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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6gn5n09v>

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### Publication Date

2017

Peer reviewed

## *Against Omniscient Narration*

### A Farmworker Critique of Neoliberalism

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In his 2005 novel *The People of Paper*, Salvador Plascencia begins with a dedication to his wife that states, "to Liz, who taught me that we are all people of paper." In the novel, Plascencia employs fantasy and metafiction to dramatize exactly what he means by "people of paper." To do so, he allegorizes the lives of Mexican farmworkers who are constantly being watched by Saturn, a god-like figure later revealed to be Plascencia himself. The author becomes an omniscient, oppressive character in his own novel, dictating the workers' narratives, but most of the working-class characters resist his authority and declare war on him in an effort to determine their own stories. Retaliating against the workers' struggle, the author-based Saturn employs various techniques to monitor and subdue the other characters and to punish those who challenge his seemingly insurmountable power. Thus, the farmworker characters find themselves in a formal predicament that bears a striking resemblance to the social contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, in which people who work for a living must constantly look for ways to challenge a system that is politically ubiquitous, ideologically dominant, and structurally determining. The farmworker characters, however, cannot fight a traditional war with guns and bullets against their abstract creator—for how can a character kill an author? They strive nevertheless to subvert Saturn's power by refusing to adhere to a conventional author-character relationship and by attempting to change the structural and visual aspects of the novel itself. In this way, *The People of Paper* stages a battle over the novel's textual features, emphasized in the fact that characters are literally textual constructs—that is, people made of paper—which alludes to the social construction of political subjectivity that we all share. In this essay, I argue that the farmworkers' war against Saturn in *The People of Paper* can be read symbolically as a critique of neoliberal capitalism; that the fight against neoliberalism is essentially a fight between competing

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narratives; that Saturn as an allegorical construct of neoliberal power is both omniscient and fallible; that the workers' struggle is fought on two fronts—against Saturn and against their own ideologies; and that even though the farmworkers fail to overcome the power of an omniscient narrator, they nevertheless employ strategies of resistance that hold promise for the future.

Before proceeding, I want to clarify two points. First, the fact that the novel's main characters are immigrant farmworkers is significant because historically farm labor has been one of the most exploited sectors of the US working class, and because immigrant farmworkers, the vast majority of whom are people of color, have a long history of fighting back against an overpowering international agricultural industry and the capitalist state. Second, I hold closely to the premise that literary works—especially those that focus on subaltern struggles for justice—have much to teach us about the social and political structures of our time. This is certainly the case in *The People of Paper*, which imagines a world where working-class characters understand that they have been created by a tyrannical, omniscient author who attempts to dictate every aspect of their lives, and yet the workers decide that they have no choice but to wage a war against these conditions despite the odds against them. To comprehend the symbolic significance of this imagined world, the critic would do well to pose and attempt to answer a fundamental question: What must the existential reality of society be like to necessitate and provide the raw social substance for the creation of such a novel? To answer this question is to theorize society. I am not proposing that literature can or should take the place of theory; each obviously performs distinct functions. But I do believe that literature and theory help us to grasp similar kinds of knowledge from different perspectives—one aesthetic, the other critical. Thus, methodologically I draw on both the novel and critical works to analyze the critique of neoliberalism in *The People of Paper*.

The novel begins in the mid-twentieth century and centers on the life of Federico de la Fe. Originally from Jalisco, Mexico, he crosses the border illegally into Southern California with his young daughter, Little Merced. They settle in El Monte, a rural town at the outskirts of Los Angeles, where Federico finds work as a farm laborer in the flower industry. He comes to discover that an unseen power in the sky named Saturn—whose name aptly alludes to the “Roman god of agriculture and harvest,”<sup>1</sup> or to a mythical god who devours his own children—has written the script of his life and has determined the conditions under which he and other workers live. So Federico decides to organize the workers to fight in a war against Saturn, concentrating on a group called the El Monte Flores gang (EMF). Little Merced explains that “EMF was not like city gangs. . . . They did not

loot fruit stores or steal car parts; they just drank mescal and worked in the furrows harvesting flowers next to my father.”<sup>2</sup> Because of his profound commitment to overthrowing Saturn’s deterministic powers, Federico eventually becomes the leader and war commander of the EMF.

Even though the EMF workers are locked in a war against Saturn throughout most of the novel—a war they ultimately lose by the novel’s end—their struggle does not take shape as a “class struggle” in the traditional sense. These workers are not fighting against their employers, nor are they demanding higher wages, better benefits, or other economic reforms. They are fighting against a nearly omniscient, seemingly indestructible power that controls every aspect of their lives, a force that created them and therefore has access to all their thoughts and knows in advance how their roles in the novel will end. The workers become aware that they are in fact characters in a novel constructed to serve the imaginative and ideological needs of the author, and they feel both perplexed and angered by their paradoxical condition. How can they ever overcome the very agent that created them? To destroy Saturn and the novel he is narrating would result in their self-annihilation. And it is in this sense that, even though the workers are not fighting for economic reforms, the EMF’s war against Saturn can nevertheless be considered a class struggle because, from a Marxist point of view, workers can only truly achieve liberation when they defeat and ultimately destroy the structural and systemic apparatuses of inequality, exploitation, and oppression *totally*—which is to say, they need not only to defeat the capitalist class but also to abolish all classes that are part of the capitalist system, including the working class. In such a scenario, workers would cease to exist as working-class subjects, but they would become something else, something entirely new, a new kind of subject. Even though *The People of Paper* does not develop this theme to its logical conclusion, the allusions to a liberated working class are nevertheless clear, making Saturn roughly equivalent to the phenomenon that Guy Debord calls “the society of the spectacle” or the self-consciousness of capital. Debord theorizes a project, similar to that of the EMF, that “in its negative form has as its goal the abolition of classes and the direct possession by the workers of every aspect of their activity. The opposite of this project is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making.”<sup>3</sup> For Debord, capital comes to exist exclusively for itself, and it projects itself as the center of the universe—as humanity’s *raison d’être*. “The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes an image,”<sup>4</sup> particularly, an image that is worshiped or fetishized. From this perspective, Saturn can be conceptualized as a socially symbolic representation of accumulated capital, and thus the workers’ enemy in the

novel is not a particular employer, company, or corporation, nor is it even the state that represents the interests of the capitalist class; it is their systemic condition of subservience and the fact of their near total domination by a spectacular structure of power.

