only the abstract pattern reveals the true nature of the historical process."[34] The novel's cycle of vignettes form the basis for a greater understanding of the diegetic story world and of crisis more generally. Though the novel formally depicts it, permanent crisis is the limit the narrator cannot see beyond.

The novel recognizes this impasse on the level of content. During a car ride to the country in "The Forest for the Trees," the narrator watches *Robocop* (Paul Verhoeven, 1987) with his sometimes-partner Margo. He muses,

> the sappy story between the cops is decent, but the futuristic stuff is interesting because they get it all so wrong. Robotics were promising and crime was grim so they made a movie about it. But then the violent crime resolved (or was absorbed into the food distribution problem), and robotics fizzled. Next? You think you're worried about the right thing and then you're sideswiped. The seasons change, as Margo likes to say, with a tone of darkness added on.[35]

In this passage the narrator places *Robocop* in the context of an impasse — crime — and a promise — robotics, significantly acknowledging that the crime problem was deferred rather than resolved. In fact, *Robocop* allegorizes an impasse between the state and the corporation emphasizing that a privatized police force (like a privatized military) requires and incentivizes, rather than prevents or brings to justice, violent crime, which relates to the problem of privatized healthcare and terminal illness — why cure something when you can treat it indefinitely?[36] Even in this later vignette,

the narrator cannot seem to see beyond the second stage of crisis, crisis becoming permanent.

Despite the narrator, the novel ties the crises of each vignette together on the level of form, without making their connection clear on the level of content — these are not so many unrelated symptoms, so many fragmentary effects, but are instead part and parcel of a near-unrepresentable system. With this realization the separate vignettes rearrange themselves before our eyes, falling under the rubric of permanent crisis, a dialectical move from separate fragments to formal totality, all mediated by the Lukácsian "middle hero" and his experience of the cycle of historical crises. But this is the place where the novel, on the formal level of the vignette, pushes up against its own representational limit: it only depicts crises as a series or a cycle, which remains the novel's central, one might even say structuring, crisis. The uncertainty of progress marks another major divergence from Scott's novels, which could figure crisis as a long wave surging towards a brighter future. For Amsterdam, however, there is no guaranteeing this future. *Things We Didn't See Coming* struggles to work through this problematic, but in the very momentum of its vignettes and its generic resonance with Scott's historical novels it encounters its own crisis: the figure that this novel cannot represent beyond the mere shadow of its possibility is the apocalyptic event itself, a terminal crisis.

Despite the apparent interchangeability of the vignettes and the absence of a nameable or figurable apocalyptic event, the novel's emplotment still proceeds in chronological order. Rather than starting at the end of the story *and at the end of the world* it begins with what one must assume is the apocalyptic event that then proceeds to structure the narrative. This emplotment seems to insist on the movement of history and at the same time puzzles over the ability of the individual to find his or her place in historical change. One way to render the work of the novel on a different narrative register is to try and place the absences from its story: on the level of the family, the absent mother, and on the level of form, the event, or, if we are still reading it against the historical novel, the world-historical figure. Today both figures have been socialized, collectivized, and not in the progressive sense of wages for housework or the social safety net: the social totality today, made up as it is by an increasing number of unemployed laborers and agents of social reproduction, daily remake the structures of domination and exploitation that keep capital accumulating and seem to foreclose the movement of history.

The decline of the U.S. hegemony and the novel's own formal limits entail these two, deeply related, absent processes — the general law of capitalist accumulation and the social reproduction of the capital-labor relation. A formal contradiction surfaces in the novel where it appears as though capitalist life continues as normal but without the attendant masses of the destitute, refugees, or the unemployed, which is not to say that a "good" novel would include surplus populations in its representational scheme. Rather, this absence becomes notable because *Things We Didn't See Coming*

so indulgently imagines individual survival. The fantasy here is that this carrying on does not require the labor of others, either as the labor of the production and circulation of commodities or as the invisible care of social reproduction.[37] These two problematics are generated within the capital-labor relation and figure the two steadily increasing groups that remain unfigured in Amsterdam's novel: first, those absolutely superfluous to the capitalist mode of production; and, second, a vast population of mostly women who once had to carry out the task of reproducing living labor, but now shoulder the weight of maintaining this population that appears to be "outside" of capital altogether.[38]

