

“Better Days Ahead” Teaching Revolutionary Futures and Protesting the Present

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In July of 2004, Barack Obama delivered a landmark keynote address at the Democratic National Convention and gained national attention as a young senator out of Illinois. Throughout his speech, Obama proclaimed the importance of hope as “the bedrock of the nation,” paving the way for his presidency in 2009. He insisted, “Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty, the audacity of hope! In the end, that is God’s greatest gift to us, the bedrock of the nation, a belief in things not seen, a belief that there are better days ahead.” Obama’s important speech galvanized the Democratic Party and younger voters around the rhetoric of hope as a promise for political transformation and an end to “politics as usual.” After his election, however, the momentous campaign for hope and change quickly diffused into the political gridlock that has come to define U.S. politics over the last couple of decades. While voters should not be surprised by this familiar tale, they should be deeply disappointed. After all, Obama’s political trajectory reveals the way in which neoliberal capitalism relies heavily on hope to conceal the clear failures and injustices of the free market.¹ The recent economic recession—not to mention the deepening stratification of classes—only attests to the staying power of capitalism and its unchanging monopoly on hope. Despite recent activist efforts like the Occupy movement, Marxism remains on the periphery—if not entirely outside—of the American imaginary in large part because the public consensus still suggests that it is largely devoid of hope.

Moving beyond the basic tenets of anti-capitalist critique, this project theorizes hope not as “the bedrock of the nation” but as an important tool that allows us to imagine future alternatives to neoliberal capitalism. Ultimately, I claim that hope endows Marxism with the very possibility of a revolutionary future. If Obama’s election revealed the affective significance of hope to younger voters, it also reminded us of the undeniable fact that any revolutionary future begins and ends with the next generation. For this reason, college campuses and classrooms are integral spaces for activism and Marxist praxis. But despite the activist histories that helped shape colleges across the U.S., not to mention the supposedly radical politics of academic professors, Marxist politics remains an antiquated anomaly in a nation of devout capitalists, an entertaining sideshow that exists primarily at “liberal” universities. How, then, do we equip students to see Marxism as a viable alternative—rather than a “sideshow”—to the current order? How do we teach students to see Marx’s critique of capitalism as more than a failed theory of intellectual interest with little practical value?

Imbuing Marxism with hope is essential, but doing so requires us to retool how we teach students to think, analyze, and critique. Like many of my colleagues, I teach students to be critical of the culture that surrounds them, the social media that they consume, and certain power

dynamics in society (i.e. capitalism, racism, sexism etc.). In class discussions and course themes, however, I think we, as teachers, often take this critical interrogation as a kind of *raison d'être* and therefore the end goal. While this critical methodology is essential to our jobs as teachers, infusing Marxist praxis with hope requires more than a critique of current class relations. We must stage conversations that ask students a slightly different set of questions: Where do we see practical forms of resistance? Where do we see historical alliances and activist communities that attempt to enact or anticipate utopic alternatives to capitalism? What do these communities, movements, and coalitions have in common? Asking students to identify these political formations—and think through the political value and practical work of resistance—makes legible a kind of Marxian hope. Moreover, these discussions actively work against the legacy of the Cold War, which condemns Marxism as hopeless, impractical, and forever illegible.² While these discussions are not entirely absent from academia (they certainly exist on the periphery), we have to change the emphasis of academic inquiry if we expect any serious paradigm shift in the public imagination, not to mention leftist experience.

As an instructor who teaches in an English department, many of my courses revolve around what the academy calls “close reading.” While certain schools of thought and the academy at large threaten to depoliticize this practice, we must continue to identify hermeneutics and close reading as a political space that requires reflexive interrogation and elaborate fine-tuning. In my classes, I attempt to recalibrate standard close-reading practices to account for what Jameson—among others—calls a “positive hermeneutic,” which moves the reader beyond a basic critique of class relations. It is not enough to simply identify a text or author as critical of capitalism, worker exploitation, and/or class stratification (a conclusion that my students occasionally—though often reluctantly—arrive at in research papers). Rather, it seems crucial that we teach our students to trace the way in which certain texts identify the limits of and imagine utopic alternatives to capitalism. When reading Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is In the Heart* (1946), for example, I encourage students to document Bulosan’s critical account of worker exploitation on the west coast. I also remind them, however, that it seems equally important that Bulosan envisions a future America inhabited not by “native” citizens but by exploited workers, immigrants, and foreigners in the final pages of his novel. These reading strategies enable students to interrogate the ways in which literature and culture can envisage legitimate revolutionary transformations in the economic and social structures that comprise the nation.

Of course, teaching these strategies also means organizing courses around revolutionary moments in history and radical texts. As Barbara Foley reminds us, “Present-day students and practitioners of revolutionary culture have much to learn from the efforts and achievements of the 1930s literary leftists, even as we strive to move beyond their limits” (169). For this reason, this essay pairs a Depression-era novel (H.T. Tsiang’s *And China Has Hands*, 1937) with a more recent post-apocalyptic film (Bong Joon-ho’s *Snowpiercer*, 2013), focusing on two radical junctures in history that invite a comparative analysis of revolutionary struggle. In order for our students to learn from past efforts and achievements, we must both read texts invested in what Foley calls “revolutionary culture” and carefully hone close-reading skills. Recalibrating reading practices in this way restores revolutionary possibility, not to mention hope, to Marxian analysis. Furthermore, these practices equip students to understand the Marxian lens not simply as anti-capitalist critique but as a visionary call for a better future.

By introducing students to these radical formations, histories, and reading practices, we make legible a politically charged hope that can transform the future. In this context, the “audacity of hope” takes on an entirely new meaning. No longer an empty rhetorical promise that makes capitalism possible, hope galvanizes radical coalitions and reinvigorates the American imaginary. As Joseph G. Ramsey states in his introduction to the 2010 issue of *Cultural Logic*, “[M]arxism teaches us that the underlying dynamics of the system will continue to perpetuate the possibility – indeed the necessity – of crises, so long as the system exists, so long as we do not find a way to overthrow and transcend it” (11). If “the underlying dynamics of the system” necessitate these crises, Obama’s “hope” rewrites these crises as the “difficulty” and “uncertainty” that will somehow culminate in “better days ahead.” In other words, this rhetorical appropriation of hope only perpetuates difficulty and uncertainty, forever displacing any opportunity for a better future.

