Chapter 24

YOU ARE NOT A LOAN

DEBT AND NEW MEDIA

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> Man is no longer man enclosed but man in debt.[2]
>
> —Gilles Deleuze

> Untangling the lines of an apparatus means in each case preparing a map, a cartography, a survey of unexplored lands—this is what [Foucault] calls field work.[3]
>
> —Gilles Deleuze

> The two great abstract machines that define our era—the market and the media—are two faces of this inscriptive-projective process, the organization of lived temporality around the interminable working-up and working-off of an imperishable indebtedness.[4]
>
> —Richard Dienst

Globalization since the 1970s has had two features that have distinguished it from earlier periods of capitalist development: debt and digital media. This essay proposes that this is not a coincidence: debt and the digital are intersectionally and inextricably linked. In this preliminary field work, I am using the activist method of mapping. Where and how debt and the digital have been and continue to be interactive and intensify is my question.[5] For Gilles Deleuze, the hallmark of the transition from the society of enclosure to that of control is the production of a subject in debt. The "man" in debt is not a male person but a subject who is defined by debt as the "head of a household" or an otherwise responsible debtor. Those outside the category "man" are, as Deleuze notes immediately, "too poor for debt, too numerous for confinement." This exclusion is always already racialized.[6] Debt and the computer form an apparatus that operates by force, subjugation and power. This operating system seeks to act invis-ibly and functions as a machine ethic that defaults to morality as soon as it is made visible or ques-tioned. Just as the story of computing in the past half century is the shift from the mainframe to the PC and the Internet, so, as we have moved from the society of enclosure to that of control, has the story of debt become the transition from sovereign to personal debt. The famous 99% is not a myth. When Occupy began, 76% of Ameri-can households were in debt, while 22% were too poor to qualify for credit: the 99% are the indebted and the excluded from credit. The goal of this work is not to say that new media studies needs a sub- field on debt but to investigate how new media sustains the debt system with the goal of finding a politics of debt and debt refusal. To refuse neo-liberal debt is not to deny our debt to each other. Rather, it is to assert that what we owe to each other as people is being written out of the program. To alter that is not a simple modification—it requires a new abolition.

"Dark Satanic Mills"

Computing is susceptible to the intensification of the neo-liberal debt system, because it was always already a liberal debt system. When Charles Babbage imagined his Analytic Engine, widely understood to be the first modern computing device, he drew on not just his mathematical skills but his formation as a nineteenth-century liberal. Driven by the practical difficulties of producing his Difference Engine calculating machine, Babbage undertook a lengthy study on manufactures. The result became a bestseller, including chapters on currency and debt, in which he stressed that "the most important principle on which the economy of a manufacture depends is the *division of labour*."[7] He gave the example, among others, of Gaspard de Prony. During the French Revolution, de Prony took a group of unemployed servants and wig dressers (who had formerly worked for the aristocracy) and turned them into "computers," calculating trigonometric tables by means of simple addition and subtraction.[8] In passing, it might be noted that similar unemployed former servants of the aristocracy produced the paper cards that gave instructions to the automated Jacquard loom. Presumably, given the nature of the work, at least some of these computers were women, the foremothers of the ENIAC women who programmed the first computer proper.[9]

Babbage was led to two key observations. He noted that de Prony's project "much resembles that of a skillful person about to construct a cotton or silk mill." And then he mused on the possibility of "the mechanical execution of such an engine."[10] These two concepts led him to devise the Analytic Engine, whose core was to be what Babbage called the "mill," the place where computation took place.[11] All modern accounts quickly inform the reader that the mill was equivalent to today's Central Processing Unit and pass on to analyzing how Babbage's mill might have worked. The mill was no casual metaphor, however, derived as it was from the new cotton mills, where debt-financed machines wove cotton, putting the skilled handloom operators out of work.[12] One layer down in the global economy of the time were the enslaved on the cotton plantations, busy making capital in the Cotton Kingdom of the American South.[13]

James Montgomery's handbook *Theory and Practice of Cotton Spinning* was first published in 1836, leading to a dramatic expansion of the mechanized mill.[14] Modern mills, using steam-power and power looms, cost at least £10,000 (approximately £750,000 in today's terms) to build, financed by joint-stock companies.[15] By 1860, some 2,200 factories were estimated by the government of the time to house close to 300,000 power looms and generate an industry valued at £100 million.[16] Unemployed handloom weavers smashed the new power looms, attacks that have sometimes been labeled as the first computer virus. In his *Condition of the Working Class of England*, Friedrich Engels described the transition from artisan weavers to waged laborers in a mill as the paradigm for the Industrial Revolution and the formation of the proletariat. The key to the mill, as it was to Babbage's Analytic Engine, was the division of labor. For Engels, the condition of the new proletarian weaver, left with nothing except her or his labor power to sell, was a form of slavery:

