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Introduction

In August 1971 President Nixon announced the suspension of the convertibility of the dollar in a live speech televised to the nation. The dramatic announcement ended the Bretton Woods agreement, which had been the bedrock of the postwar economic settlement. The value of the dollar was no longer guaranteed by the gold secured in Fort Knox but by the market's perceptions of its worth in relation to other currencies. The promise to the international monetary communities that thirty-five dollars could be exchanged for an ounce of gold was to be treated as if it had simply never existed. The moment is now a familiar one; it is routinely cited as the origin of a set of radical changes in postwar economics and culture. In the baldest of terms, paper appeared to supersede gold, abstraction to supersede materiality, perception to supersede the real and the volatile and short-term desires of markets to supersede the long-term planning of sovereign states.

This was a narrative of rupture that was to accord especially well with literary and cultural critics of the 1980s and 1990s for whom it was analogous to culture's own accelerated processes of abstraction. This critique, in which Jean Baudrillard's analysis of a 'power' that 'floats like money, like language, like theory' was to influence a generation of critics for whom this newest iteration of paper money, a money 'which promises nothing but an identical copy of itself', was taken to confirm the disabling loss of the referent.[1] Jean-Joseph Goux, evoking the parallels between the 1930s and the contemporary, declared the simultaneity of the ending of the gold standard with the faltering of the 'structurally homologous general equivalents' of 'gold, father, language, phallus', and Fredric Jameson and David Harvey made apparent the causal parallels between the severing of paper from gold, fiction from history and cause from effect.[2] The former described a novel form that had 'cut its moorings' and was left to 'float in some new world of past historical time whose relationship to us is problematical indeed', and the latter asserted that the 'breakdown of money as a secure means of representing value has itself created a crisis in representation' and that it is 'hard to tell exactly what space we are in when it comes to assessing causes and effects, meanings or values'.[3]

This book offers a new reading of the relationship between money, culture and literature. It argues that this language of a lapsarian rupture, in which money, like postmodern culture, is assumed to be a site only of an attenuating abstraction, overlooks literature's engagement with the social, political and economic changes that were occurring in the cultures of credit in this decade – changes that involved the simultaneous intensification and disavowal of the centrality of credit to American political life. Literary and cultural theory's lament of the disappearance of gold, I want to suggest, allowed it to remain ironically and perilously close to the disingenuous literalism of monetarism's own 'archaic' theories of commodity money, whose ideological naturalisation of money's creation obscured the political implications of the terms by which both public and private credits were being issued. This latter was a political obfuscation, as we shall see, that partly enabled the amnesia of an economy that privileges the future of credit over the pastness of debt.[4] Neglected in this analysis, but made apparent in this work, is literature's engagement with the implications of the credits and debts that were being rolled over anew in the 1970s, an engagement that becomes most apparent when these novels are read through, rather than as floating free from, the longer intertextual histories of American credit. It is the history of literature's exploration of the politicisation of the contemporary production of money itself, in all its complex forms, that is at the centre of this analysis.

The work explores the intersections between the literary and economic cultures of this decade in order to highlight literature's critique of the implications of this 'economic' phase of neoliberalism, an engagement somewhat obscured by a narrative that cleanly separates economics from both the 'politics' of the 1980s and the 'culture' of the 1990s.[5] This was a period in which American credit was responding not simply to international pressure, as countries began to count the costs to their own economies of its 'exorbitant privilege', but also to demands for what was being heralded as the democratisation of credit, as feminist and civil rights activists campaigned for access to the hitherto exclusive structures of state, consumer and business credit and as a new class of financiers realised the opportunities that the radical increase in postwar corporate leverage offered them.[6] The work foregrounds the ways in which literature uses its intertextual histories to open the tensions between these varied positions. It critiques neoliberalism's rhetorical construction of a language for 'real' and 'sound' money as a sleight of hand that delegitimised public credit and effaced the political implications of its intimacy with the burgeoning of private credit. It also explores fiction's account of the ironies that attended upon the demands for widening access to credit that occurred in this period and highlights the ways in which these demands have shared complex histories not only with the agendas of the international cooperative, feminist and civil rights movements but also with the changing cultures of financialisation itself. What these readings reveal, which economic accounts of credit do not, are the ways in which the contestations over the production of money were consistently shaped by the complex politics of American identity – that gender, race and sexuality were always present in discussions of credit.

