

# NATURE, CAPITALISM, AND THE TEMPORALITIES OF SLEEP: ON KAREN THOMPSON WALKER'S *THE DREAMERS*

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For decades now, the categories of *nature* and the *natural* have been under such suspicion in the humanities as to be all but unusable for critical social thought.<sup>1</sup> The suspicion is not without foundation. Theorists have been understandably wary of the reactionary uses to which such ideas can be put, not least as regards the policing of women's and queer bodies (i.e., the valorization of the socially normative as natural) and the association of nonwhite peoples with the precivilized and the "savage" (the disparagement of the purportedly natural as inhuman, violent, and untamed). Perhaps less often noted is that *nature* signifies rather differently in different instances of such suspicion. Critical wariness toward that category can, in fact, take a number of analytically distinct forms, which often function implicitly in a given argument rather than being subject to explicit explication. Let me name just three of the more common understandings: (a) The appeal to nature in discussions of social arrangements is said to mask, and thereby to abet, the coercive function of social norms, such that the unnatural and the deviant become bases for social exclusion. (b) Any reference to a nature that precedes culture risks occluding how such a condition is a fantasy construct elaborated from *within* culture, a projection backward into the past of culturally mediated and conditioned ideas, which serve to mythologize either a fall from prelapsarian wholeness or a triumph over precivilized "barbarity." And (c) appeals to human nature or to the natural order of things can work to justify current injustice by naturalizing the sociohistorical, contributing to the ideological gestures by which the dominant order makes a set of social relations appear permanent, inevitable, and unchangeable.

These are hardly the only assumptions of interest in the current context, and there is of course some overlap among them. (The third claim might in fact be read as the underlying, animating condition of the other two.) Though one could link each one of them to a specific theoretical tradition—roughly (and in order), the Foucauldian, the Derridean, and

the Marxist/Lukácsian<sup>2</sup>—they are in their most general forms able to travel across such divisions and inform a variety of politico-theoretical projects. I’ve deliberately stated them in this general form, moreover—which is also the weakest or most plausible construction—so as to give the critique of nature its conceptual due. Stated in this general way, the propositions can be viewed as nature-skeptical without being nature-denying.<sup>3</sup> They permit a critique of the category of nature for the political uses to which it is put, but do not necessitate a rejection of any and all appeals to that category. They in no way compel (though they can accommodate) an antirealist or radically constructionist epistemology in which the natural is a social construct through and through, with no ontological reality of its own outside of discourse and language.

But the common sense of contemporary theory has tended rather toward the stronger, nature-denying version of such claims. Already in 1995 Kate Soper felt the need to warn that granting the conceptual-linguistic character of our *thoughts* about nature “does not justify the conclusion that there is no ontological distinction between the ideas we have of [it] and that which the ideas are about. . . . [I]t is not language that has a hole in the ozone layer; and the ‘real’ thing continues to be polluted and degraded even as we refine our deconstructive insights at the level of the signifier.”<sup>4</sup> Since that time, the discourses trumpeting or at least assuming the artifactual character of what we call “nature” have rather proliferated than abated. Posthumanists continue to proclaim with Donna Haraway that “‘nature’ *cannot* pre-exist . . . its . . . discursive construction”;<sup>5</sup> Latourian theorists insist that the natural, as a domain of reality autonomous from and unhybridized with the social, is a phantasm of modern science that does not correspond to any nonconceptual reality; and feminists influenced by the critique of sex as a product of discourse reprise the view that gender is nothing more or less than the artifice of its iterated performance, with only a contingent or arbitrary relation to biophysical reality.<sup>6</sup> This is just a partial list.

Such assumptions may have their value in specific disciplinary or polemical contexts. But, in an indispensable recent book, Andreas Malm details the trouble they cause for thinkers whose stated aims are “green” or ecocritical. Malm at one point provides the following compendium of quotations from Noel Castree’s *Making Sense of Nature: Representation, Politics and Democracy* (2013): Nature “doesn’t exist ‘out there’ (or ‘in here,’ within us) waiting to be understood”; it is instead “a particularly powerful fiction.” “[N]ature exists only so long as we collectively believe it to exist.” And there is no “pre-existing entity ontologically *available* to be represented in different ways,” hence no way to adjudicate the competing

views of nature in (for example) the pamphlets that Castree analyzes from the 1980s documenting the battle between a timber company and the activists trying to preserve the ecosystem that company was destroying.<sup>7</sup> Malm's book is concerned above all with the poverty of such theoretical claims in the face of global warming. He's therefore especially exercised by statements like this one, from Castree: "Global climate change is an *idea* rather than simply a set of 'real biophysical processes' occurring regardless of our representations of it"; or this one, from Neil Smith: "The attempt to distinguish social vis-à-vis natural contributions to climate change is not only a fool's debate but a fool's philosophy: it leaves sacrosanct the chasm between nature and society . . . that 'the production of nature' thesis sought to corrode."<sup>8</sup> Malm points out that the first of these claims performs the fallacy of making the real, external object contingent upon and indeed an effect of the representations through which we grasp it, and has as its necessary corollary the proposition that were we to change our ideas about climate change, the crisis would simply evaporate. (One presumes, Malm notes, that Castree would dissent from such a conclusion, but it follows irresistibly from his premises.) The second statement tacitly admits that the thesis of nature's "production" by humans is useless for thinking about anthropogenic climate change, as the latter concept has referential force only inasmuch as one grants nature's independence from and ontological priority to human consciousness and will.

Malm's book can be read as providing a corrective to such theoretical excesses by leading us back toward the weak version of the assumptions about nature with which I began. Without denying that humans' access to nature is mediated by representations, or that certain discourses about the (un)natural can abet and rationalize social domination, he argues that ecocritics are best served by an epistemological orientation called *substance monist property dualism*. This is the thesis that human beings and the natural world are made up of the same *substance*—matter—but have distinctive *properties*, such that humans can be said to possess agency in a way that inanimate nature does not, while nature comprises (in Soper's words) "those material structures and processes that are independent of human activity (in the sense that they are not a humanly created product), and whose forces and causal powers are the necessary condition of every human practice, and determine the possible forms it can take."<sup>9</sup> The details by which Malm arrives at these points need not detain us here. Suffice it to say that only a distinction of this kind can enable us to grasp how humans *affect* the natural world but do not thereby *produce* it. The distinction is thus the condition for those further refinements necessary for a materialist critique of climate change, which views it as an effect

not merely of “human” agency but of the fossil *economy* as this has been built and imposed through force by a particular class of humans over the course of the past two centuries. As Malm writes elsewhere, with respect to the triumph of steam technology and fossil fuels over earlier sources of power: “By the nature of the social order of things,” steam power “could only be installed *by the owners of the means of production*. . . . [T]his class of people comprised an infinitesimal fraction of the population of *Homo sapiens* in the early nineteenth century . . . ; at no moment did the species [in toto] vote for” the adoption of steam or for the development of a fully fledged fossil economy. Rather, “[s]team won because it augmented the power of some over others,” of “[c]apitalists in a small corner of the Western world” over and against the rest of us.<sup>10</sup>

Malm’s claims belong to a tradition of ecological Marxism whose recent incarnation stretches back at least to James O’Connor’s 1988 essay “Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Theoretical Introduction.”<sup>11</sup> The tradition includes such groundbreaking work as Soper’s *What Is Nature?* (1995), Ted Benton’s *Natural Relations* (1993), John Bellamy Foster’s “Marx’s Theory of Metabolic Rift” (1999) and *Marx’s Ecology* (2000), and Paul Burkett’s *Marxism and Ecological Economics* (2006).<sup>12</sup> The vigorous continuity of this work across decades is enough to indicate that the nature-denying theoretical tendency has consistently been met by a realist–materialist approach that accepts the weak version of constructivism but resists its tendency to hypostatize the cultural and treat all appeals to nature as equally—identically—invidious. Central to all of the arguments that follow is the assumption that serious thinking about the environment would do well to ground itself in this (historical) materialist tradition, over and against the claims of radical constructivism or the “new” materialism.