> The proletarian is helpless; left to himself, he cannot live a single day. The bourgeoisie has gained a monopoly of all means of existence in the broadest sense of the word. What the proletarian needs, he can obtain only from this bourgeoisie, which is protected in its monopoly by the power of the state. The proletarian is, therefore, in law and in fact, the slave of the bourgeoisie, which can decree his life or death.[17]

The human computer was to follow the path of the handloom weaver of the Analytic Engine in Babbage's vision—that is to say, a person whose skill became mechanized. In this case, it was to have been a second demotion from feudal protection to skilled laborer to unemployment. The mill, whether inside the calculating machine or as the engine of the Industrial Revolution, impoverished the multitude while enriching the elites by means of debt-financed capital. The Analytic Engine was a perfect creature of the age of enclosure, just as the digital computer is the epitome of the society of control.

Debt and the Net

Every aspect of the modern debt system at the heart of neo-liberalism relies on new media, from the structure of the machine to the logic of code to the enabling of electronic transactions by the Internet and other electronic networks. As early as 1981, the French Socialist government-elect, headed by François Mitterand, found that electronic trading had pushed the country into a currency crisis before the new ministers had even reached their desks. The Internet itself came into its present centrality after its privatization in 1994. The National Science Foundation Network (NSFNET) was created in the 1980s as part of the wave of interest in supercomputing and was connected to a variety of federal networks, universities and other agencies. Building on the foundations of the defense agency network known as the ARPANET, the result became known as the Internet. In 1994 this infrastructure was simply transferred to the private sector, which "inherited a technology that was created with billions of public dollars."[18] The lack of return on that investment, like for so many other privatized public sector developments, forms an invisible and unmentioned part of the federal debt that so troubles neo-liberal economists.

Now everything from personal credit scores AuQ90 to the impossible-to-understand Credit Default Swaps and Collateralized Debt Obligations that brought down the markets in 2008 are determined and shaped electronically. However, this determination is not done on an equal basis. Michael Lewis' book *Flash Boys* has made notorious what many Internet scholars and users have long known: the faster the Internet connection you have, the more money you can make.[19] Dedicated fiber optic cables were laid to enable day traders to gain a few milliseconds' advantage in learning what bids were being placed for shares. This knowledge allowed their computer to raise the price in the infinitesimal gap created. The tiny profit on each individual transaction, multiplied by millions, added up to easy profit for no service rendered to anyone anywhere. Now we see what science fiction novelist William Gibson meant when he said: "[T]he future is already here. It's just not well distributed yet." Day traders know the price before other citizens and make profits by living in that cutting-edge of the present. It seems that the expression "time is money" now has a double meaning. For those who acquire knowledge first, that information is monetizable. For the roughly 40% of American households with mortgage debt, future time is monetized in reverse. That is to say, payments of mortgage debt are measured in ten to thirty years of future earnings, front-loaded to ensure repayment of interest across the lifetime of the loan. Your future is already owned by someone else.

To create shared access to wealth we all need shared access to the present. Yet in April 2014 the Federal Communications Commission proposed ending net neutrality, making it possible for web providers to offer different access speeds to users. Inevitably, the various Internet giants known as Amazon, Google, Facebook and Netflix will pay for such fast use, while ordinary users will find themselves still further behind the game on the financial markets. Setting aside the specialized demands of day trading on the exchanges, for average American consumers, the result will be yet higher costs for the same Internet access we have now. In a context where the median household income has declined from $55,000 in 2007 to $51,000 in 2014 (in 2012 dollars), any additional cost adds to the pressure on households and leads to further debt.[20] Even in apparently AuQ91 wealthy cities like New York, average incomes have declined, even as rents have accelerated.[21] Indeed, U.S. household debt began to increase again in 2014, despite continuing downward income pressure.[22] While rising debt used to be considered a sign of economic health, it is now ambiguous at best.

Neo-liberal debt is unlike the debt that preceded it. It is a system of punishment and subjugation, rather than one of finance. Debt and the gift are the subject of an immense anthropological literature. For the sake of this essay, I will rely on the widely acclaimed study *Debt: The First 5000 Years* by David Graeber. In the classic sense, "debt," says Graeber, "is a very specific thing. It first requires a relationship between two people who do not consider each other fundamentally different sorts of being, who are at least potential equals, who *are* equals in ways that are really important, and who are not currently in a state of equality—but for whom there is some way to set matters straight."[23]

What is most noticeable here is that debt is a form of relationship. Money is not even mentioned. When money is involved, complex questions of hierarchy are set aside for simpler issues of legal standing. A debt is just "an exchange that AuQ92 has not been brought to completion." Graeber highlights the permanent exchanges among Tiv women of West Africa, whose mutual borrowings never end so that social exchange continues. Compare Graeber's assessment of the operations of debt in the last thirty years, which he sees as "[t]he construction of a vast bureaucratic apparatus for the creation and maintenance of hopelessness, a giant machine designed, first and foremost, to destroy any sense of possible alternative futures."[24] The point of this essay is to say, very simply, that the machinic apparatus of neo-liberal debt is new media. One of the primary functions of new media, literally a killer app, is to create, sustain and extend indebtedness. That does not mean that all new media are bad or that it is only about debt. It does mean that debt needs to be part of the conversation about new media.