The following chapters explore the varied ways in which these financial cultures, the varied 'modes of accounting' that Miranda Joseph has suggested constitute and attribute credits and debts, were being imagined and represented in fiction from the 1970s.[7] These literary engagements trace the implications of a variety of forms of state, corporate and consumer debt and the complex intersections between them. These analyses include Don DeLillo's satire on the absolutism of America's neo-imperial currency, William Gaddis' critical negating of the triumphalism of the leveraging of the corporate personality, Thomas Pynchon's dystopian tracing of the state's weaponisation of private credit, Toni Morrison's racialised history of insurance, Marilyn French's critique of the gendered forms of agency suggested by the ledger and Ursula Le Guin's speculative construction of radical cooperative economies. The readings of these novels contrast their critiques of neoliberalism's rhetorical positivism against their accounts of the real histories of debt and the imagined futures of alternative forms of credit. It is the significance of this acute ambivalence, the implications of the coexistence of the desire for, and the rejection of, credit that was occurring in this moment that constitutes the work's primary intervention into the now-established tradition of writing about literature and credit. I want to establish its relationship to this theoretical context before exploring, via a reading of E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*, how this requires a new historical approach to reading the relationship between money and the postmodern novel, to understanding the pressure of debt's past in credit's presence.

Money in the Disciplines

That money's origins lie in the relations of credit and debt, rather than in a narrative that moves chronologically from barter (the 'double-coincidence of wants' enshrined by economics textbooks) to the commodity money of gold, to the fiat money of the state and, finally, to the credit money of contemporary financialisation, has become an orthodoxy in recent cultural and historical studies of money. It is one now adhered to even by some central banks.[8] The work of Georg Knapp and Alfred Mitchell-Innes is often given a founding role in the intellectual genealogy of this modern monetary theory as it provides histories in which money emerged from systems of tabulation, records of credits and debts, rather than from barter and then gold. For Mitchell-Innes, most notably, credit is an idea that is as ancient as writing itself. His imperialist evocation – Mitchell-Innes was a prewar British diplomat as well as an economist – of a narrative that extends from 'the merchant of China to the Redskin of America; from the Arab of the desert to the Hottentot of South Africa or the Maori of New Zealand' is only somewhat belied by the wide-ranging and forensic detail of his accounts. These systems of tabulation become money, Mitchell-Innes argues, when they are transferred in the moment of trade, and it is a history that he brings into the medieval period when he suggests that the 'clearing houses of old were the great periodical fairs, whither went merchants great and small, bringing with them their tallies, to settle their mutual debts and credits.'[9]

Understanding the nature of the contract between creditor and debtor that underpins credit money depends, of course, on how the production of credit money is itself understood. One of the central tensions that emerges in this tradition, as Nigel Dodd has made clear, is the relative significance that the state and the financial system are assumed to possess in the creation of money. Dodd parses the difference between Knapp and Mitchell-Innes, for example, noting that '*banks* appear to play a role in Mitchell-Innes' theory that is analogous to the role that the *state* plays in Knapp's, i.e. coordinating and underwriting the monetary system as a whole.' Dodd uses the distinction between the two to explore the negotiation of the tension between state and the capitalist financial system in the work of contemporary neo-chartalist theorists such as Randall Wray and Geoffrey Ingham – the first economists to reprint Mitchell-Innes' essays in the contemporary period.[10] Wray, Dodd notes, privileges the role of the state in creating what Knapp described as *valuta*, the 'fiat or high-powered money that is legal tender because the government accepts it', into which all other monies must be convertible, and which 'sits beneath the debt pyramid' that makes up the financial system, whereas Ingham reads the state as mediating the political contestation between debtors and creditors, a contestation that becomes real in the setting of interest rates and the rate of the production of credit money.[11] For Ingham, capitalism's constitutive conflict between capital and labour is reinforced by a 'complex structure of institutionalized debtor–creditor relations', and class conflict is embodied in the tension between the debtor classes 'who demand "soft" credit' and the rentier and financial creditor classes who want 'safe "hard" money', whose 'agents attempt to preserve and store value in money form and to control its supply to exact interest. Or, they might forge new social relations of credit.'[12] What is most significant in these positions, as Dodd notes, 'is the tension between the state and the financial system' that they suggest as they acknowledge that the state has both a '*unique status* as a creditor' that alone has the '*naming rights* over money' and yet is also a '*guarantor'* by '*virtue of its role in monetary and financial governance'* (italics in original).[13]