The structure of power that dominates the lives of the EMF workers, however, is not a static, automated, agentless structure. It is not a machine without machine operators. It is rather a structure marked by contradiction—at once intentional and chaotic, omnipotent and fallible, unified and fractured, structural and agential. The structure of power in the novel, much like the structures of neoliberalism in society generally, operates within a social sphere within which competing groups struggle against one another in defense of their class interests. Laurence Cox and Alf Gunvald Nilsen argue that neoliberalism seeks “to extend the hegemony of already-dominant social groups. . . . It’s prime achievement has been *restoring the class power* of capital by fundamentally undermining the social restrictions and regulations imposed on capitalist accumulation as a result of the struggles of working classes and colonized peoples in the first half of the twentieth century.”<sup>5</sup> But they also claim that neoliberalism encompasses more than merely the market-oriented economic reforms instituted by the capitalist class that are aimed at undermining regulations for the purpose of maximizing profits. It is that, but it is more too. They argue that neoliberalism is a “collective agency,”<sup>6</sup> conscientious and purposive in its actions, and capable of orchestrating “social movements from above” in the same way that subaltern groups organize “social movements from below.”<sup>7</sup> To claim that neoliberalism is a “collective agency” is to say that its actions are deliberate and calculated, and that they are motivated by class interests. Stated differently, neoliberalism represents a renewed confidence on the part of capital that the level of economic crisis experienced during the Great Depression of the 1930s will not reoccur—that capitalism need not be regulated because it is no longer vulnerable to an economic crisis of such magnitude or to the possibility of popular rebellion and revolution. Hence, capital has become daringly more arrogant in its disregard for the well-being of the working classes, disbanding policies previously associated with what used to be called the Fordist contract and the New Deal.

If we were to conceptualize the history of capitalism as a narrative with chapters, characters, conflicts, plots, and subplots, then we might be tempted to think of neoliberalism (the latest chapter in the long history of capitalism) as attempting to perform a function similar to that of an omniscient narrator—a narrator that assumes to know everything about the characters, including their thoughts and feelings; a narrator that controls the characters’ actions and makes decisions

concerning their abilities, limits, and outcomes; a narrator that creates opportunities and destroys them in the same breath; or, in a word, a narrator that becomes a God-like figure, omniscient, omnipotent, and infallible. But this analogy between neoliberalism and the omniscient narrator is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the idea that a narrator can know absolutely everything there is to know about all of the characters in a novel is illogical and impossible, not to mention presumptuous and oppressive. Omniscience is a quality that exceeds human experience; it is a fantasy that exists only in the imagination. Second, the idea that neoliberalism is omnipotent is more fiction than fact because it fails to account for the narratives of resistance that tell the stories of people who demand justice and look for ways to challenge the system. That is to say, the narrative of neoliberal capitalism is not omniscient, nor is it omnipotent; it is full of internal contradictions and marked by endless forms of opposition from below. Like neoliberalism, the agent of power in the novel as personified by Saturn seeks to subdue the rebellious workers by demolishing the modest gains they have made in placing restrictions on the narrator's omniscience, and it seeks also to reestablish Saturn's absolute authority over the characters—even though some of the characters, as I discuss below, come to discover Saturn's weaknesses and internal contradictions.

Saturn's most effective strategic weapon against the characters is his power of determination: he alone created the characters, gave them names, fashioned their personalities, and narrated the specificities of their lives; and he alone determined their outcomes. What the EMF workers fight for is "their right to be unseen," to be uncontrolled and undetermined by the author. Froggy, the EMF's second-in-command, explains that to be truly free they must be given a "choice" about how to live, and that it is an injustice to "force us to . . . submit to the commands of a dictator" (232). Essentially, the EMF workers contest the fact that they are constructed as characters confined to a text—i.e., people of paper—in the same way that real workers are ideologically and materialistically constructed as subjects within the confined social parameters of capitalism. In delivering a recruitment speech to the EMF, Federico de la Fe describes their struggle as "a war for volition and against the commodification of sadness. . . . It is a war against the fate that has been decided for us" (53). The commodification of sadness refers to making profit from writing a novel about the suffering of people—or interchangeably, to the construction of ideological narratives that benefit those in society who profit at the expense of those who are exploited. In this way, the EMF's "war against the commodification of sadness" is also a "war on omniscient narration" (218)—a war against the fact that a "collective agency" at the top gets to

write the narrative from an omniscient point of view and decide the specifics of the story, while those at the bottom are given little or no voice.