Does the idea that debt is a form of social control seem excessive? Let's take two examples. In economist Thomas Piketty's view, the financial crisis of 2007–8 was the product of increasing inequality. This inequality meant that middle-class purchasing power stagnated, "which inevitably made it more likely that modest households would take on debt, especially since unscrupulous banks . . . offered credit on increasingly generous terms."[25] The result of the crash was not, Piketty shows, punishment for such banks but a reacceleration of the tendency toward inequality. The top 10% are now on track to own 60% of all income by 2030, of which fully 25% will go to the 1%. Now consider the introduction of student debt in the United Kingdom. Fees have escalated rapidly from £1,000 a year in 1998 to £9,000 a year in 2014. While this is still low by U.S. standards, the acceleration is dramatic for people not expecting to have to pay such fees. As a result, the default rate on student loans is now expected to be 45%. The academic and financial journalist Andrew McGettigan has shown that, as a result, the British government will in fact lose money on the increase.[26] No policy change followed this disclosure. Because, as Graeber has argued, the point of the debt system is not to generate money but to make people feel and experience hopelessness about their situation. British ministers actively want to discourage young people from higher education, which qualifies them for jobs that do not exist. At the same time, indebting those who do make it into university makes it less likely that such people will engage in political or social action, because they will be focused on repaying their debt. They will be more likely to prioritize higher-paying jobs, both validating the neo-liberal insistence that education generate a financial return and deterring them from public sector or voluntary work. Student debt as measured by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York in the United States now amounts to $1.08 trillion—trillion!—with an official default rate of 11.8%.[27] Other sources, like the *New York Times*, consider student debt to have reached $1.2 trillion already.[28] Further, the New York Federal Reserve Bank's own research shows that over 30% of loans that are supposedly being repaid are in default. The figures are massaged down by including loans being deferred by those continuing their education or for other reasons as part of the total. Default rates are higher for younger graduates, reaching 35%.[29] We can now summarize the purpose of higher education as follows: you need to go to school in order to be able to repay your student loans. As Maurizio Lazzarato has put it in his study of debt: "there is no question of economic equilibrium . . . but rather of a politics of totalization and individualization of authoritarian control over indebted man."[30]

The money that is lent in the neo-liberal debt system exists only electronically. Babbage noted in his study of the economy that it took a bank clerk at the Bank of England eleven hours to sign 5,300 notes and arrange them into parcels of fifty.[31] Today's money is not, despite the media's penchant for saying so, even printed. A bank loan has very little of the bank's own capital behind it. It exists only within the computer system and is known technically as "debt-money." It becomes another form of money when the debtor transfers their credit to "repay" the debt. As a result, lenders make a profit when a few percentage points of the loan have been "repaid" because they have so little money of their own in the transaction. Lazzarato summarizes the situation clearly:

> With bank money, not only does one produce debt, but money itself is "debt" and no more than a power relation between creditor and debtor. In the euro zone, the issuance of private debt/money represents 92.1% of all the money in circulation in the largest money aggregate.[32]

Thus money borrowed by the U.S. Treasury is held to be the securest form of investment, precisely because it does not exist in any tangible form. Treasury notes, or bonds, are measures of a digital entry in a computer memory. Sovereign[33] debt is in effect a giant confidence game, or should we say confidence trick? Bonds are trusted because we have confidence that the Federal Reserve can always issue more "money" to cover them, not because the U.S. government itself can be trusted or because trust has been in some way earned.[34] In May 2014 the Portuguese government announced to great fanfare that it had exited the bailout caused by its debt. Government debt had in fact risen from 94% of gross domestic product, when the bailout was imposed by the Troika, to 129% in 2014. However, markets now have "confidence," and Portugal was thus able to sell €750 million worth of ten-year bonds.[35] Sovereign and personal debt thus exist on very distinct levels. Punishment for personal debtors ruins lives. Sovereign and corporate debt exists on a "too big to fail," basis and only one Wall Street banker has been sentenced to jail time since 2008.