But I’ve dwelt especially on Malm’s contributions for a different reason, as well. His *Fossil Capital* (2016) and *Progress of This Storm* (2018) make (together) a compelling case for thinking the *natural* in relation to the *temporal*. They seek to retrieve from contemporary disparagement not just the independent reality of nature but the category of *historical time*. In this, they form part of a constellation of recent works that invite us to reimagine the conceptual grounds for resisting the ravages of contemporary capitalism. These works trace how capital’s assault on nature is also an assault on temporal modalities that cannot be subsumed within homogeneous, empty time. They suggest that any contemporary reckoning with capitalism must include both a theoretical rehabilitation of nature’s independence and a retrieval of temporalities that are natural in the sense of belonging to biophysical processes predating and shaping

human practice, yet historical inasmuch as they introduce the possibility of punctures into capital's smooth functioning: pausing, interrupting, refusing to be swallowed by, or otherwise disturbing the temporal homogeneity required and enforced by the commodity form. I've discussed a number of these works elsewhere in the context of an inquiry into non-synchronous time.<sup>13</sup> Here I wish to bring Malm's argument into dialogue with two books that make exceptionally visible such time's relation to the natural world: Jonathan Crary's *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2017) and Karen Thompson Walker's novel, *The Dreamers* (2019). As we shall see, one of the remarkable features of both works is that they tether their inquiries into nature's independence and nonsynchronous time to a collective experience of sleep. The books locate in sleep the residue of a natural periodicity that interrupts capital's drive toward perpetual wakefulness and homogeneous time. They affirm what Crary calls "the latent desires and collective powers of a multitude of sleepers" such that "dreaming [becomes] a . . . turbulent convergence of the lived present with ghosts from a fugitive and still indiscernible [yet decidedly collective] future."<sup>14</sup>

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The linkage in Malm between the temporal and the natural comes as part of his large-scale effort to revise our conceptions of global postmodernity. His revision centers especially on the association of the postmodern with the spatial. In *Progress*, he shows how theorists who proclaim (with Fredric Jameson) that our world is characterized by the "predominance of space over time"—that "[w]e now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic"—ground that proclamation in the idea that the postmodern *has finally eradicated nature*.<sup>15</sup> Hence, for Jameson, it was precisely the incomplete character of the modernization project in the first half of the twentieth century that made time so central to the modernist sensibility: the awareness of time was indelibly inscribed in the lived experience of contrast between older, more rural spaces in which the diurnal–seasonal rhythms of nature had yet to be vanquished by the machinery of capital, and urban spaces in which industrialization, commodification, technological Prometheanism ruled. Postmodernity is said to mark the end of this awareness because it signaled the obliteration of the natural itself. In it we purportedly witness the final colonization by capital of those spaces and ways of inhabiting time that were bound up with nature's own temporalities, along with the "real" subsumption of such temporal modes to the commodity form. The postmodern is, then, according to this reading,

a condition characterized by the triumph of space (over time) that is in fact enabled by the prior triumph of technocapitalist logics over the natural world.

Malm's large argument is that this view misses the *insistence* of unvanquished nature in our present, along with a corollary persistence of time, an ineradicable experience of the temporal as constituting our *now* in its disfigurement. Anthropogenic climate change is proof positive of these assertions. It offers irrefutable evidence of a natural world that precedes and exceeds human control—a world catastrophically affected by human agency but in no sense produced or constructed by it, and one that reveals those human effects in the form of increasingly toxic disequilibria. Furthermore, Malm writes, “[w]herever we look at our changing climate, we find ourselves” not marooned in space but “in the grip of . . . *time*.” The “effects” of the “running carbon cycle” are “always delayed,” for “[i]t takes time before a certain quantity of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is realised as a corresponding amount of warming, and before that warming takes its full toll on the ecosystems.” Global warming is thus on one hand “seriously backloaded”: the present registers a rise in temperature whose genesis is in the historical past; yet, on the other, such warming is “substantially deferred,” inasmuch as “the cumulative effects of current emissions” will only fully arrive in the future. The result of this is that climate change is “a messy mix-up of time scales . . . ; in an elevated sense of the term, every *conjuncture* now combines relics and arrows, loops and postponements that stretch from the deepest past to the most distant future, via a now that is non-contemporaneous with itself.”<sup>16</sup>

“A now that is non-contemporaneous with itself,” an experience of historical time as a “messy mix-up of time scales,” of “relics and arrows, loops and postponements” . . . The formulations bear a striking resemblance to those of Walter Benjamin (from whom *The Progress of This Storm* takes its title), who famously proposed a method of inquiry aimed at revealing how historical time is perennially out of joint with itself. “History,” Benjamin writes, “is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [*Jetztzeit*]”; every past “carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption,” while each present moment is equally “shot through with splinters of messianic time.”<sup>17</sup> The mode of temporality revealed by global climate change is exactly of this kind: “a twisted, multiplex temporality” that overlays the historical past on the present and charges the present with intimations of futurity.<sup>18</sup> Yet this apprehension is best understood alongside Theodor Adorno's gloss on Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* study (1928). There, Adorno claims, Benjamin showed how “everything existing is to be grasped as the

interweaving of historical and natural being. . . . [T]he elements of nature and history are not fused with each other, rather they break apart and interweave at the same time in such a fashion that the natural appears as a sign for history and history, where it seems to be most historical, appears as a sign of nature.”<sup>19</sup> Such statements serve as counters not merely to the radical constructivist view of nature discussed earlier, but to Jameson’s Marxist theses about capitalism, space, and nature’s contemporary eclipse. They stress how our contemporaneity is less a postnatural, posthistorical condition than a temporal dialectic in which human history transforms the natural world by infecting yet never fusing with (or obliterating) it, rendering each (history, nature) into the sign of the other. The natural is in our warming world precisely a sign of the historical: our perilous levels of airborne carbon dioxide, cataclysmic weather patterns, melting polar ice, and unprecedented species extinction are symptomatic expressions of two centuries of fossil capitalism, which releases, suspends, and compresses in the *now* the toxic particulates of a devastating futurity. But at the same time—and by the same token—the historical has itself become both sign and symptom of the natural: social processes have taken the form of an increasingly reified and (apparently) unalterable “second nature,” while historical events repeatedly reveal themselves as founded in and straining against the limits of the biophysical.