The absence of any figuration of social reproduction in the novel betrays the narrator's fantasy that he can survive by scavenging, slowly working his way back into a position of stability. What the novel highlights, precisely by not emphasizing it, is that the group to bear the brunt of the neoliberal attack on hospitals, schools, and social programs is the women who now find the work of social reproduction intensified. Maya Andrea Gonzalez argues that the actions that serve to replenish both the constitution and the members of the laboring class — from clothing, cleaning, and nourishing to bearing children — are all bound up in the production of capital. Gonzalez further explains:

> In capitalism, the lives of the surplus producers are *constitutively split* between the public production of a surplus and the private reproduction of the producers themselves. The workers...continue to exist only if they take care of their own upkeep. If wages are too low, or if their services are no longer needed, workers are "free" to survive by other means (as long as those means are legal). [...] Here is the essence of the capital-labor relation. What the workers earn for socially performed production in the public realm, they must spend in order to reproduce themselves domestically in their own private sphere.[39]

As Gonzalez points out above, and as Silvia Federici does elsewhere, there are few legal fallbacks for women in this position. Attention to social reproduction reveals that cooperation may be labor's free gift to capital, but this cooperation is daily reinvigorated, at no cost to capital, by the caregivers in the home — a position without the standard temporal limits of the working day ("there is always more dust"). Though its title acts as a symptom of its form, *Things We Didn't See Coming* can only depict the impasses of its own structuring crisis, apocalyptic or terminal, through their effects.

Weaving together the shedding of labor, growth of the unemployed, and the absence of maternal care and reproduction reveals a third absence in Amsterdam's novel: the novel repeatedly attempts to figure terminal crisis, but, after the nine vignettes, the novel brings nothing to term. That is, the cycle of crisis in the vignette form, not unlike the cycle Lukács described in Scott's historical fiction, formally

circles the near impossible formal project of representing an absolute break, a total rupture, a terminal crisis. Counter to the synchronic sense of disaster becoming permanent that the novel imagines, this terminal crisis could only be a diachronic, temporal break. In other words, it could only be that longed-for actual apocalyptic event that so rarely arrives in novels of this kind. So, what we are left with at the end of the novel is, perhaps, what Nicholas Brown describes as the end of literature, where the contradiction inherent in literature is rendered graspable precisely because it cannot be grasped; put another way, the impasse that enables Amsterdam's novel is at one and the same time its own ending.[40]

But here I must ask, the end of *which* literature and *which* literary project? Surely the inability of this particular U.S. novel to figure its object, as I am suggesting above, should not be read as a universal claim about literature or the novel form as such. So, then, in this new national context, what *Things We Didn't See Coming* captures is a crisis of the center struggling yet unable to represent its own decline: that is, a crisis at the center, not in spite of but because of itself, makes this crisis unrepresentable.[41] Thus, we could think of the world depicted by Amsterdam in Jameson's terms as the future by disruption: "The Utopian form itself is the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system. But it asserts this by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things will be like after the break."[42] This does seem to help form an understanding of the novel as a sort of success by failure, in the Jamesonian sense of offering a utopian glimpse that the future could be different, precisely by tracing the limits of its imaginative capacities. Thus, material and social crisis become represented and formalized in the vignette cycle in *Things We Didn't See Coming*. Rather than offer a narrative solution, "what things will be like after the break," Amsterdam's work traces the limits of its narrator's ontological position: what would once simply be known as the bourgeois subject, can now be identified as the normative, masculine subject still clinging to a dying middle class. The outline of these limits maps the problematic of terminal crisis in such a way that confirms the near impossibility, and deep necessity, of collectively imagining and striving to reach beyond the present to the future, which remains a precedent set by the historical novel, even if its rebirth today is one rife with problems and short on solutions.