Debt in the Machine

These developments are not haphazard but are integral to the coded and networked world in which we live. Since Lev Manovich's *Language of New Media*, it has become necessary to work through the proposition that new media is in fact software studies.[36] There has been an extensive debate among new media scholars as to what software is and what it does. For Alexander Galloway, "*Software is both scriptural and executable*."[37] That is to say, software actively does things, or, as Galloway puts it elsewhere, "code is the first language that actually does what it says."[38] The idealism inherent in this statement is effectively transcribed by Wendy Chun: "By doing what it 'says,' code is surprisingly logos. Like the King's speech in Plato's *Phaedrus*, it does not pronounce knowledge or demonstrate it—it transparently pronounces itself."[39] In the new media literature, these arguments are played out over simple strings of coding languages, designed to show what machines in fact do. But what is this "it" that code does? Potentially many things, one might reply. But if code is executable, this means that it carries out executions. To *execute* is, according to my old friend the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "chiefly, the seizure of the goods or person of a debtor in default of payment." At the risk of AuQ93 being pronounced hopelessly naïve by the Talmudic and Platonic readers of scriptural code, let me propose that code is now that which places us in debt and seizes our goods and persons in so doing. The most obvious example of that code is the algorithm that determines your credit score, a number that not only gives access to loans but also is now more often than not consulted to determine whether to offer employment.[40]

To think of new media as debt might help us through some of the thickets of its interpretation. Galloway again demonstrates that (again in his favored italics) "*the computer is, in general, an ethic*." Its goal is therefore "to do something to the world." He distinguishes this from the "ethical," which relates such practices to "moral conceptions of the good." The machine as an ethic is a matter of "how specific, abstract definitions are executed to form a world."[41] One such machinic abstraction is creating and issuing debt, as defined above. Yet it is one of the peculiarities of the neo-liberal debt system that its formation of abstract forms of exchange (as opposed to the concrete exchanges of non-financialized cultures) at once defaults to intense insistence on morality and ethics. In the terms proposed by Tara McPherson, we can thus see electronically created debt-money as working through a process of modularity. McPherson shows that "the structures of operating systems like UNIX function by hiding internal operations, skewing 'clarity' in very particular directions."[42] Here McPherson is describing programming features like "filters, pipes and hidden data," but she also wants to stress that modularity operates in the social field, deploying what she calls a "covert racial logic." That is to say that, despite itself, modularity is already ethical, practicing a separation that is perceived to be morally as well as technically right. Think here of how redlining skewed the lending algorithm by excluding qualified African Americans and other people of color from loans. Debt, race and programming modulate each other. For, as Deleuze put it, "controls are a modulation."[43] Thus, a debt formed as a set of entries in the data network in the processing of an application by means of a credit score algorithm is an ethic. Move it along the system, and by means of the morality of modularity, that which Galloway calls "obfuscation,"[44] the debt becomes ethical, so that its repayment is the highest moral obligation of the debtor, whether the person or entity that threatens default is a student debtor, a city like Detroit or a "minor" nation such as Greece or Argentina.

The insistence on debt repayment as an ethical obligation that cannot be reversed is a signature of modern capitalism. In the Old Testament, as Graeber points out, the Jubilee offered debtors relief every fifty years, while the Lord's Prayer originally read, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive those against us." According to Lazzarato, capitalism changed all that. In an early essay, the young Karl Marx realized, as Lazzarato puts it, that "credit does not solicit and exploit *labor* but rather ethical action."[45] In Marx's own words, the debtor is dehumanized by capitalist debt and credit because "its element is no longer commodity, metal, paper but . . . the inmost depths of his [sic] heart."[46] Debt is in this sense alchemy, or what other digital scholars have called "sourcery"[47] or "fetishism."[48] It is an ethic transformed into the ethical, despite the apparent prohibition against such transformation within the code. What is required to counter this misrecognition, Lazzarato argues, is atheism. Here he cites Nietzsche: "atheism might release humanity from this whole feeling of being indebted towards its beginnings."[49] Debt is in this analysis a fetish for monotheism. To abolish debt, be atheistic. It is no surprise, in this view, that the United States is so religious, so in debt and so unwilling to give its citizens any relief from that debt at the same time. The machine produces a subjugation that is experienced internally: we feel responsible for our debt and for its repayment, regardless of what other options it forecloses.

Neo-liberal capitalism intensified that process once more, as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have noted: "[I]t is infused with the full intensity of displacements, modulations and hybridizations."[50] In the era of the "hybrid constitution," we cannot insist that modularity simply separates, when that separation is also a set of inclusions. The body that feels the ethical compulsion of the debt is no longer the mediated "extension of man [sic]" perceived by Marshall McLuhan. Rather, as Beatriz Preciado points out (following Donna Haraway and others), the body "functions like an extension of global technologies of communication."[51] So there is a transformation effected by the abstraction of debt by means of computation. Under enclosure, as Michel Foucault famously put it, "the soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the

Figure 24.1 Quote for a one-month loan, Wonga.com.

prison of the body."[52] The ethical perception of AuQ94 being in monetary debt restrained the impulse to default, flee or rebel. Debt restrains and contains. Neo-liberal debt incorporates the body into its network. Under financialized capitalism, debt proliferates; it is infinite—that is to say, it is without end. The death of the debtor simply relays the debt to their dependents, just as the death of a co-signer makes the entirety of a student loan due on demand. What is ethically compelled here is infinite labor. The body is required to work as long as necessary to meet the agreed terms, which, it is said, may have been unfair but were known to the debtor. The beauty of the system, from the point of view of the lenders, is that its subjects police and control themselves, imposing an ethical constraint on their own bodies. We subjugate ourselves.