### Ideology as a Weapon of War

The “war on omniscient narration” proves to be more difficult than the workers count on because it must be fought on two fronts: against Saturn and against the workers’ own ideologies. To elaborate on this point, I first address the problem of ideology before analyzing the omniscient narrator and the workers’ strategies of resistance. In the novel, ideology sometimes undermines the workers’ efforts in the fight against Saturn, similar to the way the ideological contradictions of workers in the current neoliberal period sometimes prevent them from acting in their own class interests. These ideological contradictions in many ways have become sharper in recent decades because—despite the relative systemic weaknesses of capitalism as evidenced by, among other things, the 2008 financial crash—neoliberalism has become more aggressive in its endeavors to win the hearts and minds of workers, or to scare them into submission. But the fight to persuade people ideologically works both ways, influenced by movements from below as well as movements from above. For example, since September 2011 the Occupy movement, despite its political weaknesses and organizational unsustainability as a movement, has been highly successful in countering neoliberal ideology in three significant ways: (1) it heightened an awareness that capitalism is vulnerable, having suffered severe blows to its economic and political integrity resulting from its own internal contradictions; (2) it forcefully reminded millions of people that society is divided into socioeconomic classes, and that a small minority owns most of the wealth and makes most of the decisions that govern our lives;<sup>8</sup> and (3) it drove a huge wedge into the misconception that capitalism is ahistorical, or that it will exist forever, and it nurtured confidence in the belief that a postcapitalist society can and indeed should be conceptualized.

Perhaps a more appropriate example of a social movement for understanding the critique of neoliberal ideology in *The People of Paper* would be that of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. In the Zapatista’s “First Declaration of La Realidad for Humanity and against Neoliberalism” published in 1996, the Zapatistas denounce neoliberalism’s ideological narratives of history and class power as attempts to mislead workers into believing that they are powerless and should abandon any expectation of challenging the system. The Zapatistas, of course, pay no heed to those defeatist narratives. On the contrary, in the declaration, they state, “A new lie is sold to us as history. The lie about the defeat of hope, the lie about the defeat of dignity, the lie about the defeat of humanity. The mirror of

power offers us an equilibrium in the balance scale: the lie about the victory of cynicism, the lie about the victory of servitude, the lie about the victory of neoliberalism.”<sup>9</sup> The characters in the *People of Paper*, some referred to with the Zapatista-like designation “subcomandante,” assume a similarly defiant attitude toward the ideological deception of Saturn, who has constructed a narrative that represents the workers as defenseless and politically inept. Nevertheless, despite the gains made by the Occupy movement, the Zapatistas, and other “social movements from below” in recent years, the persuasiveness of neoliberal ideology remains powerful and relentless, and its effects are evident in the actions and narratives of common folks throughout the world, as well as on the pages of Plascencia’s *The People of Paper*.

Our current period is marked ideologically by two significant gains made by neoliberal capital over the past several decades. First, neoliberalism has succeeded to a greater degree than earlier periods of capitalism in undermining the belief that a postcapitalist society is possible and achievable. Today a general (but not totalizing) pessimism exists toward the idea that people can overcome the structural domination of neoliberal capitalism—a kind of pessimism that Mark Fisher characterizes with the term “capitalist realism,” by which he means that “it is now impossible to even *imagine* a coherent alternative” to capitalism.<sup>10</sup> Second, and more problematically, neoliberalism has consolidated the belief among large sectors of the working and middle classes that capitalism is on their side—that the system serves the interests of workers no more or no less than it does the interests of, say, the banking, oil, or arms industries. These two gains by neoliberalism expose two of the most effective forms of ideology in our contemporary moment—cynicism and consent, which I now address in short order.

The EMF characters in *The People of Paper* represent various shades of ideological conflict among workers, and political cynicism is certainly one of them. Federico de la Fe, whose last name literally means “of the faith,” represents the novel’s bulwark against cynicism, but not all characters hold as steadfastly to a belief that their struggle is winnable. Years after the war against Saturn has ended, Froggy tries to convince some young workers that it is in their interests once again to take up the baton left by their elders and wage a war against Saturn, and he attempts to instill in them confidence that both victory against the omniscient narrator and the formation of a post-Saturn world are possible. But the cynical youth bluntly respond, “The veteranos couldn’t win it, we can’t either” (49), and they refuse to renew a political campaign. Here the novel pointedly puts on display an example of how the ideology of cynicism has led workers to give up the fight and lose the war before it has even started.

No doubt the failure of revolutionary movements of the past and the absence of mass anticapitalist movements in this country and around the globe at this particular historical moment have produced widespread political cynicism toward the possibility of a postcapitalist future. But political cynicism can itself be considered an objective condition that functions as an obstacle to social change, while political optimism should be considered an objective necessity for any theory of practice aimed at overcoming the historical impasse in which we now find ourselves. We might recall here the following passage from Antonio Gramsci: “It is necessary to direct one’s attention violently towards the present as it is, if one wishes to transform it,” a statement that he qualifies with his now famous line, “Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.”<sup>11</sup> Pessimism of the intellect because every rational thought in our mind convinces us of the impossibility of overcoming a system as powerful as neoliberal capitalism—and of the even greater impossibility of establishing a society based on the abolition of social classes and money. Optimism of the will because revolutionary practice requires a subjective element—not an individual will, but a collective will, a collective praxis. Gramsci asserts that what appears as impossible to the intellect becomes possible only through the collective will and concerted actions of people acting jointly to destroy one world and replace it with another.