To stress the persistence of nature in the present is thus also to recover the (hetero)temporal and the dialectical–historical, over and against the spatial and posthistorical. The example of global warming provides a powerful demonstration of how this operates in that portion of the material world that remains external to the human body. But Crary’s *24/7* calls attention to a more intimate, somaticpersonal dimension to the problem. Crary explores the injuries inflicted on diurnal sleep by our “24/7” contemporaneity. He examines the fate of slumber—those hours given over to “a human need . . . that cannot be colonized and harnessed to a massive engine of profitability”—in a world where such profitability depends on the ceaseless internalization of a demand to be always “on,” consuming, surfing, digitally self-fashioning, or just plain interfacing with our devices.<sup>20</sup> The term itself (*24/7*) “connotes an arbitrary, uninflected schema of a week, extracted from any unfolding of variegated or cumulative experience.” It names at once “a static redundancy that disavows its relation to the rhythmic and periodic textures of human life” and “the final capitalist mirage of post-history, of an exorcism of the otherness that is the motor of historical change.”<sup>21</sup> Claims like these reveal already a striking congruence in the diagnoses of Crary and Malm: for both, the calamitous character of our present derives from its denial of *nature* and

*time*. Crary's "rhythmic and periodic textures of human life" are textures grounded in biophysical realities—in the realities of the human organism, however modified by evolution and social history—yet they're also indelibly linked with time, with the peculiar temporal periodicity of the nature inhabiting the human body, as well as with the otherness lurking in each social now as portent of historical transformation.

The category of sleep then functions for Crary in a manner akin to climate for Malm. It indexes the independent reality of a nature and a temporal modality that capitalism tries yet fails to eliminate. Sleep "will always collide with the demands of a 24/7 universe," Crary writes. "[It] is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism . . . a ubiquitous but unseen reminder of a premodernity that has never been fully exceeded, of the agricultural universe which began vanishing 400 years ago."<sup>22</sup> The modality of time to which this points is neither unitary nor linear, but a time charged with the suspended potentialities of what remains undigested by the capitalist present. When Crary speaks of sleep as at once a piece of unconquered nature and an expressly temporal dimension of such nature—when he calls it "an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism"—he means that it is the residue of a nature that thwarts capital's effort to render the present "identical to itself . . . and thus in principle without specters."<sup>23</sup> It prefigures some *other* way of inhabiting time and organizing social life. Sleep "is the recurrence in our lives of a waiting, a pause. It affirms the necessity of postponement, and the deferred retrieval or recommencement of whatever has been postponed." It is a temporally heterogeneous redoubt of "uselessness and intrinsic passivity," a noninstrumentalized breach in a world that compels us to "reimagine and refigure [ourselves] as being of the same consistency and values as the dematerialized commodities and social connections in which [we] are immersed so extensively." The permanent, noncommodifiable periodicity of sleep stages the impossibility of this "harmonization between actual living beings and the demands of 24/7 capitalism"; it exposes the fraudulence of our efforts to deny "the humiliating limitations of lived experience" by "accumulat[ing] a patchwork of surrogate identities that subsist 24/7, sleeplessly, continuously, as inanimate impersonations rather than extensions of the self."<sup>24</sup> By its very naturalness and periodic necessity—in sum—sleep is a perpetually renewed disruption to the depthlessness and tyrannical homogeneity of a 24/7 "present . . . without specters."

The revolutionary potential of that disruption is bound up with sleep's relation to collectivity. Or—to put it differently—the biophysical and the heterotemporal are quite surprisingly linked in Crary's text to the category



of the social. This is partly a function of the fact that sleep requires we relinquish ourselves to the collective care of others. (Without the implicit contract of a world that will not violate us while sleeping, recurrent unconsciousness would scarcely be tolerable to human beings at all.) The link is also a consequence of the fact that sleep remains the province of a radical “release from individuation”; it entails a nightly, transpersonal deliverance from the reified digital “identities” that contemporary capital requires us to construct and dwell in by day. “In the depersonalization of slumber,” Crary writes, “the sleeper inhabits a world in common, a shared enactment of withdrawal from the calamitous nullity and waste of 24/7 praxis.” This world in common or withdrawn collectivity makes of sleep both an “unvanquish[ed] remnant . . . of the everyday” and a token of liberated futurity: “the . . . temporary absence of the sleeper [from waking life] always contains a bond to a future, to a possibility of renewal and hence of freedom.”<sup>25</sup>

But perhaps most importantly, the link between sleep and collectivity lies in the connection of both to dreaming. The meaning of this latter experience has of course been diminished over modernity’s long course to the shrunken dimension of the personal. Not only do we now live in an era that seeks to foreclose all wishes not linked to the private self and individual self-interest, but “[i]t is [also] impossible,” a century on from Freud, “to conjure up an *individual* wish or desire so unavowable that it cannot be consciously acknowledged and vicariously gratified.” Against this privatization and diminishment, Crary would have us reclaim what’s become the only truly unavowable wish: the *collective* dream of overthrowing a system that ceaselessly exploits and immiserates us, compelling isolation while integrating us into “connectivities” of an alienated kind. This is the dream secreted within “the latent desires and collective powers of a multitude of sleepers.”<sup>26</sup> Crary’s text concludes with that wish, in a passage that echoes in striking fashion the more expressly ecological arguments of Malm:

Sleep’s anomalous persistence [in the present] has to be understood in relation to the ongoing destruction of the processes that sustain existence on the planet. Because capitalism cannot limit itself, the notion of preservation or conservation is a systemic impossibility. Against this background, the restorative inertness of sleep counters the deathliness of all the accumulation, financialization, and waste that have devastated anything once held in common. Now there is actually only one dream, superseding all

others: it is of a shared world whose fate is not terminal, a world without billionaires, which has a future other than barbarism or the post-human, and in which history can take other forms than reified nightmares of catastrophe. It is possible that . . . the imaginings of a future without capitalism begin as dreams of sleep. These would be intimations of sleep as a radical interruption, . . . of sleep which, at the most mundane level of everyday experience, can always rehearse the outlines of what more consequential renewals and beginnings might be.<sup>27</sup>

Here, the dream of a world beyond capital is also a dream of retrieving sleep as a biophysically based renewal against the “ongoing destruction of the processes that sustain existence on the planet.” The withdrawal and irresistible periodicity of sleep signal the inviolability of its place in those cycles of conservation, preservation, and delimitation that capital *cannot* abide. Sleep is, in other words, not only a disruption to the perpetual present in which 24/7 capital enlists us, but a reminder of the planetary limits whose recognition must today ground any effort to choose collective life against death. This is why our utopian imaginings might have to “begin as dreams of sleep.” Any vision for “a future without capitalism” may need to start by reclaiming the residues within the social of natural processes and temporal modalities that are inimical to capitalism’s drive toward perpetual wakefulness and unending growth. To dream of sleep is to make of these things the objects of our collective yearning.