In this way, the indebted, one of the "primary subjective figures" of our time, according to Hardt and Negri, are themselves figured by the migrant in debt to the smuggler, and the migrant worker in the Middle East, repaying a debt incurred for the "right" to work.[53] These extortionate transactions are paralleled in the developed world economies by payday loans, which have now moved online. The notorious United Kingdom payday lender Wonga claims that its algorithm uses 8,000 pieces of information to assess a loan. I received the quote shown in Figure 24.1 on May 8, 2014:

As you can see, the effective interest rate is 5,853% for a one-month loan. In that time, I would have to repay over a third of the amount borrowed or face renewed penalty charges and interest. The company posted £62 million in profits in the 2012 financial year.

Resisting Debt on the Net

Given the force of the debt machine, a better way to resist it may be to turn it against itself, rather than try to overturn it altogether. Strike Debt, an offshoot of Occupy Wall Street, tried a Situationist-style tactic to this effect in New York.[54] Following the May Day General Strike in 2012, Strike Debt launched a set of Internet-enabled projects with the intent of making visible the necessity of debt refusal. *The Debt Resistors' Operations Manual* was collaboratively and collectively written and edited by a group of activists involved with Strike Debt, using nothing more complicated than Google Docs, Google Groups and email. It was printed and distributed without charge by Strike Debt, using funds donated by *n+1* magazine that had been generated by the publication of their *Occupy!* book. In addition, a PDF was made available on the Strike Debt website.[55] In the pamphlet, there was extensive information about how the debt system works, how to negotiate with creditors and, if the reader so chose, how to resist debt. The *Manual* collectively argued: "[D]ebt is a calculated attack on the very *possibility* of democracy."[56] In 2012 there was about $11.5 trillion of personal debt in the United States that we know about, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Most of that is mortgage debt. Representing one-fifth of that debt, 9.8 million households are still underwater, meaning that the loans are worth more than the homes.[57] Five million homes have already been foreclosed on as of 2014. Add to that over $1 trillion in student debt and around $800 billion in credit card debt.[58] Medical debt is unknown and not included in this total, but 62% of U.S. bankruptcies involve medical debt. In short, the basic human rights of health, education and housing have been colonized by the debt system.

As ever in the Americas, this assault targets people of color first. The Federal Reserve has shown that higher-interest sub-prime loans were issued to 54% of African American borrowers and 47% of Latinos but only 18% of whites. Quoting a 2003 essay in the *Toledo Law Review*, the *Manual* defined debt as an "economic hate crime."[59] Since 2008 home ownership has plummeted among African Americans thanks to the sub-prime loans, leading to a dramatic drop in median net wealth. The wealth gap between white and African American households is now nineteen times net wealth, the largest multiple for over a century.[60] From this economic perspective, it's as if the Civil Rights Movement never happened. In order to enable any form of meaningful democracy, a transformation of current economic practice so thoroughgoing that it should be called a form of abolition would be required. Here we can compare the replacement of slavery, an economic system that was held by many to be indispensable right up until the moment of its extinction, with the status of debt today, another supposedly indispensable system that reduces lives and nations to misery.

Strike Debt wanted to make the inequities of the debt system visible and subject to political change. People in default on their debt (meaning they have not made payments for three to six months) have their debt sold on by banks, who will accept about 5% of the value on what is called the secondary debt market. In most countries, this market operates on the grand scale, with very major investment required. In the United States, you can go online and buy other people's debt. Debt collectors buy debt for pennies on the dollar and harass people to pay the full amount. As with the banks themselves, these collectors can easily make a profit on just a fraction of the face value of the debt.

The People's Bailout, organized by Strike Debt and the Rolling Jubilee, realized that it would be possible to buy that debt—and abolish it. For as little as $5, you can abolish $100 of somebody's debt.[61] So doing would be a direct and symbolic action of direct democracy. The real intent of the action, however, was to create a *détournement*: that is, to call the debt collection

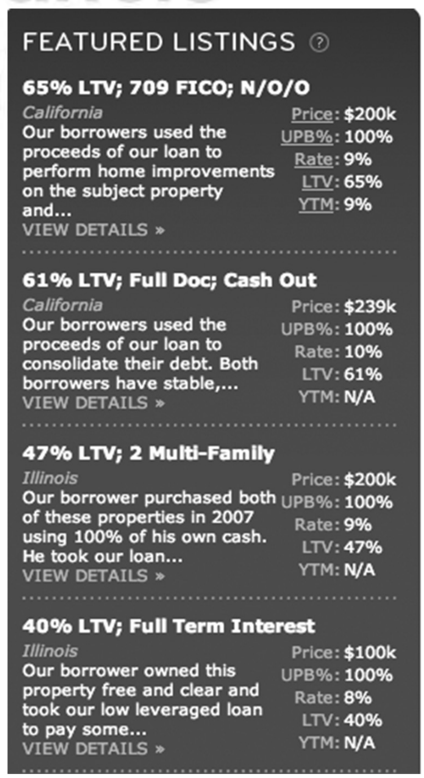

Figure 24.2 A typical secondary debt website.

system itself into question and thereby open a discussion on the politics of debt.