Peter Hallward expands on Gramsci’s concept of “optimism of the will” and the critique of ideological cynicism by asking his readers to consider the possibility of a utopian society such as communism, generally considered an impossible social system or an unfeasible political strategy.<sup>12</sup> In an essay entitled “Communism of the Intellect, Communism of the Will,” Hallward criticizes our contemporary “lack of political imagination” and urges us to learn from the wisdom of leaders who have paid no heed to the supposed impossibility of their struggles. He writes, “We would do better . . . to follow the example given by people like Robespierre, L’Ouverture or John Brown,” who were confronted with the “indefensible institution of slavery” and eventually defeated it. He continues, “Che Guevara and Paulo Freire would do the same in the face of imperialism and oppression. . . . In each case the basic logic is as simple as could be: an idea, like the idea of communism, or equality, or justice, commands that we should strive to realize it without compromises or delay, before the means of such realization have been recognized as feasible or legitimate, or even ‘possible.’ It is the deliberate striving towards realization itself that will convert the impossible into the possible, and explode the parameters of the feasible.”<sup>13</sup> The act of imagining and fighting for a future society based on social and economic equality and the abolition of classes, or what Carlos Gallego calls “the radical universality of truth,”<sup>14</sup>

whether that society turns out to be communism or some social form that we have not yet even imagined, is “no facile optimism,” according to Carl Freedman and Neil Lazarus, but we would still do well to recognize that the “very process of Utopian speculation participates in the production of Utopian possibility.”<sup>15</sup>

To be politically cynical—like the young EMF workers who refuse to follow Froggy’s leadership—about the possibility of overcoming neoliberalism’s structures of power is strategically self-defeating for working- and middle-class people, but the political cynic at least still potentially recognizes the exploitative class character of neoliberalism. She or he recognizes the inherent faults of the system but just does not believe that the system can be changed. By contrast, the person who willingly and loyally grants his or her consent to be governed—or who has been persuaded that the system serves the best interests of everyone equally—has forfeited any critical consciousness in exchange for passive convenience and possibly for the hope of a slightly larger piece of the social pie.

The critical interpretation of consent, of course, has been most cogently formulated by Gramsci in his theory of hegemony. For Gramsci, the modern state maintains social control over the masses through a combination of force and ideological persuasion, or coercion and consent. The use of coercive force by the state—the military, police, prisons, judicial system, penalties, fines, and so on—is frequently employed by those in power to “enforce discipline on those groups who do not ‘consent’ either actively or passively” to the rule of class power. Coercion is especially effective during moments of political instability or when “spontaneous consent has failed.”<sup>16</sup> But coercion alone is insufficient because it tends to provoke discontent and rebellion, and it unmasks the true repressive character of the neoliberal state. A so-called democratic society operates much more effectively if it is able to persuade members of exploited classes that it is in their best interests to follow the leadership of the ruling class, to adopt its world outlook, and to believe in its political and moral judgments.

In the novel, the minor character Smiley best demonstrates the actions of a worker who has embraced the ideology of consent. He has been persuaded that living under Saturn’s rule is a good thing. Unlike the other members of the EMF, he has consented to Saturn’s hegemonic order, and he wonders, “Was Saturn really so ominous and threatening? Could he not be protecting us?” (95). Smiley, conscious of his status as a fictional character, does not agree with other members of the EMF in waging war against Saturn. He fears that destroying Saturn “would bring our own end” as characters because then the novel would cease to exist. In a literal sense he’s correct, but his views are also allusions to his profound cynicism about the possibility of winning the war against Saturn. Representing a

skeptical possessive individualism in which he's more concerned about saving his own skin than the well-being of the collective, Smiley aspires to be recognized by Saturn and rewarded for his loyalty. He confesses as much in stating, "I was not worried about the galaxy and the fall of its satellites. I thought of my own existence, of my own place in this novel" (101).

Despite Smiley's blind devotion to Saturn and his willingness to consent to the author's dictatorial role in the novel, his relationship with the author becomes fractured and nearly unravels when Saturn's weaknesses are exposed. Upon learning that Saturn and Plascencia are one and the same and that he lives just on the other side of the sky, which is made of out of newspaper and glue, he figures out how to tear a hole in the sky large enough to crawl through, where he finds himself in Saturn's home. But Saturn is not nearly as divine as Smiley had imagined: he's unkempt, dirty, forgetful, unsightly, and flawed—flawed because he cannot always see everything, he is unknowing rather than omniscient, and he sometimes allows the narrative to slip away from his control. Smiley's ideological outlook is jolted in witnessing the author's weaknesses and faults as this experience disrupts his impression of Saturn (and by implication, political power generally) as infallible and omniscient. "When I came to Saturn he was no longer in control. He did not have the foresight to see that I was coming, nor did he care. He had surrendered the story and his powers as narrator" (103). Finding the author in this condition, Smiley considers slitting Saturn's throat with the knife he uses to harvest flowers at work, but he fails to execute what would have been a historic act—a character killing the author. Instead, he merely steals Saturn's book manuscript and leaves only the title page behind after writing on it, "You are not so powerful" (105). Yet despite his moment of anger and disillusionment toward Saturn, Smiley nevertheless is not able to overcome the consent he has granted to Saturn to be governed and led ideologically, and after a while he begins to dream regularly that he is sitting at a table with Saturn playing dominoes, and in his dreams he smiles whenever Saturn calls him "Comandante Smiley" (154). In the end, Smiley's loyalty to Saturn is not repaid in kind, and he experiences the most pathetic outcome among the EMF workers when Saturn forgets his name and overlooks him in summarizing the lives of the main characters in the novel's final pages.

Smiley is not the only farmworker character in the novel who fails to overcome the ideological influence of Saturn. Little Oso, for example, believes that "whatever happens beyond our borders is not my worry. . . . [I]t is only Monte and its sky that I care about" (215). Similarly, Pelon becomes politically sterile (a de facto form of consent) as a result of the conditioning associated with alienated

labor. While at work during the war, Pelon stops thinking about worldly matters and important ideas, concentrating instead on the minutiae of harvesting and soil cultivation. He performs these routine acts for so long during the war that he becomes ideologically nearsighted, no longer able to think beyond the immediacy of his life as a worker. “This is what I see,” he says. “There is no world beyond the till of the land and the planting of seeds” (213).