This delusional rhetoric casts hope as a constitutive logic that papers over the basic inequalities that give life to the capitalist economy, locking us into Lee Edelman’s bleak vision of heteronormative futurism.³ While Edelman’s interrogation of futurity in his important work *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) critiques neoliberal capitalism along similar lines, it launches a nearly wholesale indictment of futurity. By contrast, this essay attempts to revamp hope and futurity for Marxian purposes, arguing that we must recast hope as a revolutionary ideal that enables practical change and empowers us to re-imagine the future. After all, late capitalism and what Lauren Berlant calls its “cruel optimisms” are arguably America’s primary religion, a more direct vein for the “opiate of the masses,” allowing its congregants to invest hope in a future salvation that will never arrive. As a potential antidote, this essay explores the critical potential of radical culture by mapping what I call the “revolutionary imaginary” in literature and culture. Through studying and teaching cultural representations of revolution, we get fleeting glimpses into the limits of, not to mention potential alternatives to, neoliberal capitalism. Such glimpses have the potential to dislodge us from the oppressive conditions of the here and now, a present that constantly threatens to erase any path to and possibility of a different future.

Better Days Ahead and the Not-Yet-Here

In his four-volume treatise on hope, Ernst Bloch maintains that it is literal and metaphorical hunger that leads to revolution. Referring to the initial sparks of political transformation, Bloch writes that “revolutionary interest [...] always begins with hunger” (75). For Bloch, interest develops “when the body-ego [...] becom[ing] rebellious [...] seeks to change the situation” and eventually says, “No to the bad situation which exists [...] Yes to the better life that hovers ahead” (75). According to Bloch, the “bad situation” does not call for hope in “better days” to come. Instead, the “uncertainty” and “difficulty,” which Obama obliquely refers to in his speech, calls for rebellion, participatory action, and actual change. Bloch remarks, “Out of economically enlightened hunger comes today the decision to abolish all conditions in which man is an oppressed and long-lost being” (76). Bloch’s delineation of hope provides an inverse image of Obama’s illogical and even sadistic version, which asks voters to endure the “bad situation” while hoping for a better future.

Instead of investing hope in the “bad situation,” Bloch’s work suggests that hope coalesces in order to both imagine and actively transform the future. Defining hope as a kind of call to

action, Bloch argues, “Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness [...] The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong” (3). Hope, then, is not a purely anticipatory gesture that requires patience and passive longing. On the contrary, hope is integral to activism and social change. According to Richard Gunn, this vision of hope offers a distinctive ontology of human existence: “This ontology can be summarized by saying that, for [Bloch], we *are already*, as human, what we *are not-yet* [...] we exist ‘ecstatically’ in the literal sense of standing out ahead of ourselves towards an open future which we ourselves actively determine and towards which our hoping is addressed” (4, 5). In hoping, we actively shape the present by anticipating the future. This ecstatic ontology reveals the ways in which hoping determines the future, closing off or opening up the very possibility of revolutionary transformation.

Gunn’s delineation of this disparate ontology sheds light on Bloch’s contributions to critical understandings of Marxist temporality as well. After all, if we “are already [...] what we are not yet” then traditional distinctions between the present and the future appear less useful and even problematic. Seeing the present as closed off and completely separate from the future limits our ability to change the days ahead. By turning to his concept of queer temporality, José Muñoz clearly elucidates this problem. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009), he focuses his study on the “no-longer-conscious” because it allows for “a critical hermeneutics attuned to the not-yet-here. This temporal calculus performed and utilized the past and the future as armaments to combat the devastating logic of the world of the here and now, a notion of nothing existing outside the sphere of the current moment, a version of reality that naturalizes cultural logics such as capitalism and heteronormativity” (12).⁴ Drawing on Bloch’s terminology, Muñoz revises our understanding of the present (here and now) and the future (then and there) in order to “combat the devastating logic” of our current world and “a version of reality that naturalizes [...] capitalism.” In other words, while the devastating logic of the here and now rejects queer identity and community, Muñoz highlights repressed queer histories to disrupt these logics, creating important breakages in our understanding of the present and the past. These breakages equip him to imagine a very different future.

This essay appropriates what Muñoz calls a “queer temporality” for Marxist critique and activist pedagogy (essentially placing Bloch’s terminology back within its original Marxist framework). Of course, doing so does not diminish the significance of queer theory and Muñoz’s contributions to Marxist thought. Muñoz works in part to integrate Marxist critique with queer studies and falls in line with what Kevin Floyd identifies as “a decade [in which] prominently published and increasingly frequent interventions in queer thought began taking the vocabulary of Marxism with a renewed and explicit seriousness” (2). For Muñoz, this engagement culminates in a new vision of temporality that “is attentive to the past for the purposes of critiquing the present” (Muñoz 18). Drawing on the radical histories and revolutionary struggles of the past, this critical lens enables us to imagine a present charged with transformative possibility. By this account, historical research becomes an act of recovery wherein students and teachers alike must draw on the successful protests and failed resistances of the past to re-frame our present moment and reimagine the future. This methodology undermines the dominant narrative of neoliberal capitalism, which threatens to perpetually reproduce the crises and inequalities of capitalism as an everlasting present that constantly consumes the future.

Obama's insistence that hope is the "bedrock of the nation" shows how this paradoxical hope, with its unquestioning faith in an oppressive here and now that will somehow turn into better days, is at the core of neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, this problematic hope is foundational. In the wake of World War II, the vilification of all things communist confirmed this legacy. Throughout the Cold War and the McCarthy era, political revolution and communist critique fell away from the prevailing political discourse. Talk of protest and Marx signified patriotic disloyalty, ideological ties to the Soviet Union, and even the potential undoing of American democracy. Through the implementation of anti-Communist institutional structures like the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) and the investigations of Senator Joseph McCarthy, Marxist critique became wholly synonymous with treason.

Throughout his presidency, Harry S. Truman used his position and power to demonize communism—along with all other competing Marxisms—as un-American. In her work on the Cold War, Christina Klein writes,

The Truman administration forged this Cold War historical bloc in large part by boosting anticommunism [...] to the status of national ideology. Beginning with the Truman Doctrine speech in 1947, the president spearheaded a campaign designed to sell his foreign policy [...] Truman deployed anticommunism as a political weapon against the competing alternatives of left and right. (33, 34)

Truman's important 1947 speech appeals to the rhetoric of freedom, pitting communist governments against the freedom and independence of their nations' subjects. Moving anticommunism to the "status of national ideology" cemented capitalism as integral to national identity, securing it—in many respects—as "the bedrock of the nation."