The Rolling Jubilee therefore set a symbolic target of raising $50,000 in order to be able to abolish $1,000,000 of debt. The group enabled online donations online via WePay and PayPal. In the mediascape, it can seem as if ideas go viral simply because people agree with them. A close examination of a viral event, however, shows how untrue this notably free-market idea in fact turns out to be. Here's what you need: a network, a theory of what you're doing, a grounded history and a great deal of specific action. Occupy Wall Street had an extended network in 2012. Via Twitter and Facebook, it could directly reach several hundred thousand people. However, access to these networks was controlled both in the sense that only a few people were enabled to post and because such posts had to feel resonant with the wider movement. It took months of meetings, assemblies, discussions and one-on-one conversations for the movement as a whole to get behind Strike Debt as an accepted group. Had it been launched "cold," as it were, Occupy would not have backed it, and there would not have been the first wave of "invisible" acceptance and dissemination. Because so many people in the movement are what advertising professionals call "opinion shapers," this first wave was crucial.

Figure 24.3 Poster for The People's Bailout.

Next, the directors of the event had personal access to media and entertainment networks. This enabled the online event to be framed as the supplement to a traditional benefit, held at Le Poisson Rouge, a Greenwich Village nightclub, on November 15, 2012.

Headliners like comedian Janeane Garofalo, musician Jeff Mangum of Neutral Milk Hotel and activist-scholar David Graeber offered sufficient star-power that the event was desirable just as a night out, regardless of the cause. And then the actor-artist David Rees chose to launch the event on his blog.[62] His extensive and geeky followers tweeted and Facebook-ed the concept, allowing it to take off even before the event happened.

And then, when it was officially launched, as if by magic, it went viral. In the end over $600,000 was raised, allowing some $12 million of debt to be abolished. That's over ten times the most optimistic target set by the group. Enter the trolls, who assumed that because they were not aware of all of the above, none of it happened. Ironically, in this irony-obsessed culture, the appearance of the trolls confirmed the importance of the meme. Trolls choose popular things to attack, and their carping indicates what is trending by negative differentiation. There were many posts that began INAL (I am Not a Lawyer) and then went on to make legal rulings. These were, to be clear, trolls from the left. The most persistent of these was the blogger "Yves Smith," who posts on the *Naked Capitalism* site. Smith repeatedly asserted that the Jubilee would bring tax problems for those offered debt relief and later questioned the ethics of the Rolling Jubilee Board.[63] In fact, no tax issues resulted. And no wrongdoing was ever demonstrated. The Jubilee happened, and debt got abolished.

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Systems Failure

By its own lights, the Rolling Jubilee was, nonetheless, a failure. People did not come to question the debt system itself, only to wish to see their own debt and that of others cancelled. Debt abolition means abolishing not just extant debts but the system that compels people to get into debt for basic necessities. Indeed, debt-buying sites are newly coy, requiring registration before they will show what's available. A thoroughgoing debt abolition, openly discussed by bankers at the Federal Reserve in 2012, has receded from possibility. The very modularity of the system that I have analyzed here both predicts and predicates this failure. The debt-buying scheme was an ethic, something that software can do. By calling it the Jubilee, activists at once modulated it into an ethical system, one that had to be entirely consistent. As a result, its efficacy was at once limited, unsuitable for the uneven and hybrid nature of neo-liberalism. The taxation question and other such quibbles resulted from this predicated ethical consistency. Debt purchases made by the Jubilee were necessarily "blind," meaning that the identity of the debtor(s) was not known until the debt was bought. It was argued that such randomness was democratic in the Athenian sense, where office and other favors were allocated by lot. The difficulty here was that the Athenian "citizen" was already a homogeneous category because women, children, the enslaved and all foreigners were excluded from the class. As I have stressed throughout, debt discriminates. African Americans and Latina/os in the United States are excluded from credit more often, are disproportionately targeted for sub-prime loans and suffer greater losses compared to whites of similar income.[64] By treating debt monotheistically, Strike Debt could not adjust its perspective to deal with the uneven, deeply racialized playing field of credit. Further, the debt that is most damaging to the most impoverished, such as electricity and other utility debts, was not available in the secondary debt market because it was not owned by banks. The long histories of the debt-financed plantation system and the unaddressed debt of reparations remained obscured. Recently, mainstream figures like Thomas Piketty have argued that it is still perfectly reasonable to address reparations for slavery because the benefactors of the system are still among the elites today.[65] By not addressing such questions, Strike Debt came to appear to be, in effect, a "white" organization.