Pelon’s tragic outcome recalls the scandalous claims of Frederick Winslow Taylor in his 1911 monograph *The Principles of Scientific Management*. Taylor proposed a strategy to give capital the power to overcome the economic problems associated with the falling rate of profit in the early periods of industrial capitalism. With Taylorism, the worker-subject did not merely operate a machine in the factory but, measured by stopwatches and slide rules, was made an appendage to the machine. The worker ceased to be a *relation* of production and became a *means* of production. For Taylor, the now dehumanized, machine-like, mindless workers were incapable of understanding “scientific” production and “too stupid” to understand how they were being exploited.<sup>17</sup> More significantly, the workers’ minds would become even more intellectually disabled because of the constant meticulous attention they were required to pay to the monotonous, brain-consuming details of production. While Taylor’s theories were based partly in actuality in that certain work environments did (and still do) deaden the imaginative faculties of workers, Taylor grossly underestimated the capacity of working-class consciousness and the potential for insurgency. As Gramsci reminds us in “Fordism and Taylorism,” workers’ minds do not become “mummified” merely because their work has become mechanized.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, Pelon, along with countless other workers like him, falls prey to the mind-deadening effects of alienated labor, and he serves as an example of the novel’s critique of consent manufactured through Tayloristic working and living conditions.

In the world of the novel, ideology is an effective strategic weapon that aids Saturn in his war with the EMF. It is both intentional and structural, and it can be described as what Cox and Nilsen call a “social movement from above.” The novel alludes to the way ideology is perpetuated among workers via the metaphor of a crop duster. Once a day, a crop duster would fly over El Monte, “leaving behind a mist that ate away the larvae of medflies and also the paint coats of unprotected cars,” (38) not to mention the physical health of workers and their families. Here the novel offers a not-so-subtle condemnation of the harm that pesticides cause to farmworkers and others, but the scene should also be read as an allusion to the manner in which neoliberalism pervades every aspect in the lives of workers,

reinforced with unhealthy doses of ideology regularly “sprayed” on them by a “collective agency” from above.

### The Fallibility of an Omniscient Narrator

As mentioned earlier, the “collective agency” that the workers are up against is marked by contradiction; it is simultaneously powerful and fallible, omniscient and at times unknowing. As the representative incarnate of this “collective agency,” Saturn adds a profound complexity to the novel’s already complex narrative structure. At first glance, the narration appears democratic and inclusive because of its multiple points of view; numerous characters are given a voice in telling their own stories. The twenty-six chapters are divided into sections, and almost all sections bear a header with the name of a character. The sections are narrated from the perspective of that character either in the first person or from a third-person limited point of view, and occasional sections are told from the first-person-plural perspective of particular groups. There is also an omniscient narrator in the prologue and in the sections labeled “Saturn,” but Saturn is not the narrator in any of these sections. Nor does he ever speak for himself as a first-person narrator, except in chapter 10, where he has a brief conversation with his estranged lover, Liz. But even though he is not the literal narrator, he nevertheless performs a function that is similar to but also calls into question what Wayne Booth refers to as the “implied author.” For Booth, the “implied author” is not the real or actual author, but an imaginary substitute for the author. The real author “creates not simply an ideal, impersonal ‘man in general’ but an implied version of ‘himself’” to assume the responsibility of calling the narrative shots.<sup>19</sup> The implied author might best be understood as what H. Porter Abbott calls the “sensitivity” of the narrative, or its most reliable conscious subject, given that both the real author and the narrator proper can easily be considered unreliable either because of their personal biases and ideological values or because the truth of the narrative exceeds the limitations of their consciousness. In this case, the implied author represents something akin to the “intentionality” of the narrative.<sup>20</sup> As a character in the novel, Saturn takes form as a parody of Booth’s implied author in that he is a fictive construct with the authority to write the story, create narrative voices, give stage directions, construct characters and storylines, decide both the conflict and the outcome of the narrative, and, as in the present case, give minority characters their own sections to narrate in the first person as a sign of his benevolent multiculturalism. Stated differently, Saturn/Plascencia—not the real author but the fictive construct, the amalgamation of assumed author and

mastermind character, the narrative's consciousness—is the behind-the-scenes omniscient narrator. Saturn, however, differs from Booth's implied author in a fundamental way: he loses his imperviousness and unbridled authority when the farmworker characters, Smiley in particular, dismantle his facade and expose both his arbitrariness and his despotic value system, ripping away his veil of omniscience and, in the process, weakening (but not overcoming) the power he has over them.<sup>21</sup> In effect, not only does Saturn's fallibility in his role as the novel's intentionality create a sense of deep instability in the logic that holds the novel together, but it also threatens to tear that logic asunder. Thus, the novel stands as, among other things, a sharp critique of the supposed neutrality or objectivity of the implied author in realist fiction, and perhaps as an indictment of the assumed stability of the novel form itself.

Saturn's role in the novel as implied author/omniscient narrator generates a series of paradoxes. A war between characters and the novel's author challenges the conventional contract between author, text, and audience that we expect when we read a fictional work. We don't normally expect characters to be conscious of the fact that they are indeed characters. Nor do we expect them to challenge the authority and intentions of the author who created them. Saturn is correct to recognize, and perhaps even to be concerned about, the fact that novels often take on a life of their own beyond the intentions of the author, and he tries to stunt the characters' efforts to make this happen. Yet even though Saturn ultimately wins the political war in the novel, he is not successful in reigning in the extratextual signification that occurs beyond the pages of *The People of Paper*. Despite Saturn's obsessive desire to maintain strict control of the production of meaning in the novel, the novel's signification nevertheless exceeds the author's intentions. This is to say that within the logic of the novel's status as an art object, Saturn has lost the war of aesthetics insofar as the characters' thoughts, words, and actions have assumed a dynamic social significance that surpasses the author's individual consciousness. The irony of Saturn's situation is that as much as he tries to control every aspect of his characters' lives as he strives to complete the narrative, his failure to do so is actually the mark of a successful novel, for it is precisely the meanings in the novel that surpass authorial intentionality that give it critical depth, aesthetic complexity, and historical relevance. In this case, when the farmworker characters expose Saturn's fallibility, they have also brought to light the unequal relations between author and characters, or relatedly, between the power of capital and the needs of the working class. More pointedly, and in a symbolic sense, the near dismantling of the novel form caused by the breakdown of the conventional author-character-reader relation strongly parallels the unraveling

of neoliberalism's structure of power brought on by its own internal contradictions and the struggles of the working class.