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Walker’s *The Dreamers* is a “dream of sleep” of exactly the kind I have been describing. In it, the denizens of a small college town succumb en masse to a mysterious, virally transmitted sleeping sickness, which causes dreams of such fevered intensity as to enact what Crary calls the “latent desires and collective powers of a multitude of sleepers.” The book is attuned to nonsynchronous time as the temporality proper to such dreaming: while the sleeping sickness itself induces a pervasive interruption of the temporality necessary for the town’s smooth functioning, the dreams of the stricken turn out in addition to include unsettling premonitions of futurity, “a ceaseless and turbulent convergence of the lived present with ghosts from a fugitive and still indiscernible future.” The novel even invites us to link such sleep’s temporality to *nature*—that is, to a natural

periodicity that has been deformed by anthropogenic climate change. Hence the town where the action takes place sits nestled beside the remnants of a lake. “There is less of [it] than there used to be,” the narrator muses, as what was once “a glittering, uncanny blue” is “now muddy and shrinking in the sun.” Its “receding water [leaves] the sand littered with fragments of a hundred lost things,” and the “woods that line the slopes around [it] are diseased and dried out, . . . the trees . . . standing long after death, [with] branches blackened by fire or . . . trunks eaten away from the inside by beetles.”<sup>28</sup> The idea that these disasters have something to do with the sickness afflicting the inhabitants occurs to at least one character. A biology professor named Nathaniel thinks that the trees surrounding the lake are also (like the town’s inhabitants) “going to sleep, in a way—sent there by drought and bark beetle. It’s been happening for years, he tells his students, this ravaging, but no one talks about it, this other, slower wasting” (143). The suggestion here is that the sleeping sickness is somehow analogous to the “wasting” away of the trees, and that both are expressions of a natural world now “ravaged” by human activity, its “glacial” pace of change disrupted by the accelerant of a human “history unfold[ing] at high speed” (143).

Less immediately evident is whether and how the novel can be said to be about capitalism. It would not be hard to show, for example, that its allusions to climate lack anything like Malm’s attention to the causal links between global warming and the fossil economy (to say nothing of his reclamation of substance monism/property dualism as the condition for a materialist ecology). And while *The Dreamers* is, around its edges, concerned with how the virus travels over the Internet in ways that betoken the integration of human beings into depersonalized networks, it provides no analysis to match that in *Crary* of the reifications and colonizations performed by communicative capital, or how these enmesh us in a simulated wakefulness that purports to stand “after nature” and beyond time. These apparent failures or omissions will be obvious to anyone who reads the book. To dwell on them at length, however, would be to belabor (precisely) the obvious: the novel is not a work of theory. Its engagement with capital takes place less at the level of content than in how that content is mediated by form. In the suggestive terms of Nicholas Brown, it has to do with the specific properties that distinguish the artwork—in any medium—from its cousin, the art commodity. “Art opposes capitalism,” Brown writes, but not by “confront[ing it] directly, as an opposing force”; such a strategy would subordinate the artwork to aims and intentions extrinsic to it and hence turn it into little more than “a consumable sign of opposition.” Art’s oppositional stance stems rather from the way

it achieves immanent purposiveness through the successful suspension of the commodity form that it also (always) embodies. That suspension is coextensive with an assertion of meaningfulness that escapes the logic of abstract exchange and signals “a rejection of the market as the horizon of history.” This is true “even when [the claim of autonomy] is not directed against or even interested in the commodity form.” For the plausible assertion of autonomy *is* nothing less than a convincing claim on the artwork’s part that its “form is self-legislating”—that it adheres to the logic of the material on which it works (rather than submitting to an external compulsion) and hence sets the terms appropriate for its own interpretation and evaluation.<sup>29</sup>

In the case at hand, this means that *The Dreamers*’ oppositional power follows not from any anticapitalist “content,” but from the way it subordinates itself to the inexorable logic of its premise: If an enigmatic sleeping sickness were to descend on a small college town, what exactly might this look like? How would developing the scenario’s inner logic disclose new things about (for example) collective dreaming, the experience of time, and the relation of both to the natural world? The novel’s autonomy and immanent meaningfulness emerge from the depths and the *plausibility* with which it speculates on this question’s possibilities (which is different from merely answering the question).<sup>30</sup> But as we shall see, this plausibility is also predicated on a dialectical appropriation/transmutation of the formal potentials that Walker inherits from her literary precursors: José Saramago (whose 1995 novel *Blindness* provides the epigraph<sup>31</sup>), Albert Camus, and Franz Kafka. Each of these authors contributed to a tradition of what might be called a parabolic mode of storytelling. Each developed the inner potential of an (anti)allegorical form of narration that begins with a mysterious, inexplicable affliction and follows out the ruthless logic of that premise.<sup>32</sup> *The Dreamers* at once inherits that form and recasts it as the content of its *own* form—the substance on which it goes to work and through whose immanent transformation it stakes its claim to plausible autonomy.

But let me begin with a set of contents that links the novel directly to the issues raised so far. One of *The Dreamers*’ central story lines involves two young professors, Ben and Annie, who’ve recently moved to Santa Lora (from New York City) and—even more recently—become parents. (Their infant girl is seventeen days old on the day that the first towns-person falls ill.) Over the course of the novel, all three members of this family will fall victim to the sleeping sickness. It happens first to Annie, and, after she’s taken to a makeshift medical ward, Ben finds himself overwhelmed not just by the intense demands of parenting, but by a series of

strangely absorbing, unprecedentedly vivid dreams. The dreams seem to him “not normal” because they “contain, somehow, the heft of lived life”; they leave in their wake the “sensation that these experiences are . . . as real as anything in his waking life” (217). It’s important that these new dreams occur *before* Ben actually becomes ill. They continue both during and after his sickness, but the fact that they also predate it suggests that the dreams with which the sick are stricken are not discontinuous with ordinary sleeping, that the sleeping sickness merely distills a truth habitually hidden from the healthy.

The substance of that truth concerns the possibility of a different order of time. One night Ben “dreams of a beautiful sunny morning.” He and Annie sleep “luxuriously late,” then “spend the morning in bed,” eating breakfast, “reading the paper and drinking coffee. . . . What should we do today? she asks, stretching slowly, and the question comes with a feeling that they could do anything, anything at all. Time: that’s what the dream is really about,” Ben thinks. “There is so much time in this dream, endless hours to spend however they like. An intense feeling of leisure” (219). This dream of time and infinite leisure is in part a narrowly personal one: it expresses the conventionally domestic desire for a conjugal intimacy liberated from the all-consuming character of new parenting. But the dream is also the index of a longing for an entirely different social order. It points to the possibility of a world in which uncounted time has been reclaimed from the leisureless regimentation of the present.<sup>33</sup> Such an order entails laying claim to a renewed ability to sleep (the couple sleeps “luxuriously late”). It entails, that is, a luxuriation *in* sleep that serves as both figure and basis for the utopian vision of “endless” leisure: of time as the stretching of hours ahead that are freed of any external compulsion. This freedom is the determinate negation of the 24/7 universe into which contemporary capital conscripts us, a refutation of that “static redundancy” and temporal self-identity that admits of no *otherness* in which a future that differs from the present might take root and even flower.

That this future can best be figured by that diurnal interruption called “sleep” becomes clear on the following page:

An outlandish idea is beginning to bubble in [Ben’s] mind. Or is it only a wish? That these dreams really are a sort of travel, a kind of vision of a time yet to come.

It isn’t like him to think this way. He would never say it out loud, but he is different than he used to be, different from who he was before the baby. He believes in more—or is it less? It is so much harder to say, these days, what is

true and what is not true. After all, the most unbelievable thing has already occurred—what could be more uncanny than an infant? Hadn't it required a certain magical thinking to believe that what was swelling beneath Annie's skin all those months really was a human being? And wasn't she a little otherworldly when she came? A *criatura*. That's the word that came to him, the Spanish word for a newborn, according to their book. A creature. She was born with a silky layer of hair all over her body. Fur, said Annie in delight. Lanugo, the doctor called it. Our baby has fur, she liked to say, as if Grace really had traveled from some supernatural realm. . . . The point is this: after all that, who is he to say what is possible and what is not?