Reversing this narrative requires a great deal of critical work, and it demands that we use "the past and future as armaments to combat the devastating logic of the world of the here and now" (Muñoz 12). After all, re-imagining our national identity means re-thinking the American past and future. Such projects call for critics who are determined to bring the marginalized histories of radical groups, labor organizations, and leftist coalitions to the fore. Tracking the history of American unions and working-class communities, scholars like Michael Denning, Chris Vials, and Nelson Lichtenstein—among others—engage in these kinds of projects by tracing the partial successes and temporary failures of working-class alliances and labor organizers in the U.S. These critics write histories that highlight Marxian discourse and coalition building as centripetal forces in American history. Denning, for example, writes of the cultural front in the late 1930s: "[T]he cultural front reshaped American culture. Just as the radical movements of abolition, utopian socialism, and women's rights sparked the antebellum American Renaissance, so the communisms of the depression triggered a deep and lasting transformation of American modernism and mass culture" (xvi). Rather than reading communism as the spectral Other of American national identity, Denning insists that during the Depression (and after) communism dramatically altered and shaped this identity.

What Denning refers to as a lasting transformation can also be seen in the popularity of unions, attention to and renewed vitality in the labor struggle, and legislation like the 1935 Wagner Act, "a radical legislative initiative [...] It guaranteed workers the right to select their own union by majority vote, and to strike, boycott, and picket" (Lichtenstein 36). Due in large part to

the extreme class inequality and labor exploitation that pervaded the Depression, Marxist critique became a fundamental part of the cultural vernacular and basic legislation, creating what Raymond Williams might call a new “structure of feeling” in the American masses. Contrary, then, to popular belief, these radical resistances and Marxian influences undergird American history, even in spite of their clear repression. These critical histories also re-frame our understanding of the here and now, allowing us to see the lasting—though often ignored—impact of these movements and coalitions.

Turning to the field of literary studies, there is a great deal of recovery work on “red literature” that breaks important ground for literary scholarship as well. Critics like Alan Wald, Paula Rabinowitz, and Barbara Foley—among others—re-examine proletarian literature as an important site of political imagining and radical resistance. Foley astutely argues, “If Marxism is to arise like a phoenix from the ashes of state capitalism, it is useful to study texts inspired by this phoenix in an earlier incarnation—for their cautionary lessons as well as their testaments to possibility” (ix). In their work, they read proletarian literature from the Depression dialectically, attending to the failures and successes of this literary tradition. These attentive readings run counter to past scholarship and traditional canonical formations, which often dismiss this tradition wholesale as political propaganda. As Wald writes of this decade, “[T]he Left was always delimited in relation to modernism—not only because it shared many of the same interests but because modernism conquered as the paramount heritage in U.S. literary culture in the 1940s and after” (323). Because modernism “conquered,” many Depressionera proletarian writers have disappeared from national memory. The anti-communist ideologies of the Cold War, then, infiltrated literary culture in the U.S. following the Red Decade, constricting to a certain extent the political content and imaginative possibility of American literature.

These scholars begin to re-imagine American history as a testament to Marxist possibility. Rather than invest hope in the narrative of neoliberal capitalism, their work—in the words of Muñoz—uses “the past and the future as armaments” to disrupt capital’s monopoly on hope. Foley quite appropriately envisions Marxism as a phoenix, one that can only emerge from the ashes of state capitalism. This utopic image portends a Marxist ascendance and demands a temporal calculus that draws on past and future imaginings to make a better world.

Collective Resistance and H.T. Tsiang’s World Revolution

As a literary scholar and instructor, I intend to teach and read proletarian literature, as well as contemporary trends in culture, in a way that attends to what Muñoz and Bloch call the “not-yet-here,” a utopic potentiality charged with revolutionary possibility. But how do we teach students to trace this potentiality in aesthetics? How do we create an optic attuned to utopic possibility and Marxian hope? I argue that this optic requires readers who look closely at, as well as instructors who design courses around, diegetic representations of revolution. And although the Depression did not mark the beginning of social protest and revolution in American literature, these political concerns did become a dominant mode of literary representation unlike any time period before or after. The proletarian novel—American literature’s most direct response to the Depression—included what the radical writer Mike Gold calls “revolutionary élan,” which promised to “sweep this mess out of the world forever” (5). Gold insists that this revolutionary scope is crucial to the proletarian literary genre. In line with Gold’s claims, I will trace the contours of this revolutionary scope in order to document the

ways in which Depression-era writers began to imagine radical transformations in the political, economic, and social structure of the nation. After discussing this “revolutionary imaginary” in the proletarian novel, I will turn to a more recent example of revolution in contemporary film.

In his proletarian novel, *And China Has Hands*, Chinese American H.T. Tsiang wields a rather unique revolutionary vision of the future.⁵ In this text, Tsiang imagines a not-yet-here wherein an international working class unites in order to end economic and racial oppression across continents. The narrative foregrounds a community inflected by racial diversity and transnational conflicts from the opening pages. Rooted in the complex racial and class dynamics of the Depression, this fictional account of a Chinese immigrant named Wong Wan-Lee shows how the revolutionary imaginary enables writers to launch a historically specific critique of their present moment while providing glimpses into a radically transformed future. Moreover, introducing students to this often overlooked novel allows them to see the radical implications and formal complexity of politically conscious literature from this period.

From the opening pages, the narrative pairs Japanese imperialism and American capital as twinning projects of exploitation oppressing the international working classes. As Floyd Cheung observes, “Tsiang envisioned both the Chinese revolution and the U.S. proletarian movement as part of what he called [...] ‘the world revolution’” (229). It makes sense then that Tsiang’s novel interrogates the symbiotic structures of imperialism, racialization, and capitalism in the

U.S. The critic Julia H. Lee’s reading of the novel focuses on “the relationship between triangulated interracial dynamics in a local, American scene and Western inspired, imperial encroachment on a global scale” (81). The “triangulated interracial dynamics” allude to the novel’s two racialized protagonists: the Chinese immigrant Wong Wan-Lee and Pearl Chang, who is half Chinese and half African American.