### **EMF Strategies of Resistance**

Now that I have established that the EMF's war is fought on two fronts—against ideology and a fallible omniscient narrator—I shall discuss the strategies the workers deploy to fight the war. To wage an effective campaign against Saturn, the EMF workers rely on various plans and tactical maneuvers with varying degrees of success and failure, but given the particular kind of enemy that the EMF is fighting against, and given the characters' condition as discursive constructs, the workers come to recognize that they must engage in a nontraditional kind of warfare. Thinking back to his youth years later, Froggy remembers, "What we fought against didn't use guns or shanks . . . didn't use stones or weapons of steel, nor could it be defeated by such" (46). When they try shooting guns up into the air, attempting to penetrate the sky and injure Saturn, the bullets fall harmlessly to the ground. So they decide to launch a "full assault" on Saturn, but "it [is] an attack without gunfire or mortar explosions" (87). They host cock fights, start a dairy farm, and collect donations to produce income that will sustain the war financially, even though their financial limitations are not the primary impediment to victory. They burn lumber and tires to create smoke in an effort to block Saturn's vision, but this strategy backfires as it eventually causes health problems for the group. They line the walls and roofs of their homes with sheets of lead, which Saturn's vision cannot penetrate, but the lead eventually leaks into the air and water and makes them sick, so they are forced to abandon that strategy. Late in the novel, the EMF launches an offensive by attempting to crowd Saturn off the page, forcing him into a corner. They attempt to out-populate his power on the page and to speak so loudly and forcefully that they will be able to "drown the voice of Saturn." In so doing, their plan is to seize control of the novel's pages, a textual coup d'état. For a while, the strategy is successful in forcing Saturn to retreat, and the EMF characters believe that they have finally caused his downfall from the sky. "Saturn heard them approaching, crowding into the page, pushing and trying to press Saturn further and further to the margin" (208).

Notwithstanding their weaknesses, the farmworker characters seize control of page space and narrative structure as part of their war strategy. The layout and appearance of the chapters in the novel coincide with the story of the war between the EMF and Saturn as it unfolds. Of the twenty-six chapters, sixteen are typeset in a standard single column of text that spans the page from the left to the right margin. Six chapters (1, 4, 7, 15, 20, and 24), however, are typeset with two narrow

vertical columns on each page. In the first four of these two-column chapters, the left-hand pages are always devoted to Saturn's point of view, who occupies just one column, while the other is left blank. His columns are noticeably wider than those of other characters partly owing to the fact that he does not have to share the page with any other characters. The right-hand pages are reserved for all other characters. At one point (in chapter 4), Saturn reflects on the EMF's two battalions, one led by Froggy and the other by Subcomandante Sandra.<sup>22</sup> As if to emphasize the age-old strategy of divide and conquer, Saturn splits the narrative into two sub-columns, one for each of the battalions (56). Saturn's vulnerability begins to appear in chapter 15, where he is missing entirely from his dedicated page. Only the header with his name remains, as his columns are empty. Saturn has gone AWOL as he attempts to escape his own internal weaknesses. Then in chapter 24, at the height of EMF's most successful military campaign against Saturn, and with Saturn retreating, some of the vertical columns are now turned sideways, or horizontally aligned, and for the first time in the novel other characters begin to appear on the left side of the book to share Saturn's space. More significantly, Saturn's columns have now become narrower, shorter, and noticeably pushed into a corner. But Saturn eventually returns with a vengeance, ultimately seizing total control of the narration in the final pages of the novel and reassuming his role as the novel's narrator, effectively ending the EMF's offensive to bring him down.

Of all the plans implemented by the EMF against Saturn, Little Merced employs what is perhaps the most effective strategy, even if at first it might seem individualist, escapist, and not fully developed in the novel. Through the power of mental concentration and the redirection of her emotions, she learns how to block her thoughts from both Saturn and the reader, and the blockage appears as a black patch on the page, covering some of the text. At first the black patches are small, obscuring a few lines of text at most. But Little Merced develops her skill to the point that she is able to blacken entire columns with varying degrees of success. While her obfuscation skills provide temporary relief for the young girl and her father, they are still severely limited and fall far short of neutralizing Saturn's power over the EMF workers.

Little Merced's blackout skills, however, can be read as an emergent structure that, when developed to its full potential, will be able to overcome Saturn and the power he represents. She learns her skills from Baby Nostradamus, whom she meets on the bus during her migration from Mexico to Southern California. At first Baby Nostradamus, a slobbering child, appears to be brain dead or severely challenged mentally, but the girl soon learns that he possesses the gift of clairvoyance, allowing him to see, among other things, the book's last sentence before it