. . . .

[H]e would never say it out loud, but maybe, maybe, like collective unconscious, like ESP, maybe—he really is seeing the future in his dreams. (220–21)

The passage is extraordinary not least for the way it brings together and reimagines the relations among temporality, nature, and sleeping/dreaming. There is, first, a coordination of dreaming with futurity that recurs in the stories of almost all the main characters (see below). Ben not only dreams “about time”—that is, as he does in the previous passage—but dreams dreams that perform an operation *on* time, that incarnate the future within the dream's present. (This is what it means to say that he's “seeing the future in his dreams.”) The content of this present–future is in each case a variation on the elongation of quotidian time just analyzed. In each of Ben's dreams, an ordinary event (a picnic, a party) crackles with the accumulated charge of the *extraordinary*, precisely inasmuch as the event's present is revealed to be replete with “something else . . . : possibility” (273). Ben thus dreams of a future in which futurity itself has become newly available. He dreams of a time in which the “being” of time has escaped the delusion of posthistorical closure, in which the specters of “a fugitive . . . future” have begun once more to “converge” on the present.

What primes Ben to believe in the reality of this convergence is his prior experience of the natural as preternatural. The bounds of the possible have been stretched for him by an encounter with creatureliness as the “substance” of human being. Their newborn is, he thinks, a *criatura*; she's covered in fur and (hence) weirdly otherworldly. Her gestation required of him and Annie a kind of “magical thinking,” a suspension of disbelief in the after-all quite incredible fact that a human being was growing

inside her. The infant who emerges from this process is “uncanny” in her creatureliness. She appears miraculous, strange, and (un)familiar not because she “really [has] traveled from some supernatural realm,” but because she confronts her parents with a “nature” that the human order pretends to have surmounted.<sup>34</sup> The creaturely character of her birth and being makes her existence “the most unbelievable thing,” which—having now “already occurred”—allows Ben to believe in his dreams’ preternatural ability to conjure the future: “There is a difference between what is not true and what cannot be measured” (197).

I’m suggesting we read these scenes together as tracing the persistence in the human world of a nature that appears uncanny, magical—*supernatural*—exactly inasmuch as humans believe they have left the natural world behind. The creaturely character of the infant resides in how she permits this exposure to nature as the estranged internality of human being. (I stress again that this does not mean obliterating the distinctions between humans and nonhuman nature; see my foregoing discussion of Malm.) The defamiliarized experience of nature is, in turn, if not identical to, then at least a prefiguration of, the uncanny mode of unconsciousness induced by the sleeping sickness—a sleep that’s continuous with natural periodicity, yet also radically alien to it, and one whose interruption of a present “without specters” retrieves and activates the seeds of futurity lying latent in that present. The novel’s central, organizing trope can then be placed in precise relation to the arguments of Crary and Malm. A fictional enactment of—on one hand—Crary’s protest against capitalism’s drive to dissolve both sleep and futurity in a perpetually wakeful present, the sleeping sickness is, on the other, a figure for something like climate in Malm: for the return of nature with a mutated vengeance, against a present and a social order that increasingly view the natural world as no more than an artifact of the social.

I’ve focused so far only on the story line that most clearly links up with the conceptual issues raised in this essay’s introduction. In fact, however, Santa Lora becomes “famous” for the *many* “claims” by those who survive that in their dreams they “saw visions of the future” (298). Four of the novel’s five main plots involve characters whose dreams partake of this structure. Ben’s is of course one of these four. The others are worth contemplating briefly, not least for the ways they differ from the pattern already discussed.

The biology professor Nathaniel, for example, has a partner suffering from dementia in a nursing home whom he dreams has recovered and come home. So vivid and real is this dream that it is first narrated identically to all other events in the novel—there is no formal marking of

it as dream (indeed, no indication that Nathaniel has fallen asleep at all). When he finally awakens from the sickness and “[t]he facts as others will see them [become] clear to [him]”—namely, “that [Henry’s] great awakening was only a wish Nathaniel wished in his sleep” (281)—he responds by taking Henry to a facility in rural Mexico, “where an anesthesiologist has promised that he can induce with drugs the same dream sleep that the Santa Lora Virus did.” That is where the couple lies unconscious and side by side to this day. “And who are we to say,” the narrator wonders, “that they are not, these two, together somewhere even now[?] . . . Who are we to say that they are not right now dreaming a better world?” (296). The suggestion here is that Nathaniel has dreamt what *is not* but *could be*; he has, in a sense, at least in retrospect, dreamt a future in which he and Henry will together have dreamed a world where the latter has recovered and finally rejoined him. The narrowly interpersonal character of this dream should not blind us to its social character. The vision preserves in negated form the utopian dream of a *better world* (the novel’s words)—a world in which suffering will have been alleviated and something like solidarity (togetherness) reclaimed.

A similar if more disquieting thing happens to Thomas Peterson, the survivalist father of two young girls (Sarah and Libby) whose story the novel recounts. Peterson wakes from his illness in a campus dining hall that has been turned into an emergency medical unit, convinced that the library (similarly requisitioned) has suffered a terrible fire. “I had this dream,” he tells Sarah. “That there was a fire at the library, and somehow, the fire—it woke up all the sick. . . . The fire . . . worked like some kind of cure” (260). A fire in the library does indeed occur several days later, and it does in fact cure many of the sick. The novel raises the possibility that Thomas himself has set this fire, but part of its considerable power comes from its refusal to adjudicate this question. The turbulent incursion of the future in the present becomes, meanwhile, a general structure of post-oneiric experience. Peterson says to his daughter, Sarah, on the day after his return, “‘I’ve been having this strange feeling . . . that things are happening out of order. . . . Like just now,’ he says. ‘When you came into the kitchen, I had the sensation that you were standing beside me, but that was before you walked in.’ . . . It’s like everything’s out of order, he says, like there’s something wrong with the sequence, as if the future were coming before the past” (261). If sleep is a pause that promises recommencement and “always contains a bond to a future” (Crary), here that future disorients the present by actualizing a freedom—the cure by fire—that anticipates what it should in fact follow. The “future [that comes] before the past” is a way of figuring such temporal disorder as a



constitutive effect and meaning of sleep. The scene thus offers a compelling depiction of sleep's interruptive, transformative power: it reveals the heterotemporal sediments that rise from unconsciousness into waking life to trouble the present with a future incarnate.