While the novel takes up local politics to be sure, it also engages with broader international conflicts and communities in order to address transnational circuits of exploitation. In the final pages of this novel, Wong dies while striking with Pearl and other workers in the U.S., but before dying, he looks to Communist China as a significant site of resistance and revolutionary possibility for the international working class. The novel, then, takes aim at the extreme class stratification and immigrant exploitation of the Depression, but it also imagines a strike that will eventually unite disparate working-class movements and radical coalitions. Tsiang invokes the revolutionary Marxism of China as an important bastion of hope for the workers and protesters in the U.S., highlighting a potential circuit of resistance in the Chinese diaspora.

Set almost entirely in Chinatown, Tsiang’s novel follows the life of Wong as an immigrant worker in New York City. After working as a waiter for some time, he saves up enough money to buy his own laundry. Eventually, however, he loses this laundry and goes back to waiting on tables because “he could not raise another fifty dollars to pay the House Inspector” (119). As he slowly loses hope and all of his money, he begins to develop a political critique of the corruption that surrounds him.

When Wong first meets Pearl, she helps him learn to negotiate the cultural differences and blatant racisms that surround him in Chinatown. As an American born Chinese, who is half

African American, Pearl is uniquely equipped to teach Wong about these racial dynamics. Both characters reveal how Tsiang's representations of race and Chinese diaspora complicate overly simplistic or monolithic constructions of either. Indeed, Pearl's very existence within the novel disallows straightforward representations of race and nation by emphasizing the complex histories of immigration and cross-racial identification that often formed ethnic subjects during the 1930s. Initially, she marshals her ambiguous racial identity to her own benefit in the Jim Crow South. Because African Americans "are not allowed to ride in the same streetcar with whites, but Chinese are," Pearl passes as Chinese (32). Pearl's attempts to pass reveal the incredibly intricate racial dynamics that pervade the South during this time period.⁶ Through his portrayal of her experience, then, Tsiang constantly highlights and critiques these racial dynamics that constituted the here and now of the Depression.

Yet, it is not only the "white" world that exercises racism within the novel. Lee notes—when discussing Pearl's firing at the hands of a Chinese Nationalist—"Tsiang pointedly condemns how the Chinese Nationalists mimic the racial and economic oppression of America [...] The owner is concerned about the racial purity of his 'people,' but he is more worried that the presence of Pearl will drive away his customers" (89). In New York, Pearl works briefly at a Chinese restaurant, but her presence as an apparent African American worker threatens the owner's business. The Chinese owner objects to her racial background, claiming "[w]e Chinese are black enough" (102). Through these character dynamics, Tsiang maps the shifting fault lines of racialization during the Depression, which exist primarily—if not solely—for the dual purposes of commodification and power. The business owner fires Pearl because she threatened to "spoil" the reputation of his restaurant and "drive away customers" (102).

If racialization exists for these dubious purposes, internationalism also threatens to function duplicitously within the narrative. Indeed, critical images of globalization surface and recur in Wong's various encounters. A peripheral character, whom Tsiang calls the "Chinese gentleman," for instance, "recently finished his Ph.D. thesis—'How to Sell China More Profitably'—and he also made great progress in studying Japanese" (88). The gentleman and his thesis appear to propagate the American exploitation of China. This same gentleman also studies Japanese, a nation whose imperial exploitation of China was in full swing throughout most of the decade. Similarly, Tsiang describes the boss of the cafeteria that Wong and Pearl work in: "When the boss talked to the Chinese workers, he would say the whites were no good. [...] When the boss talked to the white workers," he would say the opposite (122). Tsiang then calls the boss an "internationalist" (122). Tsiang's satirical invocation of internationalism critiques the boss's attempts to divide the workers. He utilizes his internationalism to exploit and divide workers across race and national lines. In this context, international relations only serve to negotiate the blatant profiteering of capitalism.

Conversely, Tsiang offers a much more radical vision of internationalism and collective resistance. This resistance forms in direct opposition to the boss, whose "internationalism" exploits workers of various races, nations, and genders. In response to the boss's exploitation, "Pearl [...] and many other workers quit their jobs and paraded in front of the Chinese cafeteria in which they worked" (123). Shortly thereafter, Wong and "[t]he workers in the other cafeterias joined: The white, the yellow, and the black, the ones between yellow and black, the ones between white and black" (124). The boss's very effort to co-opt internationalism as a tactic of capitalism backfires: the workers organize pan-ethnic coalitions and eventually strike.

Moreover, this strike moves beyond black and white race relations to account for a range of ethnic identities that include “white,” “yellow,” “black,” “the ones between yellow and black,” and “the ones between white and black.” No longer invested in “passing,” Pearl joins forces with Wong in order to form a collective resistance.

This revolution includes—and in fact depends entirely on—the racialized Others excluded by the nation, and yet it relies on a utopic transcendence of race as well. The strikers sing “the song that knows nothing of white, yellow, or black./ They wanted better wages./ They wanted shorter hours” (125). The song anticipates and calls for a future that transcends the racializing tactics of labor exploitation and Asian exclusion, and it remains rooted in the practical needs of the present as well.⁷ In other words, this transcendent futurity takes shape under the sign of practical demands in the diegetic here and now. The revolutionary imaginary emerges here as a realistic critique of the present without compromising a radical vision for the future. Moreover, this vision of revolution unites a diverse Chinese diaspora that includes Tsiang’s proxy as a Chinese immigrant writer of proletarian literature, Wong as a Chinese immigrant fighting for American citizenship, and Pearl as a Chinese African American, who has never been to and seems to know very little about China. Even though race seems to disappear in the workers’ song, these diasporic connections bring race to the fore and reveal Tsiang’s strategic investment in both pan-ethnic and working-class solidarity.

Ultimately, this strike constitutes an image of diasporic protest and collective resistance in the final scene. Indeed, it takes place on North American soil, but Wong turns to China for hope. At the end of the novel, Wong is shot and killed by a Japanese agent. But before he dies, he yells, “*I have no ten thousand fortunes,/ But I’ll have China!/. [...] Up, China now stands,/ And China Has Hands—/ Eight/ Hundred/ Million/ Hands!*” (128). His class-consciousness comes full-circle as he realizes the importance of class solidarity. Moreover, he rejects the prototypical narrative of U.S. modernity, which would suggest that the U.S. is the beacon of hope for this radical futurity and progressive politics. Instead, China becomes the centripetal force of hope. In contrast to Japanese imperialism and U.S. racism, the resistance movement in China serves as a model for Tsiang’s radical futurity. The novel imagines a realignment of Chinese diaspora with the racialized strikers of New York City. In fact, the final image of protest and potential revolution joins workers across national and racial lines in order to form and imagine radical resistances to both U.S. and Japanese empires. Tsiang links both the strike in New York and the independence movement in China to a broader fight against the globalizing strategies of capitalism, U.S. empire, and Japanese imperialism.