This analytical model for credit money suggests a way to discern the interconnections between the three approaches to credit money in America in the 1970s that my literary analyses focus upon. The first approach concerns the meaning given to the American state's own debts, the printing of dollars and the sale of government bonds that both provide *valuta* and enable government spending. By the early 1970s, as Marxist critics such as Michael Hudson, Leo Panitch, Sam Gindin, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt have all made retrospectively clear, the 'dollar overhang', the continual and apparently exponential absorption of US dollars by the international community, had become central to the wielding of its neo-imperial authority in a changing world order. This was a power that had both a domestic and an international reach. The steady outward flow of dollars allowed America to run, as Michael Hudson has detailed, an otherwise impossibly large 'domestic budgetary and balance-of-payments deficit', which allowed it to fund its increasing military spending whilst also 'satellising' those nations that accepted the terms of its devaluation, destructive as they were for their own economic sovereignty and competitiveness.[14] America, in the bluntest of terms, was able to simultaneously cancel and increase its international debts to emerge, in Randy Martin's memorable phrase, as the 'empire without credit'.[15] This was a move that also gave the capitalist state a renewed internal leverage, allowing it to evade the pressures of the international labour movement and freeing it to pursue the policies that accelerated the post-Fordist culture of economic precarity. The closing of the gold window was an act that Christian Marazzi was to presciently describe in the mid-1970s as one that permitted capital to escape 'from the immediate impact of worker struggles … inconvertibility can only be understood in political terms; it set the strategic framework for reorganization of capital by means of the crisis – a planned crisis against the global working class through the manipulation of money'.[16]

The implications of America's twinning of its economic and imperial strategies, and the reshaping of the very idea of whom and what the public credit of the state served that this involved, run throughout my analysis. The critique of the rhetorical and literal violence of American credit is particularly foregrounded in my readings of the novels of De Lillo, Gaddis and Pynchon. These readings explore the ways in which these writers carefully parse the effects of the distinctions between this literal and rhetorical partnering of the state's economic and military violence and suggest that the careful attention each pays to the histories of American money, and the affective performance of language in this context, offers a useful qualification to the sweeping claims made about the immateriality of the new financial economy.

One of the central ironies of such a reading of American credit, of course, concerns the fact that America's wielding of this 'hyperpotency' was accompanied by the apparent withdrawal of the state's ability to create money at all. The majority of money created and circulating in America, 'the debt pyramid' of various forms of private, business and corporate debt, was being built outside the economic and political languages of the state, both because of and in spite of the fact that it involved the financialised transference of those needs – in housing, education, social care, health and social insurance – for which the state of both the New Deal and the Great Society had worked with the private and corporate sectors in finding partial solutions.[17] The production of money itself was being privatised in the 1970s, and the agenda for this very different language for credit took shape in complex and often contradictory ways. It can be seen in the monetarist histories and definitions of what did and didn't constitute 'sound' money, as well as in debates about the 'democratisation' of credit, as feminist and civil rights groups represented access to credit as a form of citizenship and as finance professionals radicalised the cultures of corporate credit by expanding terrains upon which it operated.[18] My reading of the literary representations of some of these key vehicles of credit in the 1970s – consumer debt, housing debt and corporate debt – highlights this as a transitional moment in America, as a political reckoning with the limitations the New Deal and Great Society structures of credit was met by the new reaches that the processes of financialisation were claiming. It argues that the novels of Toni Morrison, Barbara Raskin and Marilyn French, for example, offer intertextual histories of the gendered and racialised nature of credit that lead them to problematise it as a route into a hitherto denied, but required and still deeply desired, form of economic autonomy.[19]