Finally, and most complicatedly, there's the case of the student Rebecca, who's among the first to succumb to the virus. It happens the night after she has sex with a dormmate and (unbeknownst to her) becomes pregnant. The infiltration of her present with the future thus unfolds along two distinct lines. On one hand are the biophysical processes by which a "cluster of [sperm] cells . . . burrow[s] into the wall of her womb" and a human embryo begins forming (103). While Rebecca sleeps, in other words, her body propels her irresistibly toward a future in which she will discover that it has produced another being "behind her back" (so to speak). The novel stresses how this procedure registers the encryption within the human of an ineradicably natural time. "There is no one part of the brain in charge of keeping track of time," says the narrator. "But certain other parts of the body [do so] with more precision. At the beginning, we all grow at a certain, fixed rate. . . . Thus, as Rebecca begins her seventh week of sleep, ten fingers begin to flower, and ten toes. A pair of tiny nostrils opens in a nose. The eyelids are starting to form," and so on. "While Rebecca sleeps, and while the nurses change in and out of their suits, and while, outside, the soldiers go on and off shift . . . the small developments of one minute human being go on unfolding at a perfectly predictable rate, like the intricate ticking of the most delicate clock on earth" (244–45). One point of this description is to show that the (female) reproductive body remains in thrall to a temporality of inexorable forward motion. This temporality differs from that of sleep in that it is less *periodic* than developmental and hence less open to the promise of temporal interruption and renewal with which I've been concerned. Instead, it moves one ceaselessly into a future that's practically preprogrammed within it: "No bigger than a poppy seed," says the narrator of the not-yet-fetus on the night of Rebecca's intubation; "and yet, so much is already decided—the brown eyes, the freckles, the slightly crooked teeth. Her sense of adventure, maybe, her affinity for language. A girl. It is all of it packed into those cells, like a portrait painted on a grain of rice" (103). Nature's processes are here imagined as at once miraculous in the intricacy of their designs and determinative in the constraints they impose on what one is and can become; the processes' temporality is such as to unfold independently of a self that need not even be present (conscious) in order for time to do its work.

On the other hand, however, Rebecca's *mind* engages during her sickness in that activity characteristic of sleep—dreaming—that tends in this book to broach the future as redemptive irruption of the possible in the present. The girl to which her sleeping body gives birth (along the inexorable, progressive axis of time) is uncannily doubled by a son she has, raises, and watches grow into middle age in her dreams (in a second, more disordered temporal register). Rebecca, in short, dreams an entirely other future—a life—that interrupts and comes before her “actual” future. This alternate future is one in which she is mother to a son instead of a daughter, and where she develops a relationship to that son over the course of forty years (289–90). The dream itself is once more recounted without any formal marking as dream; it is given the exact same narrative weight as, for example, the depiction of Rebecca's bewildered awakening to a baby girl (“Who is that baby?” [291]) and her repeated, increasingly panicked question: “Where's my son?” (292–93). The effect of this is to require readers, too, to experience her alternate future before her present, and to live it as equally, indisputably real. We are asked to share in an extended and well-nigh permanent disorientation:

It takes [Rebecca] months to believe she is a girl of nineteen and not a woman many decades into life. How uncanny, it seems to her, that the baby girl on her lap is hers.

And her son: his absence informs every moment of her life. [He] is a truth as certain as anything else: she knew him for forty years. . . .

She holds her baby girl just like she once, long ago, held her son. . . . She loves her with that same madness. Or with more, maybe, her love suffused, this time, with the loss of the other one. (294–96)

The category of the uncanny returns here to signify not—as in Ben's relation to his child—a creaturely inhabitation of the human, but a porousness of the real to the dreamt and of the present to the (speculative) future. Rebecca's daughter is uncanny because she reveals how the future that Rebecca dreams inhabits the present as its ineradicable shadow, animating that present with the alternative potential of futures that are not, yet also *are*—that are, in fact, so hauntingly real as to be felt as already past (i.e., as having been lived and lost already). This haunting quality is or should be a permanent feature of the present. “[E]very moment of [Rebecca's] life” will be “informed” by her son's absence; her present will always be lived in the province of the ghost of a future that, though rendered past and

“only” a dream, continues to signal the nonidentity to itself of the present, and hence to open that present onto the alterity necessary for newness to enter. This is perhaps the pivotal difference between the temporal register of dreaming and the developmental–gestational one described above: the child whose future is largely “decided” in cellular form in utero, and whose fetal development is both predictable and irresistible in its forward momentum, is twinned by a *fictive* child of the future who exists in the interregnum between states of wakefulness, whose development remains merely speculative, and who disrupts and remakes the actual child to whom Rebecca gives birth. The latter’s being will always be premised on the loss of and spectral haunting by this future that has not arrived.

\* \* \*

It’s worth pausing here to recap the arguments before concluding with some remarks that link the novel’s contents to its form. My claim has been that, like Malm’s *Progress of This Storm* and Crary’s *24/7, The Dreamers* offers reasons to resist the critical consensus discouraging recourse to the category of nature as a basis for the radical imagination. The book suggests that the natural periodicity of sleep contains within it a bond to futurity that introduces the *possible*—heterotemporal evidence of time’s nonidentity with itself—into an otherwise static, ostensibly closed present. The metaphor of sleeping sickness then works along two disparate axes. It is a figure for the encroachment into the social order of a sickness inflicted by humans on nonhuman nature (on the analogy with anthropogenic climate change); but it’s also an enactment of what Crary depicts as the liberatory potential of sleep: the collective refusal of a present that seeks to foreclose both slumber and futurity as remnants of an obsolete nature. The uncanny creatureliness of the infant provides a further twist on these intimations by pointing to nature’s internality to the human as a defamiliarization that reveals how the magical and implausible are, in fact, actual, realizable, and eminently possible.

I’ve also proposed that the novel discloses how contemporary capitalism is the causal agent behind both the devastation of nature and the sleeping sickness—but that this intuition is less a matter of representational content than of the operations by which that content has been sedimented into form (in Adorno’s resonant terms).<sup>35</sup> Capitalism shows up in the novel, that is, only insofar as its paradigmatic *form* (the commodity) has been suspended by the immanent purposiveness and self-legislating form of the work itself. The social world from which the novel carves

its material undergoes a provisional dereification in this process, which is an effect of the book's persuasive assertion of autonomy from market values. That assertion does not involve pretending not to be a commodity, but rather the artwork's claim that it is not a commodity like all others, that its being includes the meaning-making procedures that resist reduction to the ruthless abstractions and equivalencies of market exchange. In a novel whose contents have to do with sleep, collective dreaming, the heterotemporal intimations of futurity, and climate, this means that all of these themes must be grasped as effects of a capitalism that appears in the novel only in and as its suspension by the logic of form. (I note here that, for related reasons, the collective future beyond capitalism emerges in *The Dreamers* only as the negated intimations of a different order: a world that redeems unnecessary suffering, that imagines new forms of togetherness, that emerges from apocalyptic cure, and so forth.)

Central to such a reading is the category of the "plausible." Nicholas Brown has persuasively argued that "Plausibility . . . is the capacity to produce the conviction that what we are seeing [or reading] belongs to the logic of the material rather than to some external, contingent compulsion. . . . [I]t is a far more stringent criterion than representational fidelity, which is rarely absent even in the least compelling representation."<sup>36</sup> I take this to mean that artistic autonomy is intimately bound to the convincingness with which a given work adheres to the logic of the problem set for it by its own contents. A work achieves autonomy if and when it succeeds, not in miming the socially given (the real world), but in working out and giving form to the immanent potentialities of the material on which it works. Success in this endeavor can never be decided in advance or finally settled. "Since there is no external criterion, the discipline of interpretation is not a search for certainties but, rather, a shared (one might say normative or institutional) commitment to the production of compelling ascriptions of meaning."<sup>37</sup> The plausibility of an artwork's claim to autonomy is thus a matter for reasoned debate. It can be adjudicated only through the collective practice and protocols of interpretation. This would be true however apparently simple or internally riven and complex its meanings might be, and however radically nonidentical to itself such meaning becomes through the formal maneuvers that (always and necessarily) make a given work's statements "mean something other than what they immediately say."<sup>38</sup>

The entirety of my reading of *The Dreamers* has striven for this kind of "compelling ascription[] of meaning." It has sought to show that the novel rigorously submits to the logic of its initial premise and, in doing so, articulates a plausible claim to autonomy that generates meaning by actively suspending the commodity form that it also embodies. Demonstrating

these arguments has entailed a temporary subordination of form to content—or, more exactly, an approach that treats the novel's form as a complex totality (the shape necessitated by the premise of the sleeping sickness) through whose mediation particular contents alone derive their significance. By way of conclusion, I'd like to provide a more explicit treatment of some of the book's formal features, especially with respect to how they engage with and even enact the problem of this fiction's plausibility.

