

Money Talks: Inequality and North American Identity

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Writing in 1991, Fredric Jameson wondered how it was that “the dreariness of business and private property, the dustiness of entrepreneurship, ... investment banking, and other such transactions ... should in our time have proved to be so *sexy*” (*Postmodernism* 274). Here, Jameson, in Michael W. Clune’s words, “confronts the fact that the prospect of a global free market has become an object of nearly universal fascination since the end of the Second World War” (*American Literature and the Free Market* 1). A quarter of a century after Jameson asked these questions, fascination has arguably given way to disenchantment; if not, in fact, outright resistance. Though the Yuppie certainly lingers as a figure of near rock star excess – see, for instance, Martin Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) – it is fair to say that the world of high finance is now as likely to stoke anger as it does titillation. 2008’s global financial crash, the 2010 Eurozone debt crisis, the rise of Occupy, punitive austerity programmes, the revolving door between bankers and politicians – these phenomena and more have sparked a great delibidinalisation of the same activities Jameson once identified as so sexy. How long this sobering up will last, and to what extent we should take the recent emergence of left- and right-wing populisms across the West as a turning point, remains to be seen. Culturally, though, it is undeniable that the past few decades have witnessed a fresh awareness of the fact that the emperors of late capitalism wear no clothes.

The impetus for *Money Talks: Inequality and North American Identity*, an Interdisciplinary Postgraduate and Early Career Conference held at the University of Nottingham in 2015, stemmed from a desire to take stock of just such cultural reverberations. Amy Bride, in her astute review of the conference for *United States Studies Online*, puts it succinctly: if the 2008 crash and its aftermath is “as groundbreaking and ubiquitous as it appears, it must have an examinable effect on identity construction, artistic output, and social relations between those at opposite ends of the U.S. economic spectrum” (“Review”). That said, the rubric for the conference adopted a *longue durée* approach to the topic of economic inequality in North America, and papers were accordingly diverse in their concerns. To give a few examples, speakers looked at Puerto Rican community activism in 1960s Lower East Side New York; the role of the body in satirical cartoons by late 1990s AIDS campaigners; obesity and disaster in Lionel Shriver’s *Big Brother*; and identity construction in “coke rap”. Closed by Dr. Paul Crosthwaite’s keynote address, “Fascinating Finance: Pynchon, DeLillo, and the Fantasy of the Perfect Market”,

the conference in Bride's words "presented an open platform on which to explore financial, historical, social, and cultural formations of money in equal value and measure" ("Review"). Indeed, the day's success encouraged us to open the topic to further exploration with this special issue of 49th Parallel.

The articles in this special issue respond to the concerns raised in Jackson's introduction, by considering a range of economic issues in U.S. literature and culture from the nineteenth century to present day. Wayne Arnold provides an insightful view of how economic conditions shaped Henry Miller's writing. Facing economic precarity, Miller's art of lying—or bullshitting—led to an enhanced literary identity that operated as "an economically viable method for reaching his readers." Ryan Brooks considers the idea of the family in "post-postmodern" writing. In the work of writers such as Jonathan Franzen and David Foster Wallace, representation of familial relations draw on the neoliberal discourse of "family values" promoted by diverse political figures Hillary Clinton and Rick Santorum. Examining literary figuring of economic phenomena, Andrew Knighton tracks metaphors of water and fluidity in Edgar Allan Poe and Henry Blake Fuller. This liquid imagery evinces a "new economic subject determined by financial circulation" in the nineteenth-century and Knighton asks how successfully literature can construct economic epistemologies. Rounding off this special issue, Richard Voeltz offers a wide-ranging critical review of *American Beauty*, two decades after its resounding success. Voeltz reads the film as a "culmination and caricature" of the middle-class suburban genre of American cinema.

Reflecting the theme of our special issue we have three reviews that consider economics in relation to North American culture and identity. David Hancock examines Olaf Christian Christiansen's history of market reformism in *Progressive Business*; Tim Jelfs reconsiders Clune's *American Literature in the Free Market, 1945-2000* in light of its recent paperback publication; and Evan Rothera appraises April Merleaux's *Sugar and Civilization* on the impact of the sugar trade in the early twenty century. Our regular reviews section focuses on twentieth-century popular culture and literature. On popular culture, Gordon Alley-Young discusses portrayals of 1970s New York in the edited collection *Downtown Film & TV Culture 1975-2001*; Oscar Winberg reflects on the transnational family sitcom in Christian von Hodenberg's *Television Moment: Sitcom Audiences and the Sixties Cultural Revolution*; and John Barnhill offers his thoughts on Mitch Goodrum's survey of superhero culture *Superheroes and American Self Image*. Covering twentieth-century American fiction, Dominic Caraccilo reviews Ichiro Takayoshi's study of pre-war literature in *American Writers and the Approach of World War II*, and Alex Moran examines Lee Konstantinou's expansive *Cool Characters* on irony in Ralph Ellison to Jonathan

Lethem. Finally, Iain Williams and Edward Jackson reflect on the rise of Foster Wallace studies in their respective reviews of David Hering's *David Foster Wallace* and Clare Hayes-Brady's *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace*.

This is the final issue of 49th Parallel under the editorship of Hannah Lauren Murray and Thomas Cobb. We thank our outgoing articles and reviews editors (Alex Bryne, Samuel Cooper, Lauren Davis, Katherine Doniak, Edward Jackson, Hannah-Rose Murray) and our webmaster Rosemary Pearce for their support. We welcome Andrew Duncan of the University of Nottingham as our new General Editor. From Issue 40 the journal will move to a fixed publication schedule with submission deadlines; details will be announced later in Summer 2017.

Hannah Lauren Murray and Thomas Cobb
General Editors

Works Cited

Amy Bride. "Review: 'Money Talks: Inequality and North American Identity' Conference, 19th June 2015." *United States Studies Online*. 10 July 2015. <http://www.baas.ac.uk/usso/review-money-talks-inequality-and-north-american-identity-conference-19th-june-2015/>

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