Tsiang conjoins this strike in New York City with the independence movement in China in order to reveal a diasporic community that is integral to revolutionary transformation. Moreover, this radical vision of protest enables Tsiang’s critique of the present. The racial dynamics of the Jim Crow South and the immigrant exploitation of the Depression galvanize radical coalitions and lay the groundwork for a diasporic protest that moves beyond national borders. Tsiang’s narrative re-imagines the U.S. strikes of the 1930s organizing alongside the working class of China in order to assemble the “world revolution” that he so adamantly advocated throughout his work. He draws on a history of protest in New York City and the burgeoning Marxisms of China to envision a very different future. Indeed, this novel tracks the way in which the symbiotic relationship between racialization and class stratification structures constrictive versions of national identity, and—more importantly—it looks beyond this relationship in

order to imagine broader communities of resistance, pan-ethnic coalitions, and grander narratives of belonging.

As teachers and students of literature, we must make legible the dually-pronged critique of protest literature, which indicts the oppressive tactics of its contemporary moment while insisting on the utopic potentialities that comprise a better future. Although *And China Has Hands* may initially pose some challenges for students who have difficulty relating to its idiosyncratic protagonist and Depression-era context, the deeply stratified class relations that pervade the text connect it to our current economic moment. Moreover, comparing the novel to more contemporary depictions of economic crisis and revolution in film and culture, such as Bong's *Snowpiercer*, yields a uniquely suggestive analysis and provides students with a more accessible entry point into the novel.

Reading Apocalyptic Revolution in Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer*

Turning this optic to contemporary expressions of revolution, we find ourselves in a very different historical context. In the wake of the Great Financial Crisis (2007-08) and the unprecedented rise of the Occupy movement, revolution appears to loom large over the political landscape. Ramsey appropriately describes the movement as an “eruption” wherein the “basic and undeniable facts of income and wealth inequality and the consequent inequalities of political power – previously confined to the margins [...] now occupy central stages in the newspapers, magazines, even on mainstream television” (5). Drawing on the work of Slavoj Žižek, Ramsey notes that this eruption coincides with a “number of apocalyptic Hollywood films in which the disasters’—meteorites, earthquakes, super-storms, alien invasions, epidemics—main ideological work is not to call into question present social practices so much as to underscore the importance of ‘family values’” (36). For example, films like *Deep Impact* (1998) and, more recently, *World War Z* (2013) cling to traditional family values in the face of worldwide destruction.

By contrast, however, South Korean director Bong Joon-ho's postapocalyptic film, *Snowpiercer*, envisions the apocalypse as an opportunity for social and political transformation. As Gerry Canavan claims, “[T]he film advances a utopian vision whose happy ending emerges not through some liberal logic of reform—which would only prolong our sentence in the failed experiments called *Snowpiercer* and capitalism—but rather through revolution and radical historical rupture” (22). I argue that this utopian vision inheres in an apocalyptic revolution wherein future generations are finally able to embody what Kevin Floyd refers to as “an absolute break with the present” (6). Although Floyd productively draws on Adorno for a dialectical critique of the assertion that a revolution somehow equates to “an absolute break,” this essay attends to the ways in which aesthetic representations of revolution attempt—to varying degrees of success—to envision this very break. *Snowpiercer's* depiction of revolutionary rupture culminates in an important image of intergenerational solidarity. Perhaps even more importantly, however, it critiques and re-imagines revolution for a mainstream audience. The film takes its narrative from the 1982 French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige* by Jacques Lob, Benjamin Legrand, and Jean-Marc Rochette. Excepting only a train full of passengers that travels around a frozen planet, life—as humanity knows it—no longer exists. What critic David Denby calls “a climate-change crisis” results in a train comprised of “oligarchical rule and underclass discontent.” An attempt to bring world temperatures down by unleashing a toxic chemical—

known as CW-7— into the atmosphere ends up freezing the earth and killing everyone unable to board the train. The train is then broken up into a rigid class system wherein the lower classes inhabit the dark and dingy back of the train and the upper classes fill the luxurious front section. Led by the engineer Mr. Wilford (Ed Harris), whom A.O. Scott describes as “both dictator and deity in this postapocalyptic world,” the train metaphorizes the extremely stratified state of contemporary class relations in the U.S.

Bong’s critique of class exploitation is clear from the opening sequences of the film. After an opening shot of planes presumably preparing to drop CW-7 on the earth, the film shifts through time and space to show the back of the train where militant police carrying what appear to be assault rifles prep for a “bed check.” The lighting is sparse as the camera pans and then stops to frame the dirty inhabitants at the back of the train. Bong uses close-ups and medium shots—in combination with dim lighting—for an overall claustrophobic and crowded effect. The lower-class inhabitants wear dark and tattered clothing with grease and grime smeared across their faces. The protagonist Curtis (Chris Evans) stands among these inhabitants before the police demand that he sit down, foreshadowing his future resistance.

The police appear to taxonomize the passengers with a mechanical counter, carefully controlling what Wilford and his primary minion Mason (Tilda Swinton) will later allude to as the “balance” of the train. During this routine “check,” the police ask for a violinist, but when a man volunteers with his wife (both of whom were concert violinists before the apocalypse), they insist that they only want one of them. He refuses to go, and the police respond by physically beating him and then taking him to the front of the train. The only way to leave the tail section is by police escort. Otherwise, the back of the train is sealed off by a series of guarded gates, which literalize the static—but also parasitic—relations between classes. Class mobility is nearly impossible. Once he initiates a rebellion, Curtis rescues the security engineer who designed these gates, along with his clairvoyant daughter, both of whom reluctantly decide to help him get to the front of the train in exchange for a drug called Kronole. The daughter, Yona (Ah-sung Ko), eventually helps Curtis anticipate what lies beyond each gate, and the engineer, whom Curtis calls Nam (Kang-ho Song), opens the doors.