Notes

1. Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (Verso: New York, 2005) 29.
2. Aaron Benanav, "Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital," *Endnotes* 2 (27 June 2012).
3. Many thanks to those who have given me feedback and advice on this piece: I maintain that thought and writing are intensely collective processes and as such I like to take what moments I can to recognize those who have impacted, challenged, and, thus, enriched my work. Thanks go to Maria Elisa Cevasco, above all, for arranging the dossier and for insisting "do not over polish – life is too short!"; to my colleagues appearing in the dossier, Jeff Diamanti, Marija Cetinic, Vincent Adiutori; to Alexandra Carruthers, Adam Carlson, and Imre Szeman, who gave me wonderful editorial feedback; to the MLG-ICS 2012, especially Ryan Culpepper, Kevin Floyd, Barbara Foley, Mathias Nilges, and Alberto Toscano; to Jen Phillis, the two blind readers, and the *Mediations* editorial team.
4. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) ix.
5. I use the word *contemporary* here as a periodizing term, following Mathias Nilges who made this connection at the Marxist Literary Group's Institutes on Cultural Studies in Vancouver in 2012 during the discussion period for the panel we both sat on — *Aesthetic Histories of the Present II* organized by Kevin Floyd.
6. Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (Verso: New York, 2013); Perry Anderson, "From Progress to Catastrophe: Perry Anderson on the Historical Novel," *London Review of Books* 33.15 (28 July 2011) 24-28; Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011) 66; Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (Verso: New York, 2013).
7. According to Perry Anderson, "In the United States, by contrast, if we consider the span of historical novels of one sort or another produced in the same period, the core experiences triggering the American branch of the phenomenon would appear to be race (Styron, Morrison, Doctorow, Walker) and empire (Vidal, Pynchon, DeLillo, Mailer, Sontag)" (28).
8. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 66.
9. Moretti, *Bourgeois* 186.
10. *Things We Didn't See Coming* was first released in Australia in 2009 (Melbourne: Sleepers). Amsterdam's second book, *What the Family Needed*, was released in 2012 (New York: Riverhead).
11. Alexander Saxton, "'Caesar's Column': The Dialogue of Utopia and Catastrophe," *American Quarterly* 19.2 (Summer 1967) 224.
12. Fredric Jameson, "Future City," *NLR* 21 (May/June 2003) 76.
13. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage, 2006) 52.
14. Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (London: Pelican, 1981) 57.
15. *Waverley*'s first draft appeared in 1805, though was abandoned until its release some ten years later. Moretti, *Graphs* 17.
16. Due to the Industrial Revolution, England was already a politically "post-revolutionary" country opposed to France. Lukács, *The Historical Novel* 17.
17. See Giovanni Arrighi, "Hegemony Unravelling — I" and "Hegemony Unravelling — II," *New Left Review* 32-33 (March 2005; May/June 2005) 23-80, and 83-116; David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003); Peter Hitchcock, "Oil in the American Imaginary," *New Formations* 69 (2010) 81-97; Imre

Szeman, “System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106:4 (Fall 2007) 805-23; and Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Eagle Has Crash Landed,” *Foreign Policy* (July/August 2002): 60-68.