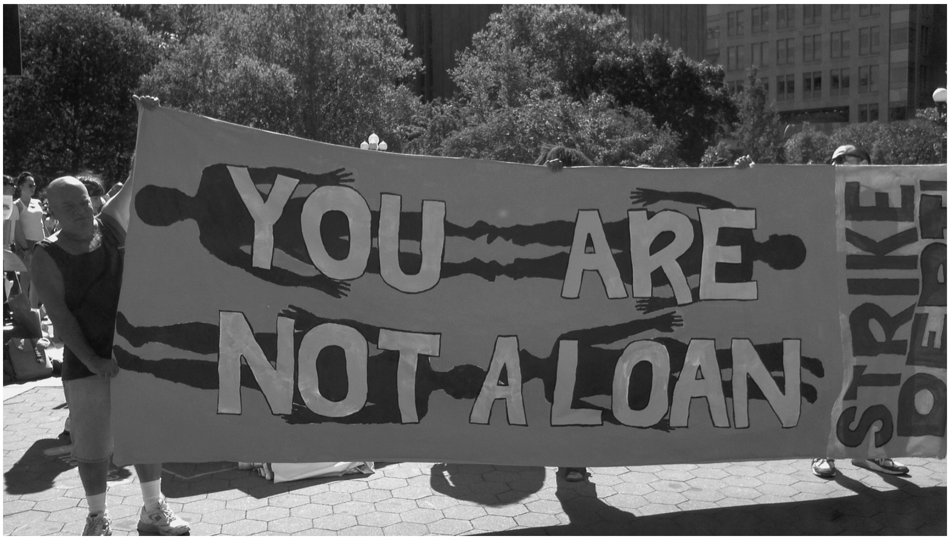

Figure 24.4 "You Are Not a Loan." Photo courtesy of the author.

One of the first slogans used by Occupy Wall Street was "You Are Not a Loan." It means that "you" are not the individual predicated by the capitalist market imaginary, both because there are no individuals in the society of control[66] and because no free labor market has ever existed.[67] The slogan insists that a person is not commensurable with a financial promise to turn debt-money into more fungible forms of money. Incommensurability or obfuscation or refusal can all be understood as pathways to abolition. That is to say: a person cannot be a slave. The two categories "slave" and "person" obfuscate each other. We refuse to be slaves, and we refuse to enslave. This abolition works where it works, where it can be performed (not executed). How is slavery to be abolished? In Haiti, the world-transforming revolution of the subalterns that abolished slavery (1791–1804) was followed by the imposition of an indemnity by France of 150 million *livres* that was not finally disposed of until 1947. Abolition has to be what it says: the abolition of all authority, whether the "full faith and credit" of a nation, the ability to offer loans or the power to confer degrees. If "new media studies," in keeping with all other such forms of studies, were to integrate (debt) abolition into its work, as I have argued that it should, it would first have to think through how debt, race and segregation are integral to new media. The outcome of such study[68] (as opposed to the bureaucratic form "studies") would ultimately involve its own abolition as a mode of hierarchy. It would not be a version of "studies" any more but a form of action. By refusing to be a loan, we cease to be fugitives and take our bodies out of their network. And begin.

Notes

1. This essay would not have been possible without the work that I have done with two sets of people in digital media and in debt resistance, too many to name here but you know who you are. Special thanks to Tara McPherson and Pamela Brown from each team respectively, who read this essay in draft form and helped improve it. Any remaining stupidities are my own, of course.
2. Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October*, Volume 59 (Winter 1992): 6.
3. Gilles Deleuze, "What Is a *Dispositif*?" in David Lapoujade (ed.), *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews*, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2007), 343.
4. Richard Dienst, *The Bonds of Debt* (New York: Verso, 2011), 125.
5. See numerous posts in *Occupy 2012*, my durational writing project, such as "Endebt and Punish" (March 1, 2012), at http://www.nicholasmirzoeff.com/O2012/2012/03/02/endebt-and-punish/. See also Tayyab Mahmud, "Debt and Discipline," *American Quarterly*, Volume 64, Number 3 (September 2012): 469–494; and Andrew Ross, *Creditocracy* (New York: OR Books, 2014).
6. See Paula Chakravarrty and Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Accumulation, Dispossession and Debt: The Racial Logic of Global Capitalism—an Introduction," *American Quarterly*, Volume 64, Number 3 (September 2012): 361–385.
7. Charles Babbage, *The Economy of Machinery and Manufactures*, rpr. in Martin Campbell-Kelly (ed.), *The Works of Charles Babbage Volume 8* (New York: NYU Press, 1989), 121. Original emphasis.
8. David Alan Grier, *When Computers Were Human* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 35–38. Babbage, *Economy*, 136–38.
9. See Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 29–34.
10. Babbage, *Economy*, 136 and 138. See also Chun, *Programmed Visions*, 38.
11. Charles Babbage, "Of the Mathematical Powers of the Calculating Engine" (1837), rpr. in Martin Campbell-Kelly (ed.), *The Works of Charles Babbage Volume 3. The Analytical Engine and Mechanical Notation* (New York: NYU Press, 1989), 15.
12. As Babbage knew. Although he attempted to show that the machines increased employment, he had to admit that this was in fact because women and children were now used to work on the power looms. He also makes no allowance for the increased population or for migration to cities. *Economy*, 231–35.
13. See Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2013).
14. James Montgomery, *Theory and Practice of Cotton Spinning* (Glasgow, 1836).
15. Stanley D. Chapman, "Fixed Capital Formation in the British Cotton Industry, 1770–1815," *The Economic History Review*, New Series, Volume 23, Number 2 (August 1970): 235–266, 241.