The scenes that precede Nam’s rescue reveal the social and material inequalities that constitute life on the back of the train, and they expose the oppressive and violent regime installed by Wilford and his police force. During what the police call a “medical check,” for example, they take two children by force. These regular “checks” reveal how Wilford’s tyrannical regime relies on a variety of bureaucratic tactics and institutional routines to enforce a kind of Foucauldian power structure over the train’s population. In this scene, a woman from the front (Emma Levie), who is well guarded by the police, takes the children’s measurements with a tape measure. Her clean wardrobe, which includes a bright yellow coat and necklace, stands out in comparison to the dirty clothing of the lower classes. The woman decides to take two small children: Andy (Karl Vesely) and Timmy (Marcanthonee Reis). Eventually, Curtis learns that these children are forced to work in the engine room, where they are doomed to a short life of endless physical labor in a very small compartment (they literally replace a broken mechanical component of the train that Wilford is unable to fix). Their exploitation results from their ability to fit into this small compartment. As an undeniable microcosm of the train itself, this irreducible structure of exploitation lies at the epicenter of the “sacred engine,” a constant reminder to viewers that the train’s very existence depends on this brutal scene of exploitation. Treated like

objects, these children's limited value inheres entirely in their ability to replace a fairly basic mechanical part. Objecting to his son's abduction, Andy's father, Andrew (Ewen Bremner), makes the mistake of throwing his shoe at this woman.

As a result, Minister Mason delivers a speech about the importance of "order" on the train while the police proceed to punish Andrew. This punishment requires Andrew to stick his arm outside of the train for seven minutes, which causes his arm to freeze and finally break into pieces when the police strike the arm with a large hammer. More importantly, Mason's speech on what she calls "eternal order" delineates the power dynamics on the train. Mason announces, "In this locomotive we call home, there is one thing between our warm hearts and the bitter cold. Clothing? Jeans? No, order." The apocalypse, then, validates the status quo, and the shoe that Andrew throws in the previous scene becomes—in Mason's words—"size 10 chaos," threatening to put an end to Wilford's "order." This chaos, of course, endangers "the sacred engine." While Wilford's order justifies the perpetual exploitation of children and the tail section, Mason constantly insists that there is no alternative. For this reason, the inhabitants must subscribe to the order that keeps them alive. This emphasis on order and taxonomy shows how Wilford relies on these organizing logics to maintain power on board his train.

Mason's emphasis on order also depicts a world in which there is no real future. The exploitative present appears to stretch out ad infinitum before the passengers consuming all possible alternatives. After all, "Order is the barrier that holds back frozen death." She goes on, "We must all of us, on this train of life, remain in our allotted station. We must each of us occupy our particular, preordained position. [...] In the beginning, order was prescribed by your ticket." Figuratively frozen in the static class relations that comprise the here and now, Mason's speech does not even need to suggest that there are "better days ahead." Instead, the inhabitants must endure their exploitation—their "allotted station"—or prepare for "the frozen death." For the most part, this rhetoric effectively marshals the apocalyptic event to exploit the back of the train and locks them into a here and now that appears to foreclose any possibility of a revolutionary future. It is important to note that the inhabitants of the back of the train lack even the delusional hope of Obama's "better days ahead." The film appears to offer a cautionary tale for the radically stratified class society that no longer offers even the rhetoric of hope to its subordinate subjects.

Eventually, however, Curtis stages a rebellion that appears to rupture this order. Significantly for the argument above, it quickly becomes clear that Curtis's very ability to imagine a revolution stems from his capacity to remember what the world was like before the apocalyptic event and his life on the train. Because many of the passengers were born on the train, which has now been circling the earth for eighteen years, they either never saw—or have no recollection of—life outside of the train. For this reason, many have a hard time even imagining a life without exploitation. This oppressed life—what Mason calls "order"—defines and therefore gives meaning to their existence. As they move forward for the first time, however, these passengers begin to see the stark contrast between their own confined quarters and the more spacious and luxurious front of the train. In the next car up, for instance, they see a window for the first time, which allows them to look at the frozen earth that surrounds the train. Moving further forward, they eventually encounter a welllit aquarium and even a sushi bar. Shifting away from the close-ups and medium shots that framed the tail section, Bong films many of these

well-lit scenes with medium-long and long shots, establishing a clear difference between the crowded, dark spaces at the back and the spacious front section.

Unsurprisingly, their march forward is met with resistance. During one of the bloodier confrontations, Mason calls the passengers “filthy ingrates” and tells them that they “suffer from a misplaced optimism of the doomed.” This “optimism,” of course, springs from the hope that they can somehow change their “preordained positions.” Moreover, Mason’s proclamation reveals, once again, the significance of hope, which has begun to foster revolutionary (dis)order, or what Mason calls “violent hooliganism.” By the end of the film, however, this disorder will culminate in a successful rebellion, even if this rebellion looks quite different than what Curtis had originally planned. After this brutal sequence, Curtis captures Mason, and the rebels begin their march toward the engine room where Wilford controls the train. During this march, they encounter the school car, where the front section “educates” their children and teaches them to uphold Wilford’s “sacred order.” These children reproduce the ideologies of their parents: one student announces, for example, “I heard old tail sectioners are lazy dogs who sleep all day in their own shit.” In these declarations, Bong clearly satirizes the assumptions of the upper class, who make ridiculous assumptions about the poor. The children then proceed to watch a video that idealizes Wilford as the ultimate savior of humanity and prophetic builder of the train. Their pregnant teacher (Allison Pill) only serves to reinforce these basic ideologies. She teaches the children about the “Revolt of the Seven” a failed rebellion in which seven passengers attempted to stop the train, but after failing, these “seven” instead jumped off the train and froze to the earth as they tried to run away. The class then recites together with their teacher: “If we ever go off the train, we all freeze and die.” Their education revolves around this mantra through which students learn the deadly consequences of “misplaced optimism.” This education also instills a version of Edelman’s “heteronormative futurism,” which forever reproduces the present as it is. The engine, which their teacher insists, “will never die,” orbits the earth forever replicating the “eternal order.” As she encourages the class to join her in these ideological chants, the teacher rubs her pregnant belly, highlighting her own heteronormative contribution to this eternal order. Playing an organ and clearly invoking the worship music of certain western churches, she sings, “What happens if the engine stops?” and the class responds, “We all freeze and die.” Bong’s satirical critique of what Louis Althusser would call “ideological state apparatuses” exposes how institutions like schools and churches can function merely to bolster existing power relations. In class, these students learn to revere Wilford and fit into the sacred order that constitutes everyday life on the train. Rather than be enslaved to a life of work in the sacred engine like Andy and Timmy, these kids adopt and repeat the ideologies propagated by Wilford, living a life of luxury and relative ease.