18. Benanav, “Misery.” And here is Roland Simon, of Théorie Communiste, on crisis, “The current crisis is a crisis of the wage relation, both as the capacity of capital to valorise itself and as the capacity of the reproduction of the working class as such.” Roland Simon, “Crisis Theory/Theories” *SIC* (17 July 2011) <http://sic.communisation.net/en/crisis-theories?DokuWiki=c524e974fa68f1309ab46b88f00ae70b>. Or, here is Robert Kurz of the Krisis group on the same idea in 1986: “The new crisis is thus no temporary crisis of overaccumulation or overproduction, but rather a crisis of the creation of value itself, from which there can no longer be a way out for capital.” Robert Kurz, “The Crisis of Exchange-Value: Science as Productivity; Productive Labour; and Capitalist Reproduction,” trans. Josh Robinson, *Mediations* 27:1-2 (Fall-Spring 2013-14) 54 <http://www.mediationsjournal.org/articles/crisis-of-exchange-value>.
19. This question emerges from the work of Jasper Bernes: “If it is impossible to project a communist future from present bases, it is also likewise impossible to project a capitalist one. This is because, returning to the point where we began, capital is a self-undermining social dynamic — *the limit to capital is capital itself* — one that establishes by its very own progress forward an increasingly intractable barrier to that progress: by compressing necessary labor (and gaining more surplus labor) it also compresses the pool of workers it can exploit.” Jasper Bernes, “The Double Barricade and the Glass Floor,” *Communization and Its Discontents*, ed. Benjamin Noys (New York: Minor Compositions, 2011) 157-72.
20. This distance indexes the waning significance of a patriarchal relation, which now seems unable to function as a compass or a map for the social: despite the insistence that the father-son relation has some purchase or insight available to it, the only thing it offers is a false promise that eclipses both the maternal relation of care and social reproduction within the family and the chance of creating a new social form capable of collectively shaping a viable, equal future outside of the family.
21. Fredric Jameson, “Progress versus Utopia, or, Can We Imagine the Future?” *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005) 288.
22. Steven Amsterdam, *Things We Didn’t See Coming* (New York: Pantheon, 2010) 145.
23. Amsterdam, *Things* 7.
24. *ibid.*
25. *Things* 23.
26. Eric Cazdyn names and identifies, in medical, cultural, global, and economic fields, a new chronic temporality of the contemporary impasse — a key component of which is the shift from treatment and cure to triage and placation. See Eric Cazdyn, *The Already Dead* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012).
27. *Things* 184.
28. *Cruel Optimism* 63.
29. *Things* 101.
30. *ibid*.
31. *ibid*.
32. *Cruel Optimism* 63-64. Emphasis mine.
33. Benanav, “Misery and Debt.”
34. *Graphs* 29.

35. *Things* 122.
36. Thanks to Alexandra Carruthers and Adam Carlson for talking over this point.
37. Maria Mies has referred to this as "superexploitation." See Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* (London: Zed, 1999) 48. According to Silvia Federici, as such, the structure of class exploitation itself remains genderic in nature. See Silvia Federici, "Preface," *Caliban and the Witch* (New York: Autonomedia, 2009) 7-10.
38. In Fredric Jameson's commentary on the unemployed at the climax of *Representing Capital*, he develops the category of the absolutely superfluous, as does Marx in Chapter 25, as a constitutive element of the capitalist mode of production, and as a group beyond the reserve army of the proletariat. It should be noted that this remains a structural position, not an ontological one. So that as Jameson urges us, earlier in his book and against Giorgio Agamben, "the destitution of unemployment is the more fundamental and concrete form, from which such later conceptualizations [such as, bare life] derive: what is concrete is the social, the mode of production, the humanly produced and historical; metaphysical conceptions such as those involving nature or death are ideological derivations of that more basic reality." Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital* (London: Verso, 2011) 125.
39. Maya Andrea Gonzalez, "Communization and the Abolition of Gender," *Communization and Its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles*, ed. Benjamin Noys (New York: Minor Compositions, 2011) 227.
40. Nicholas Brown, "One, Two, Many Ends of Literature," *Mediations* 24.2 (Spring 2009) 90-101.
41. Here it needs to be made clear that the specific economic context of my consideration is the center of this phase of capitalist accumulation, in Giovanni Arrighi's sense, that is, the United States of America thought of in the context of the global system of capital. A counterexample would be that China has refused to invest heavily in fixed capital, so that it can maintain a larger working body of the population. This example is necessarily complicated by recent reports of an economic downturn in China: "Analysts and government planners are now resigned to the fact that the growth rate in 2012 will slip under the once-magic (and numerologically auspicious) figure of 8 percent." Mark McDonald, "China's Economy: Apocalypse Soon?" *International Herald Tribune* (9 July 2012) <http://rendezvous.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/09/watching-the-china-stress-index-its-rising/?_r=0>.
42. Fredric Jameson, "The Future as Disruption," *Archaeologies of the Future* (London: Verso, 2005) 232.