Reified Life
Speculative Capital and the Ahuman Condition
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This book has been a long, long time coming, and it has benefited from my idiosyncratic travels through institutions and fields of knowledge. I came of age at a unique and privileged moment in academic history when it was still possible to move among programs and disciplines, at least in the humanities. As a result of my initial peripatetic schooling, I accrued numerous debts that I cannot even begin to repay to my many teachers—not only those whose classes formed my thinking and encounters with the world, but also the colleagues, fellow graduate students, or people outside academia with whom I conversed over the years and who created inchoate thought.

Years ago, as a confused art historian at the University of Chicago studying the German Dadaists, I was enrolled in a seminar led by French philosopher Louis Marin. Marin taught while receiving chemotherapy, and sadly would die before the semester finished. Each week, he came in with ever-darkening circles beneath his eyes from the treatments, but in class he lived the joy of speculating on and debating ideas, offering me my first model of speculative thinking. The medieval art historian Linda Seidel challenged me to think beyond the history of art by undoing my historicist straitjacket and exposing me to the historicality of thought, and how power informs the writing of history. Arnold Davidson’s class *The History of Sexuality* introduced me to the nuances of Michel Foucault’s thinking, further unhinging how I thought and did history.

I then found myself in a unique cultural studies program at SUNY-Binghamton, where I was first exposed to Martin Heidegger, and to world-systems theory, through seminars at the Ferdinand Braudel Center. This aberrant conjunction of historical sociology and critique actually informs my present way of seeing the world. At Binghamton, urban sociologist Anthony King immersed me in studying the colonialism of everyday life in institutions and cultural practices, the work of Stuart Hall, and the global circulation of ideas, cultures, and structures due to capital. Christopher Fynsk and Bill Spanos shepherded me through the gathering of more Heidegger, Foucault, and Georges Bataille in two semesters than seemingly
possible. Fynsk helped me to loosen my historian’s tendency to read everything written about a topic in order to avoid encountering or thinking the thing before me. Spanos provided a model of thinking seemingly incompatible traditions—(Foucault, Heidegger, and Sartre read together? What heresy!?)—and practice conjunctural and intersectional thinking. His repeated love for the Heidegerrian auseinandersetzung, the “strife that belong together” as he put it, drives my focus on historically grounded theory and concrete criticism, the historical materialism of critique if you will.

At the University of Pittsburgh’s Critical and Cultural Studies program, I finally became situated following my “un-homely” graduate education travels. I thank my dissertation committee, Paul Bové, Marcia Landy, Ronald Judy, Terry Cochran of the Université de Montreal, and Jonathan Arac (unofficially), for all of their guidance over the years. Paul Bové’s classes on Foucault and Deleuze, on Marx’s Grundrisse, and on Fascism and Literature have been defining, as was his direction of my dissertation. Marcia Landy directed me through Gramsci and Negri, as well as multiple Deleuze independent studies. The Pitt experience collectively set the stage for all that follows in this book.

I taught at the Pratt Institute for several years amid a first-rate group of colleagues in Sociology, Literature, and Critical Theory, whom I still consider my intellectual fellow travelers. Sociologists Ricardo Brown and Ivan Zatz-Diaz in the Department of Social Sciences, and Ethan Spigland in Film always kept me on my toes with Marx references or Deleuze passages. Suzanne Verderber, my office mate for years, was a challenging interlocutor in the most profound way during my time there, and continues to expose me to new ideas and thinkers like Anne Sauvagnargues. I also thank Verderber, Peter Canning, and two former students, Brian Edgerton, and Jason Orrell, for the Lacan-inspired Cartel reading group and experiment in eventful thinking—how to think before structuring into predetermined concepts and narrative, to think topologically.

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me over the years and for their perseverance amid a disintegrating social contract.

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My union work for the Professional Staff Congress-CUNY informs my goal in this book of trying to mix the theoretically abstract and the concrete, as well as demonstrating every day how seemingly moribund institutions, like corporatist labor unions, can be redeployed and energized for social justice and political change. I thank the PSC’s leadership, Barbara Bowen, Michael Fabricant, Steve London, Nivedita Majumdar, and Sharon Persinger, for their commitment and example.
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Reified Life
On May 6, 2010, the New York Stock Exchange tumbled one thousand points over several minutes due to an algorithmic-driven buying and selling spree, when high-speed artificial intelligence bots created an autonomous reality far beyond their programming. Dubbed the “flash crash” in the U.S. media, this event signaled to the world the automation of global stock markets, the pervasiveness of high-frequency trading in the age of financial derivatives, and new frontiers of economic risk in the digital age. Computer programmers and quantum physicists had created automated forms of intelligence (programming robots) that replaced human financial traders, resulting in what Wall Street Journal writer Scott Patterson calls the “algo wars.” The automated high-frequency trading systems within over seventy different online exchanges operate by exercising calibrated semiautonomous judgment through the virtual buying of stocks and selling them nanoseconds later for a profit. These fast-moving algorithms, which were programmed for opportunistic traders at small firms, detect the intention of institutional investors (that is, pension funds or large investment houses such as Fidelity or Vanguard) to buy or sell large orders of investments, and purchase them beforehand. This raises the stock, bond, or asset price in the interim between
the institutional investors’ signaling of intention to buy and the time it takes to process the actual order—which is itself done through other, slower automated systems. Due to the celerity of the operations, institutional investors pay a now-higher price for the investment due to the algorithms’ simultaneous buying and selling. These changes defy human sensibility and only register belatedly through numerical value fluctuations. The algorithmic bots generate profits by monetizing pre-cognizant intention, skimming the difference between intention and action, and accumulating vast sums of money due to the size of the orders, all in the span of nanoseconds.

Most of these transactions, which utilize a machinic form of arbitrage monetizing the price difference between different markets, are speculative virtual hedges without any actual transfer of money between agents in the material world. As a result, algorithmic bots are programmed to generate fake orders, raising and lowering prices instantaneously in an automated form of speculative financial capitalism. They trigger other algorithms to buy or sell depending on their programmed intention to seek new avenues of profit (hunter-seeker bots) or manage risk from such algorithms. This cascading process creates seemingly endless feedback loops of bots performing their functions, forcing more and more human programmers to generate more and more algorithms that open and complicate the financial system through their interaction. The result is an algorithmic war of all against all. Indeed, as Patterson wrote,

Insiders were slowly realizing that the push-button turbo-trading market in which algos battled algos inside massive data centers and dark pools at speeds measured in billionths of a second had a fatal flaw. The hunter-seeker Bots that controlled trading had sensors designed to detect rapid, volatile swings in prices. When the swings passed a certain threshold—say, a downturn of 5 percent in five minutes—the algorithms would instantly sell, shut down, and wait for the market to stabilize. The trouble was that when a large number of algorithms sold and shut down, the market became more volatile, triggering more selling.¹

The flash crash was thereby the effect of a cascade of triggers, events, and networks of connected relations whose interactions transformed the systems’ phases to function differently from their programming and protocols. These interconnected processes exemplify self-reflexive autopoietic systems that open and exceed their initial protocols through dynamic “intra-actions,” in Karen Barad’s terminology,² in this instance generating economic crises. On a more basic level, however, virtual symbolic trades,