Once he gets to the final car, the sacred engine, Curtis prepares to confront Wilford and finish the rebellion. In these climactic moments, however, what begins as a collective rebellion threatens to dissolve into an individual crusade. While Nam tries to convince Curtis that they need to destroy the train and take their chances outside (rather than take over the engine), Curtis initially rejects the idea and moves forward alone. Throughout his conversation with Wilford, Curtis slowly begins to realize that Wilford has helped manufacture many of the past revolts and revolutions—including Curtis’s own— in order to control the balance of the train and select new individuals for leadership. Thus, Bong carefully exposes the various ways in which “revolutionary élan” can be co-opted and appropriated by the ruling class.⁸ Moreover, their discussion demonstrates the immense critical value of the film’s centripetal metaphor. In one of

his long monologues, Wilford describes the sacred engine—the mechanical embodiment of capital’s systemic exploitation—as “cozy [...] in her heart. Peaceful.” Wilford asks Curtis to “take his place” before insisting, “the train is the world.” This claim mirrors the rhetoric of neoliberal capitalism, which implies that capitalism “is the world” and that there is no alternative. Moreover, the brutal oppression of rear passengers and small children allows for peaceful solitude and complete comfort at the very front of the train. Wilford attempts to seduce Curtis with these comforts, but once Curtis sees Timmy and Andy working tirelessly underneath the floor of the train, he begins to envision a very different kind of rebellion, one that might culminate in a revolutionary break.

When trying to persuade Curtis to blow up the train, Nam reveals that he has been storing up Kronole not to feed his addiction but to build a bomb. In the final sequence, Curtis gives his last match to Yona so that she can set off the bomb that she has attached to the side of the train. The explosion creates another kind of apocalyptic rupture, an end to the train that Wilford called “the entire world.” During this penultimate sequence, the camera jumps to the various cars and their upper-class inhabitants living out the last few minutes of their everyday lives: Wilford appears to sit down for one last glass of wine, a middle-aged woman looks out her window in confusion while she knits and a man tends to his garden in the background, and a young woman dressed in what looks like a golden silk robe gazes outside as well. Culminating in a massive explosion, the train’s destruction terminates their comfortable lives, as well as the lives of the rear inhabitants.

This rupture, however, enables the teenager Yona and young child Timmy—the only two survivors, so far as we can tell—to set foot outside of the train. Amidst the wreckage, these young survivors step out onto the snow and glimpse a polar bear moving slowly in the distance. They stand in awe before the camera finally fades to black. This scene depicts what Kevin Floyd—drawing on the work of Adorno—calls “a halting of reproductive futurism: a break with the mere temporal expansion of identity, of equivalence, of exchange” (7). To that end, the film’s final image refutes Edelman’s rather bleak vision of children. In his work, Edelman depicts children as the embodiment of reproductive futurism par excellence. By contrast, Floyd reads the figure of the child dialectically in order to suggest that “the child is most salient [...] as a figure not for an airtight, utterly predictable future, but for a precarious standpoint from which that future might begin to look less predictable” (16). In his introduction, Ramsey, too, considers similar intersections between post-apocalyptic narratives and the figure of the child: he insists, “The point, then is not that the figure of the Family, or of the Child, —or of the coming Catastrophe for that matter—is essentially subversive, radical or progressive, but that we need to read these figures dialectically, historically, strategically” (38). In the case of *Snowpiercer*, the figure of the child embodies the possibility of a new future, an absolute break with the present for Yona and young Timmy. This ending, however, simultaneously exposes the limits of such attempts to represent the break. The film’s climax can only articulate this break as the terminus of the film’s present. For that reason, it is not entirely clear what this ostensibly utopic future holds, but the “eternal order” of the engine—along with Curtis, Wilford, and the other passengers—is no longer. Bong dialectically critiques revolutionary desire, showing how resistance and protest efforts can easily function to serve existing power dynamics. In the end, however, Bong condemns reformation and half-measures, suggesting that it is the train itself that must meet an explosive end. After all, the train is *not* the entire world—though its ideologists would claim so.

The young survivors disrupt this “eternal order,” stepping into an alternative future, venturing into what Bloch would call “the brightest horizon.”

Revolutionary Pedagogy and Alternative Futures

In such disparate narratives as *And China Has Hands* and *Snowpiercer*, we encounter two unique revolutions. These narratives register the concerns and crises of two very different historical moments. Tsiang’s novel imagines a diasporic resistance that unites Communist China with protest efforts in the Depression-era U.S. Bong’s film emerges in the wake of historically unprecedented class stratification, the Occupy movement, and the climate crisis to allegorize the destruction of the class system. Nonetheless, tracing what I call the revolutionary imaginary in these texts makes legible a kind of Marxian hope that spans nearly an entire century. This hope is essential in our current moment, a moment charged with what Floyd calls a “defining contradiction, that [...] is symptomatic of a conjuncture in which capital’s domination of the future seems both inevitable and, at the same time, transparently violent in a way that would suggest the opposite of inevitability, the future’s irreducible openness” (4). If Tsiang’s 1930’s novel foregrounds a protagonist who rallies against capitalism and its bleak future in the final pages, Bong’s post-apocalyptic narrative portrays this future as a harrowing reality. Both aesthetic projects reveal societies ripe for social and political transformation. Outlining a foundational affinity between Muñoz and Bloch, Floyd writes, “[Muñoz] shares with Bloch a willful insistence on the ‘not yet,’ a determination to see an apparently neutralized political present as ‘laden with potentiality,’ to find political hope in the face of abundant evidence of its absence” (18). Tsiang and Bong, too, cling to the “not yet,” imagining a political present that is “laden with potentiality.” Whereas Tsiang’s diasporic protest registers this potential in transnational alliances that join together Communist China and working-class protesters in the U.S., Bong’s apocalyptic revolution harnesses this potential in a working class willing to go to great lengths to end the class system altogether.