One place to start is with those scenes I've mentioned that decline to mark that the events narrated are in fact dream contents (that they did not "really happen"). These moments perform a heightened version of the most basic formal operation to which Adorno alludes in the essay on "Commitment" (1962). "If no word which enters a literary work ever wholly frees itself from its meaning in ordinary speech," Adorno writes, "so no literary work . . . leaves these meanings unaltered, as they were outside it. Even an ordinary 'was,' in a report of something that was not, acquires a new formal quality from the fact that it was not so."<sup>39</sup> I call this a *basic* formal operation because it concerns the most rudimentary level of fictionalization, the bare fact of saying something "was" when it was not. The presence of this feature would be common to all fictions and therefore says nothing at all about the plausibility of any given work. In *The Dreamers*, however, this foundational formalization, this treating of the nonfactual *as if* it were factual, is transformed into a content in its own right, included as it is in the novel itself as a question surrounding the plausibility of dreams. To say that Henry has recovered and "started speaking" again (146), or that "Rebecca . . . is holding her little boy's hand as they walk one day in the woods" (289), is to make a claim *within* the fiction for the real existence of dreamt events, which are in their turn intimations of a future that ordinary perception consigns to the impossible. This is to differentiate from within the large category of fictionalizations—the entirety of events that this novel, like all novels, claims "was" when they were not—a second set of occurrences that were not but are narrated as if they were.

I suggest that this is *The Dreamers'* way of reflexively posing the question of its own plausibility. The scenes make the reality of futurity in the present, which the novel formally enacts by declining to mark the speculative future as dream, an explicit object of representation, a problem, indeed, for the plausibility of the novel's content as much as for its form. Is it *plausible* that dreams predict or incarnate the future? The absence of dream markings provides an affirmative formal answer to this question: the future *is* incarnated in the narrative, and this by way of the dreams of the Dreamers. This is a formal matter in that we're obliged to experience the abruption of the future through a technique that treats the dream

events as if they were actually occurring. But the formal answer emerges only in dialectical relation to the book's content: the future can take place in the present only inasmuch as the narrative shows it to take place—that is, only inasmuch as the novel depicts or represents it. Plausibility thereby becomes in one stroke the condition of possibility for formal autonomy *and* the problem around which a central element of narrative content coheres.

Something similar can be said about the relation between the novel's form and that of the intertexts with which it affiliates—what we can loosely call the genre of (anti)allegorical parables. Generic affiliation itself, of course, denotes the relation between a specific work and a collectively practiced form (the genre), so that what is at stake here is the interplay between a general set of formal conventions and the singularity of a given work's embodiment of those features. Adorno puts the point this way: "The more specific the work, the more truly it fulfills the type: The dialectical postulate that the particular is the universal has its model in art."<sup>40</sup> This does not mean that the new work simply and unproblematically incarnates a pre-given, already finalized formula; a work that succeeds in "fulfilling the type" is rather one that renders the typical singular, that takes up and pushes the possibilities of the form to the extremity of its inner limits, thereby transforming the universal/generic by "fraying the borders" of what defines and makes the genre what it is.<sup>41</sup>

In the case at hand, this means that the formal potentials of the genre are once more transmuted into "content," becoming something that the novel expressly thematizes and meditates upon. The epigraph from Saramago's *Blindness* can stand in for more extensive examples. "That night, the blind man dreamt that he was blind," reads the quotation. It is a reference to a character in Saramago's text who is unsusceptible to the disease that the book chronicles—an epidemic of sightlessness—because he already "has" it, but who nonetheless dreams that the sickness befalls him. Put differently, the epigraph indexes a dreaming of the future in which that future *makes no difference*: it is indistinguishable from the blind man's present. In taking up the generic form practiced by Saramago, then, Walker's novel starts by turning the blind man's sleep into its basic *formal* principle; the founding misfortune at the heart of the genre becomes in this case a sleeping sickness, and it's out of this ideational kernel that the novel's plausible form develops. Second, however, by taking seriously and problematizing the act of *dreaming* referenced in the epigraph, *The Dreamers* takes a measure of distance from its own formal principle, transmuting sleep into a content whose meaning must be interrogated in order for that principle to be realized. The novel's most radical discovery follows directly from this appropriation: the epidemic of blindness in Saramago's book simply

and inexplicably *is*, in the form of a brute facticity that yields nothing to interpretation; in this it resembles the blind man's dream of a future that merely reprises his present. In *The Dreamers*, in contrast, the sleeping sickness acquires a significance and a semantic dignity of its own, initiating as it does those dreams of the future that incarnate the heterotemporal promise of what capital seeks to expunge from our present.

Finally, this enlarging of the optic to include the novel's relation to genre helps to render newly salient the dialectic between the historical and the natural with which my reading began. For if, as I argued then, the novel's content traces out how the natural becomes historical—if it suggests that climate and naturally occurring pathogens have been radically historicized by human activity—it's also true that, at the level of form, the most historical dimension of the literary (genre) has come for *The Dreamers* to appear natural. This is the danger intrinsic to the institutionalization of any genre. (Genres are forms whose contours have come over time to seem natural, ineluctable.) But the danger afflicts both genres and subgenres with peculiar force in a capitalist order, where generic form always risks becoming another name for market niche: hence the now ubiquitous and eminently marketable category of the "Kafkaesque," or (more immediately relevant) the promotional blurbs in Walker's novel that make some version of the point that her book's experiment reveals the "humanity" that shines forth in moments of extremity. These are all symptoms of a system that transforms the historical (genre) into a kind of "second nature," such that what human beings have wrought appears to them with that "phantom-like objectivity" that Marx ascribes to the commodity form.<sup>42</sup>

Far from merely or blindly enacting it, *The Dreamers* makes visible this naturalization of the social and the historicization of nature that accompanies it. Its dialectic of form and content engages in what Jameson calls "a reciprocal defamiliarization of the two incommensurable poles of the dualism of Nature and History." The novel makes of this oscillation "a perpetual process in which neither term ever comes to rest, any more than any ultimate synthesis emerges."<sup>43</sup> In this open-endedness, this *negative* dialectic, something like futurity arises: a future enacted by what I have called the natural periodicity of sleep, and one in which dreaming emerges once more as that "ceaseless and turbulent convergence of the lived present with ghosts from a fugitive and still indiscernible future."