As these forms of financialised credit are represented as falling consistently short of the promises that they make, as indebtedness redoubles a desire for debt in both an imaginary and a painfully literal version of Wendy Brown's 'wounded attachment', then debt's association with dispossession is often leavened in these fictional representations by narratives that explore the possibility, and histories, of alternative forms of credit.[20] These are wide ranging and include the utopian workers' cooperatives of Piercy and Le Guin, the feminist potlatch of Raskin, the anarchic economies of Pynchon and the histories of mutualised finance evoked by Morrison. My reading of these varied forms of counter-credit requires me to draw upon a third vocabulary for credit, one that we can find examples of in the radical anthropological tradition that David Graeber, most notably, has claimed begins with Marcel Mauss – and ends with David Graeber – as well as in the histories and theories of alternative forms of credit offered by figures as different from one another as Kojin Karatani and Peter North.[21] A reading of this critical tradition, which understands that all money may be credit but that not all credit is money, is one that runs throughout the entire argument of the book but is consistently qualified by a resistance to those models that claim to open a radical space entirely *outside* of capitalist relations, one often reliant on a problematically gendered concept of the gift or sacrifice and that can often be read as a version of the compensatory fantasies that appear to be central to the self-preserving plasticity of capitalism's imaginary forms.[22]

This narrative arc that I have briefly drawn, which concludes its reading of credit by placing the anthropological language of sociality, one associated with the work of critics such as Viviana Zelizer and Keith Hart, against the postmodern language of abstraction, is now a familiar one in interdisciplinary theories of money. It is apparent in Bill Maurer's critique of the tautologies of Jean-Joseph Goux and in Anna Tsing's critique of the 'global futurism' of David Harvey's account of the ending of the gold standard, which takes issue with Harvey's assumption that the money form that emerged in the 1970s was inevitable, wholly epoch changing and entirely, newly, encompassing.[23] As Maurer's and Tsing's works demonstrate, the tensions between anthropological and postmodern approaches to money are productive in allowing theorists to access the particular contradictions of the money form that can function, in Maurer's words, as 'a social relation, a symbolic system, *and* a material reality'.[24]

Yet other work has read these competing readings of what money really is as sites of tension rather than of reconciliation, and the recent writing of theorists such as Martijn Konings, Noam Yuran and Ole Bjerg has been especially important in highlighting the paradoxical meanings that are signalled by the affective desire for money as a thing in itself – as a site rich with potential social meaning rather than only characterised by alienation. Bjerg draws out the interdependencies between commodity, fiat and credit theories of money, pinpointing the ways in which the lack that constitutes each is served by the fantasy that the presence of the others fulfils, in order to argue that money is constituted by a theoretical lacuna and the 'theoretical controversy about money is a symptom of the very nature of the thing itself.'[25] Yuran connects 'the unresolved opposition between matter and value' that lies at the heart of credit money to the Marxist logic of alienation as he argues that money is constituted by a desire that is the 'culmination of the logic of ownership' that reveals only the dispossession of the self.[26] Konings, finally, but most usefully in this context, locates these paradoxes in their political and historical context, suggesting that money is a 'form of belief that incorporates a reflexive awareness of the dangers of idolatrous, literal belief: the promise that it holds out is not one of magic but of redemptive austerity, the purifying effects of taking personal responsibility for the workings of the economy'. For Konings, the inevitable failure of credit's promise is central to its endlessly renewable appeal, and he argues that this belief in the promise of a 'redemptive austerity' has been core to the spirit of American republicanism.[27] His history of twentieth-century credit is thus directed not towards the Arrighian critique of high finance, those moments when a 'top-heavy structure of speculative credit' inevitably collapses as belief falters and society embarks on 'a re-embedding project', but towards the steady growth of credit instruments that allowed banks to focus on 'financing the American dream', even through recurring cycles of financial crises.[28]