is written. The extraordinary Baby Nostradamus knows the exact temperatures of halos, he can cryptically predict the future, and he is able to communicate with his sense of touch and through his emotions. Most importantly, he is able to hide his thoughts from Saturn and the readers.<sup>23</sup> As such, his columns are filled not with words but with black ink. In an interview with Matthew Baker, Plascencia (the real author) reveals that “Baby Nostradamus is a prolific mind but masquerades as a retarded baby,” and Plascencia draws a distinction between the “white space” readers occasionally find on literary pages and the blackened spaces that fill Baby Nostradamus’s columns. “The way I understand the page . . . white space is silence and any inscription equals sound. Yet when I see the black rectangle in *Tristram Shandy*, I read a quiet sadness—death. . . . I wasn’t satisfied with the Baby Nostradamus signifying silence. As the novel progressed, I tried to turn the darkness from a limp muteness into an active form of resistance.”<sup>24</sup> While Baby Nostradamus does not pose any significant threat to Saturn as a “form of resistance” in the novel proper, he represents symbolically, together with Little Mercedes, the emergence of a structure that at some point will enable workers to challenge Saturn’s claim to power. I make this assertion because of Baby Nostradamus’s characteristics: he is a child, not fully developed and still emerging; he has the ability to see the future, which implies that to some extent he is already in the future, or from the future; his thoughts are closed off to Saturn, or he is immune to Saturn’s panoptic gaze; and he has the ability to communicate without language through his emotions. Because of these characteristics, I want to suggest a strong correlation between Baby Nostradamus’s alternative form of consciousness and Raymond Williams’s concept of “structure of feeling.”

In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams rethinks the concept of “structure” through a critical examination of the base–superstructure model of orthodox Marxism, arguing that Marx’s conception of determination has been misunderstood by most Marxists who came after Marx. He shows that Marx himself stood against the separation of thought from material production and criticized definitions of “structure” and “superstructure” that treat these abstractions as if they were separable concrete entities.<sup>25</sup> Williams states, “It is the reduction of the social to fixed forms that remains the basic error,” and he adds that the “mistake . . . is in taking terms of analysis as terms of substance.”<sup>26</sup> For him, Marx did not argue for a study of “base” and “superstructure” as fixed forms, the former as a timeless synchronic structure determining the latter, but for an analysis of the “processes” that inform the ever-changing relationships between the material and nonmaterial aspects of social and cultural life. Thus, for Williams the concept of “structure” as a shaping social force should not be limited to the economic, but must include social insti-

tutions, cultural traditions, and ideological formations. He further categorizes these institutions, traditions, and formations as either “residual, dominant or emergent,” depending on whether they originally sprung from a now archaic mode of production, serve the interests of the contemporary status quo, or represent the aspirations of some futuristic society, respectively.<sup>27</sup> Of these categories, the emergent alone possesses the potential for creating revolutionary change. It is not surprising then that Williams attempts to answer the question of where emergent structures come from. In order to be genuinely emergent, a structure must already exist as a knowable system, that is, as an already contemplated and articulated set of ideas, a method of explanation, or an ideology that can be named and categorized. But *before* the emergent structure ever becomes articulated, *before* it is understood intellectually or analytically, *before* it is ever explained in written form, it exists in a “pre-emergent” stage where it is *felt* in the lived experiences, desires, attitudes, and emotions of individuals—in their “practical consciousness.” This pre-emergent stage of emergent structures is what Williams refers to as “structures of feeling.”<sup>28</sup>

The skill that Little Merced learns from Baby Nostradamus and that she begins to develop on her own toward the end of the novel can be understood, within the logic of the argument I have been making, as a “structure of feeling”—an emergent formation of revolutionary consciousness still in its embryonic state, an “optimism of the will,” that with time will allow the EMF workers to develop a revolutionary practice not dependent on the structures of dominance and in this way shut out Saturn entirely from their stories and from their lives. As the novel ends, Little Merced shades her father with a parasol, sheltering them both from Saturn’s view as they walk off the page together, successfully escaping the deterministic world of Saturn’s novel and, more importantly, directing our attention to the possibility of a futuristic, truly democratic world not based on the commodification of sadness.

### Conclusion

In *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx* (2009), Chris Harman argues against the idea of a bad capitalism (neoliberalism, financialization, trickle-down economics, etc.) versus a good capitalism (regulation, Keynesianism, demand-side economics, etc.). In Harman’s view, one with which I concur, capitalist ideology must always “pin the blame on something other than capitalism, as such,” even if this means vilifying one aspect of capitalism rather than placing blame on the entire system of accumulation itself.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, as we come to discover in *The People of Paper*, the problems faced by the EMF workers do not lie

exclusively in the motives and actions of the fallible Saturn, as omniscient narrator, implied author, and the figurative embodiment of neoliberalism, but also, and principally, in the entire structure of power that he represents, a structure that determines the unequal relations between author and characters, or between class power and subservience, consolidated or challenged by narratives from both above and below. The main conflict in the novel then comes down to who will control the writing of the workers' narratives (both literary and ideological) and who will decide what lies in store for them in the future. This battle over narrative control takes shape partly in the formal structures of the novel and its typography, but it is also a fight over the narrative's content. Ralph and Elisa Landin, the characters who provide financial support for Saturn/Plascencia's novel, state this point most emphatically: "If we had learned anything from this story it was to be cautious of paper—to be mindful of its fragile construction and sharp edges, but mostly to be cautious of what is written on it" (219). Plascencia's fictive benefactors fear the subversive content of literature, but the farmworker characters by contrast come to embrace its revolutionary potential. Initially the farmworkers attempt to prevent Saturn from hearing them by keeping silent or whispering, by hiding their words and thoughts, but they later come to realize that to challenge their domination successfully they need to be vocal. They need to write their stories, and they need to rewrite history. In a speech to the EMF workers, Froggy explains, "We are fighting a war against a story, against the history that is being written by Saturn. We believed that silence was our best weapon against the intrusion of Saturn [but] learned that history cannot be fought with sealed lips" (209).