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## NOTES

1. One important exception to this suspicion is Eve Sedgwick's late work, which sought to recuperate Silvan Tomkins's theory of affect and so to make the bioaffective a central category of analysis. Her explorations in this area initiated the "affective turn" in cultural studies (see Sedgwick and Adam Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold: Reading Silvan Tomkins," *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995], 1–28). The differences between my own arguments and Sedgwick's anti-antibiologism lie beyond the scope of the current essay. But for an analysis of the tendency in late Sedgwick to associate all criticisms of the biological with a generalized, "paranoid" mode of reading that she then indiscriminately disparages, see Gila Ashtor, "The Misdiagnosis of Critique," *Criticism* 61, no. 2 (2019): 191–217.
2. That is, the first could be rewritten as an assertion that what we think of as natural is a product of disciplinary power; the second, as a deconstruction of the myth of (natural) origins and of the nature–culture binary more generally; and the third, as an elaboration of what Marx meant by fetishism and of Lukács's expansion of that idea into the theory of reification and "second nature."
3. On the distinction between "nature-endorsing" and "nature-skeptical" views, see Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 4–5, 120–21. The term "nature-denying" is my own.
4. *Ibid.*, 151.
5. Donna Haraway, "The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula A. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 295–336, quotation on 298 (emphasis added).
6. The founding texts here are Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Both thinkers have moved away from radical constructivism in recent years, but these earlier formulations remain influential.
7. Noel Castree, as quoted in Andreas Malm's *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London: Verso, 2018), 23–24.
8. Malm, *Progress of This Storm*, 24, 29–30. The quotation of Neil Smith is from the afterword to the third edition of his *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 239–66, quotation on 244.
9. Soper, *What Is Nature?* 132–33. Implicit in these formulations is something that Malm makes explicit at various points in *Progress of This Storm*: a need to decouple *agency* from *autonomy* in discussions of the natural world. For "Nature can . . . propel itself toward states of affairs and generate its own patterns, but [does so] without a mind. [I]t does not think about things and act on one of the alternatives it has surveyed: the volcano erupts with no intention. Hence the appropriate formula in this case would be *autonomy without agency*" (199).
10. Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016), 267. These claims form part of Malm's critique of the Anthropocene account of climate change, which operates at a level of such transhistorical generality ("the human" as agent of such change) that some of its proponents are driven to claim that the cause of our current crisis is the human mastery of fire.



11. James O'Connor, "Capitalism, Nature, Socialism: A Theoretical Introduction," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism* 1, no. 1 (1988): 11–38. John Bellamy Foster has persuasively argued that the rediscovery in recent decades of Karl Marx's ecological thinking was necessitated by the forgetting of this dimension under Soviet Communism, along with the concomitant, Promethean reading of Marx that underwrote the Soviet ecocide (see Foster, "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift: Classical Foundations for Environmental Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 105, no. 2 [1999]: 366–405, esp. 391–94).
12. Soper, *What Is Nature?*; Ted Benton, *Natural Relations: Ecology, Animal Rights and Social Justice* (London: Verso, 1993); Paul Burkett, *Marxism and Ecological Economics: Toward a Red and Green Political Economy* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2006); and John Bellamy Foster, "Marx's Theory of Metabolic Rift" and *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000). A feminist articulation of these points can be found in Silvia Federici's ongoing work, perhaps most relevantly in *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2020), 49–51.
13. See Greg Forter, "World Enough, and Time: Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story* with Marcuse, Benjamin, and Chakrabarty," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 8, no. 1 (2021): 60–79; and "Capitalism, Temporality, Precarity: Utopian Form and Its Discontents in Contemporary Literature and Theory," *Cultural Critique* (forthcoming).
14. Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London: Verso, 2013), 110, 109.
15. Malm, *Progress of This Storm*, 1. The quotations of Fredric Jameson are from, respectively, "The Aesthetics of Singularity," *New Left Review* 92 (March–April 2015), 101–32, quotation on 105; and *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 16.
16. Malm, *Fossil Capital*, 7–8. The internal quotations are from Stephen Gardiner, *A Perfect Moral Storm: The Ethical Tragedy of Climate Change*, Environmental Ethics and Science Policy Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33–34.
17. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 4: 1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 389–400, quotations on 395, 390, 397.
18. Malm, *Progress of This Storm*, 6.
19. Theodor W. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor, *Telos* 60 (1984): 111–24, quotation on 121.
20. Crary, *24/7*, 10–11. See also Jodi Dean, "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics," in *Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Andrew Pendakis et al. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 533–54.
21. Crary, *24/7*, 9, 8–9.
22. *Ibid.*, 10–11. The argument here bears some relation to Moishe Postone's assertion that, at its heart, capitalism involves "the domination of people by time" (see Postone, "Rethinking Marx's Critical Theory," in *Contemporary Marxist Theory*, 41–53, quotation on 49; and his *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003]).
23. Crary, *24/7*, 19.
24. *Ibid.*, 126, 10, 99, 100, 104. It may be that Crary underestimates the susceptibility of sleep to commodification, at least if one thinks of the explosion in recent decades of

- pharmaceutical markets for sleep aids (see Darian Leader, *Why Can't We Sleep?* [London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019]).
25. Crary, 24/7, 126–27.
  26. *Ibid.*, 108, 110.
  27. *Ibid.*, 128.
  28. Karen Thompson Walker, *The Dreamers* (New York: Random House, 2019), 105, 104, 53. Future references will appear parenthetically.
  29. Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 182.
  30. I return to the issue of plausibility in my concluding section.
  31. “That night, the blind man dreamt that he was blind.”
  32. I am not suggesting that these writers share identical thematic or formal concerns, only that a family resemblance among them makes it plausible to think of them as comprising a tradition of antiallegorical parable making—the making of parables that invite yet thwart allegorical transposition to another, metaphysical order of significance.
  33. The exponential rise in recent decades (at least in some parts of the world and in some economic sectors) of new kinds of immaterial or creative labor has as one of its effects the masking of leisure’s general eclipse or, put differently, a blurring of the boundary between work and leisure. But this is merely another way of saying that commodification and compulsory self-marketization have colonized ever greater proportions of what used to be called leisure time.
  34. On the salience of the (un)familiar for grasping the uncanny, see Freud’s well-known essay “The Uncanny” (1919), in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 121–62.
  35. Theodor Adorno’s formulation (“aesthetic form is sedimented content”) features prominently in his essay on Friedrich Hölderlin and the later *Aesthetic Theory* (see Josh Robinson, *Adorno’s Poetics of Form* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018], 43–49). My claims in this concluding section draw on Robinson’s book, as well as on Brown’s *Autonomy*.
  36. Brown, *Autonomy*, 59.
  37. *Ibid.*, 31.
  38. *Ibid.*, 37.
  39. Theodor Adorno, “Commitment,” trans. Francis McDonagh, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, Radical Thinkers (London: Verso, 2007), 177–95, quotation on 178. This essay was originally published in German in 1962, with McDonagh’s English translation appearing in *New Left Review* 87–88 (September–December 1974), 75–89.
  40. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 202.
  41. See Robinson, *Adorno’s Poetics*, chap. 3.
  42. The *locus classicus* for “second nature” is Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 128. On the commodity’s “phantom-like objectivity,” see Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 128.
  43. Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or The Persistence of the Dialectic*, Radical Thinkers (London: Verso, 2007), 99.