Teaching students to read this potentiality will be integral to any possibility of “better days ahead.” Such a task aligns with what Ramsey calls a “radical need: namely, the need to cultivate a social and political imagination capable of sustaining intergenerational solidarity, and/or, a felt connection to Nature” (32). Indeed, this intergenerational solidarity combats the hopelessness that often looms over the contemporary left and, ultimately, allows students to learn from and inherit overlooked histories of political resistance. For this reason, Ramsey’s claim that “[i]n light of the suffocating hold of cynicism today, [...] it becomes a critical need in these times not only to attend to those utopian nodes (such as the figures of Nature and Futurity) [...] but also to closely attend to those moments in History (however brief) that have disrupted, challenged, or run counter to the common cynical sense that ‘things have always been like this’” (49). The study of textual revolution responds to this critical need and runs against the cynical grain that freights a colonizing view of the present, which suggests that things are as they have always been and will always be.

Near the end of his review of *Snowpiercer*, David Denby asks, “Is revolution being hatched in the commercial cinema?” Indeed, revolution appears to be pervasive in commercial cinema and popular culture; one need only look to the mass-market appeal of films like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*, not to mention the recent production of television shows like *Turn* and *Continuum*. To varying political ends, these narratives render a here and now that is

ripe for revolution. It is worth noting, however, that many of these films simply envision a destruction of the present without any attempt to reimagine the future, reminding us that “[a]s disturbing and provocatively jam-packed with images of crisis and apocalypse as these Hollywood films are, they tend to be quite conservative” (Ramsey 36). Ramsey goes on to note, “The crises (ecological, economic, political) of the present and future alike will prompt – are already prompting – many people to cling closer and more conservatively than ever to various traditional ideas and social forms” (36). Still, these films attest to Muñoz’s claim: “The here and now is a prison house,” and so “We must strive [...] to think and feel a then and there” (1). It is only through this striving to imagine, think, and feel a then and there that we will ever find “better days ahead.” The classroom provides an ideal space for this striving, as well as an opportunity to interrogate and learn from cultural iterations of revolution. Students, then, can begin to “believe in things not seen” and “better days ahead” but not because this belief is “the bedrock of the nation.” On the contrary, the audacity of hope emerges here as a revolutionary ideal, one that does not confirm our collective national identity but draws on global perspectives and transnational alliances that equip us to imagine and enact a better future.

Notes

¹ In discussing the work of Lee Edelman, Kevin Floyd historicizes Edelman’s claim that politics is always already defined by a promissory rhetoric, implying that this absolute claim is symptomatic of late capitalism. According to Floyd, this particular stage in capital perpetuates “heteronormative futurism,” “a futurism that only ever reproduces the actual as it is” (5). He highlights Edelman’s suggestion that “politics are by definition oriented toward the future – which means, here, that politics are always inevitably implicated in heteronormative futurism, a deeply ideological understanding of time which holds out the promise of a different future, a promise that always turns out to be false” (4, 5). Obama’s proclamation of hope, too, is symptomatic because it reproduces the present by articulating a similarly “false” promise, a “different future” that never actually arrives.

² Of course, this legacy has had a range of deleterious effects on the left, including but not limited to what Wendy Brown calls “left melancholia.” Drawing on Brown’s critique of the left, Gabriel Winant writes, “Today’s leftists, as anyone who’s done some organizing will know, are still attached to the experience of defeat, since it gives structure to their sense of their own marginal, heroic, and sad position” (126). Hopelessness, concomitant with melancholia, has come to define the experience of the left for decades.

³ This rhetoric also mirrors the now infamous “cruel optimism” that Lauren Berlant describes in her 2011 book by the same name. Berlant writes, “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle of your flourishing” (1). This constitutive logic reminds the reader of the many ways in which neoliberal capitalism thwarts the very fantasies and “better days” that it imagines.

⁴ Muñoz takes aim at our present moment because of what he calls the “ontological certitude [...] partnered with the politics of presentist and pragmatic contemporary gay identity” (11). He argues that the problematic fetishization of gay rights within a neoliberal framework privileges our present moment, foreclosing on the revolutionary possibilities of a queer future.

⁵ Of course, proletarian writers from this period like Mike Gold, Clara Weatherwax, and Carlos Bulosan imagine revolutionary futures as well. Due to length constraints, however, this

essay will look specifically at Tsiang, who draws on his own diasporic trajectory and struggles as an exploited immigrant worker to envision an international working class capable of radically transforming his present moment.

⁶ With these dynamics in mind, Leslie Bow argues, “Unlike apartheid in South Africa, segregation in the American South made few provisions for gradations of color” during this time period (2, 3). She goes on, “Whether characterized as sojourner, foreigner, or ‘cultural isolate,’ those who could not be placed as either white or black were not exempt from the complex social formations of the American South” (3, 4). In this regard, Pearl’s racial identity remains tethered to and yet different from these social formations. ⁷ Asian exclusion refers to the set of legislative initiatives and social codes that barred Asian immigrants from entering the country from the late eighteenth century to the 1960s (the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act would officially overturn many of these legislative restrictions). Decades of anxiety about Asian immigration led to the Page Law of 1875 and eventually the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, bills that dramatically restricted the number of Chinese immigrants allowed into the U.S. Worried about a growing Asian working class, the government quickly acted to diffuse the presumed threat that it posed. Throughout this time period, the government primarily targeted the working class, and thus anti-Asian racism and worker exploitation undergirded exclusionary policy from the beginning. Since the first wave of immigration, then, Asian immigrant identity was forged in racial alterity and working-class political struggle, and Wong—like Tsiang—clearly bears the marks of this history and embodies this radical working-class identity.

⁸ Bong’s critique should resonate strongly with a contemporary audience. One need only think of the droves of college students who wear shirts pasted with Che Guevara’s face and the advertising campaigns that now deploy the word “occupy” for marketing purposes to see how capitalism harnesses and absorbs revolutionary potential.

⁹ Wilford clearly subscribes to a Hobbesian vision of humanity in which he argues: “You’ve seen what people do without leadership. They devour one another [...] That’s how people are. You know. You’ve seen this. You’ve been this.” Like Mason and the teacher before him, Wilford attempts to convince Curtis that there is no alternative to the train and the tyrannical order that is its *raison d’être*. Eventually, however, Curtis adheres to a much more optimistic vision of humanity, which causes him to destroy the train altogether.

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