Literary studies have similarly qualified the assumptions about the conflation of economic and aesthetic abstraction that underpinned the postmodern and post-structuralist register of the new economic criticism of the late 1990s. Mary Poovey's warning of the 'increasingly misrecognised' relations between literary and economic analyses needs no repeating, and critics such as Michael Tratner, Paul Crosthwaite, Leigh Claire La Berge and Joshua Clover have all produced careful qualifications of literary theory's claims in this regard.[29] La Berge's account of the inconsistent assumptions about abstraction at work in these homologies has been especially useful as it contrasts the aesthetic use of the term for a 'mode of nonfigurative representation', against its use by social theorists, to describe a 'metonymic reach in which an incomplete representation stands in for something larger that cannot be represented' and notes that neither comes close to the 'specificity and critical poise' of the analysis used in Marxist critical studies of finance, in which abstraction exists only through its dialectical relationship with the concrete because each is 'possible only in its realization of the other'.[30]

La Berge's approach is in keeping with recent moves in literary and cultural studies to explore the social conditions through which money is created through reanimating the dialectical relationship between the abstract language of credit and the concrete and specific language of debt, an approach that also accords with a renewed attention to literature's capacity to represent the affective and material histories that the postmodern turn had appeared to render opaque. This approach overturns the decades-long tradition of scholars working within the field, associated with J. G. A. Pocock's work, which assumed that literary culture's role was to help 'stabilise' the anxieties that attended the abstractions of the credit economy as value 'ceased to be real' and became 'not merely mobile but imaginary' – to teach readers how to read credit. Instead, this approach stresses literary culture's critical capacity to reveal the material conditions of the indebted life that the language of abstraction effectively conceals.[31] It is an argument that is made variously apparent in the works of Annie McClanahan, Miranda Joseph, Christopher Breu, Richard Dienst, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, and it suggests a language for money that is capable, in Joseph's terms, of addressing both the 'socially destructive power of capitalism's processes of abstraction' and the 'socially constructive particularizing power of capitalism'.[32] For many of these writers, it is a division that makes new sense of the synonyms of credit and debt, because 'debt is social and credit is asocial. Debt is mutual. Credit runs only one way.'[33]

It is literature's engagement with the contradictory meanings that were attached to the dialectic of credit and debt that underpinned the steady growth of a wide variety of credit forms, the self-negating but also self-renewing desire for credit money that Konings describes, which is at the centre of the intertextual history that this project suggests. My approach to reading the novel of the 1970s through this literary and economic history, as a moment of continuity rather than only rupture, requires a model for reading literature, like its model for reading money, that is somewhat at odds with the postmodern rhetoric in which the diminishment of the signified was associated primarily with loss. It is to this final question that I want to now turn.

Postmodern Times: E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*

The assumption of the waning of literary referentiality and historicity that was seen to be so integral to the postmodern novel took, of course, a variety of forms in the 1970s literary academy, and it is not helpful to either overstate or simplify it. Critics as different from one another as Harold Bloom and Linda Hutcheon offered a qualified acceptance of the text's anchoring in literary history. For Bloom, literary debts existed but required an oedipal avenging rather than an honouring: Bloom, as Marjorie Garber has noted, offered a 'brilliant inversion of the idea of influence, turning it from a benign outflowing to an anxious indwelling'. For Hutcheon, conversely, literary debts were primarily self-referential and a source of parody, and she argues that the 'representation of history becomes the history of representation' and that postmodern culture knows that 'the history of representation cannot be escaped but it can be both exploited and commented on critically through irony and parody.'[34] The alternative model for thinking about literature's referential potential came from theorists for whom even such qualified possibilities were insufficient. *Tel Quel* writers such as Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva cancelled Bloom's debts by suggesting an endlessly open model of intertextuality, and Fredric Jameson rejected Hutcheon's model of parody by suggesting that literature had entirely abandoned the possibility of connecting even to the self-consciously textual political history that it suggested. Jameson argued, like Baudrillard before him, that we have entered 'a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach'.[35]

Jameson's diagnosis of the endless present became particularly emblematic of the postmodern novel and was to be later read specifically through his analysis of finance capital.[36] Yet the financialisation of this concept, credit's ability to pull the future into the contemporary and to shape it in ways that annul 'true futurity', has been more recently placed under pressure by cultural critics of finance, particularly influenced by the work of Elena Esposito, who suggest that it simplifies the multiple temporalities of finance, the 'clash of time frames' that mark 'the volatile zone' between