*The People of Paper* dramatizes a conflict that exposes the correlation between literature and society, between narratives and ideology—that is, between the structures of the novel and the social structures of dominance in the current period of neoliberal capitalism. And the novel makes us wonder as well about the similarities between the lives of the characters and our own lives. In a sense, we are all indeed people of paper, textualized within neoliberalism's ideological narratives of history and class power, and faced with a choice either to grant our consent passively to be dictated by those narratives or to wage a war against their claims of omniscience.

## NOTES

Thanks to Marcelle Maese-Cohen, John Alba Cutler, Dennis López, and Emma Appel for their comments on an early draft of this essay.

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1. Ramón Saldívar, "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Realism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction," *American Literary History* 23, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 596n4.
2. Salvador Plascencia, *The People of Paper* (New York: Harcourt, 2005), 34. Hereafter cited in the text.
3. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 34.
4. *Ibid.*, 24.
5. Laurence Cox and Alf Gunvald Nilsen, *We Make Our Own History: Marxism and Social Movements in the Twilight of Neoliberalism* (London: Pluto, 2014), vi. I added emphasis to the phrase "restoring the class power" because it implies misleadingly that capitalists lost class power at some point in the past, and that now neoliberalism represents an effort to regain it. But the capitalist class has held state power consistently since the inception of capitalism, at least in the Western world. More accurately, neoliberalism represents an effort by capitalists to consolidate a radically new phase of unregulated capitalism.
6. *Ibid.*, 59.
7. *Ibid.*, 71.
8. Cox and Nilsen write that "between 1960 and 1997 . . . the ratio between the share of income received by the richest 20 per cent of the world's countries to that received by the poorest 20 per cent increased from 30:1 to 74:1; the richest 20 per cent of humanity received more than 85 per cent of the world's wealth, while the remaining 80 per cent had to make do with less than 15 per cent of the world's wealth" (*ibid.*, 2).
9. "First Declaration of La Realidad for Humanity and against Neoliberalism," Zapatista Army of National Liberation, [http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/ezln/ccri\\_1st\\_dec\\_real.html](http://flag.blackened.net/revolt/mexico/ezln/ccri_1st_dec_real.html).
10. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 2.
11. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971), 175n75. The passage originally appeared in Antonio Gramsci, *Passato e presente*, vol. 6, *Quaderni del carcere* (Turin: Einaudi, 1951), 6. "Pessimism of the intellect" is sometimes translated as "Pessimism of the intelligence." Gramsci ascribes this passage to the novelist Romain Rolland.
12. See, e.g., Enrique D. Dussel, "From Critical Theory to the Philosophy of Liberation: Some Themes for Dialogue," *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 31. Dussel writes, "Communism is not some empirical future moment in history, but rather a postulate for practical orientation whose historical realization would be impossible." Here Dussel expresses a healthy dose of "pessimism of the intellect" but lacks any "optimism of the will."
13. Peter Hallward, "Communism of the Intellect, Communism of the Will," in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 2010), 112.
14. Carlos Gallego, *Chicana/o Subjectivity and the Politics of Identity: Between Recognition and Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 202. Gallego argues that "radical universality . . . transcends artificially created boundaries like culture and nation," but "in fact resembles . . . classless socialism" (200).
15. Carl Freedman and Neil Lazarus, "The Mandarin Marxism of Theodor Adorno," *Rethinking Marxism* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 95, 96.
16. Gramsci, *Notebooks*, 12. Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Appara-

tuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review, 1971), 145, draws on Gramsci’s theory of hegemony in theorizing Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) and Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs). These two categories are based on the concepts of consent and coercion, respectively. Althusser explains that in practice ISAs and RSAs overlap in their functions, given that there is always a repressive aspect of the ISAs and an ideological aspect of the RSAs. “There is no such thing as a purely repressive apparatus,” and similarly, “There is no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus.” This implies that most people do not freely give their consent to be controlled; they do so with the tacit knowledge that their failure to grant consent would likely result in some form of coercion to force them into compliance. In other words, the stick is always hidden just behind the carrot.

17. Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 1997), 63.

18. Gramsci, *Notebooks*, 309.

19. Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 70. Originally published in 1961.

20. H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 84–86.

21. For an analysis of metafiction in *The People of Paper*, see Saldívar, “Historical Fantasy.” Saldívar argues that Plascencia’s novel strives “to depict accurately the truth of which the text bears witness free of textual or historical coercions” (582). See also Alma Granado, “Rebordering the Borderlands: Writing Violence, (Im)migration, and Surveillance” (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2014), 51–75.

22. Although the topic of gender is beyond the scope of this essay, it is a central motif in *The People of Paper*. While some female characters, such as Little Merced and Sandra, are complex and assertive, others serve as the cause of sadness for male characters when they abandon their mates. Merced, Merced de Papel, Sandra, Liz, and Cameroon all abandon male characters for different reasons. The notion that women-induced sadness for male characters drives the novel could be read as problematic from a feminist perspective, and it deserves a full analysis. For a reading of Merced de Papel as a “gendered non-citizen,” see Granado, “Rebordering the Borderlands,” 64–69.

23. The novel’s critique of the author and narrator also implicates, to a lesser degree, the readers because they form part of the implicit contract that determines the novel form. In thinking about her father’s resentment toward Saturn for his pervasive vigilance of their lives, Little Merced begins to “feel her own resentment, not only toward Saturn, but also against those who stared down at the page, against those who followed sentences into her father’s room and into his bed” (186).

24. Matthew Baker, “An Interview with Salvador Plascencia,” *Nashville Review*, April 1, 2010, <https://as.vanderbilt.edu/nashvillereview/archives/1084>.

25. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 78.

26. *Ibid.*, 129.

27. *Ibid.*, 121–27.

28. *Ibid.*, 128–35.

29. Chris Harman, *Zombie Capitalism: Global Crisis and the Relevance of Marx* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2009), 292.