16. James A. Mann, *The Cotton Trade of Great Britain: Its Rise, Progress, and Present Extent* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1860), 32.
17. Friedrich Engels, *Condition of the Working Class of England* (1845), http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/ch05.htm
18. Rajiv C. Shah and Jay P. Kesan, "The Privatization of the Internet's Backbone Network," National Science Foundation under Grant Nos. ITR-0081426 and IIS-0429217, http://www.researchgate.net/publication/240932934_The_Privatization_of_the_Internet's_Backbone_Network/file/3deec52a0c11ea3ebd.pdf
19. Michael Lewis, *Flash Boys: A Wall Street Revolt* (New York: Norton, 2014).
20. http://www.census.gov/prod/2013pubs/p60-245.pdf
21. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/30/nyregion/nearly-half-of-new-yorkers-are-struggling-to-get-by-study-finds.html?src=me
22. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/19/business/economy/an-ambiguous-omen-us-household-debt-begins-to-rise-again.html
23. David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (New York: Melville House, 2011), 120.
24. Graeber, *Debt*, 382.
25. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 297.
26. See posts for March 2014 at http://andrewmcgettigan.org/, and John Morgan, "Budgeting Rules Adjusted," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, April 10, 2014, http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/budgeting-rules-adjusted-to-manage-costs-of-student-loans/2012569.article
27. http://www.newyorkfed.org/newsevents/news/research/2014/rp140218.html
28. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/29/opinion/troubling-student-loans.html?ref=opinion
29. http://www.newyorkfed.org/regional/Brown_presentation_GWU_2013Q2.pdf
30. Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of Indebted Man*, trans. Joshua David Gordon (New York: Semiotext(e), 2011), 128.
31. Babbage, *Economy*, 123.
32. Lazzarato, *Making*, 97.
33. For sensible proposals as to how to deal with public debt, see Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2014), 540–570.
34. Miranda Joseph's *Debt to Society: Accounting under Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014) appeared too late for me to include its ideas here, but it will no doubt have important insights into this area, as will the work-in-progress of Annie McLanahan.
35. http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2014/05/02/business/02reuters-portugal-review.html
36. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).
37. Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), 73. Original emphasis.
38. Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Power Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 165–166.
39. Chun, *Programmed Visions*, 22.
40. See http://www.myfico.com/crediteducation/whatsinyourscore.aspx
41. Galloway, *Interface Effect*, 23.
42. Tara McPherson, "U.S. Operating Systems at Mid-Century," in Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader*, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012), 597.
43. Deleuze, "Postscript," 4.
44. Galloway, *Interface Effect*, 67.
45. Lazzarato, *Making*, 55.
46. Quoted in Lazzarato, *Making*, 56.
47. Chun, *Programmed Visions*, 68–72.
48. Galloway, *Interface Effect*, 60–61.
49. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, quoted in Lazzarato, *Making*, 164.
50. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 319.
51. Beatriz Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: Feminist Press, 2013), 44.
52. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 30.
53. See Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Declaration* (Kindle Single, 2012), 6. Human Rights Watch, "Exported and Exposed Abuses against Sri Lankan Domestic Workers in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates," at http://www.hrw.org/node/10592/section/1, and many other such reports.
54. See *Occupy 2012* from the end of May onwards at http://nicholasmirzoeff.com/O2012
55. The much-changed second edition is available at http://strikedebt.org/drom/
56. Strike Debt, *The Debt Resistors' [sic] Operations Manual* (New York: Strike Debt, 2012), 2.
57. Peter Drier, "What Housing Recovery?" http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/09/opinion/what-housing-recovery.html?ref=opinion

58. See http://newyorkfed.org/householdcredit/2013-Q1/index.html. The interactive graph allows you to track debt by quarter.
59. Strike Debt, *Debt Resistors' Operations Manual*, 44.
60. Pamela Brown, "Can We Have Capitalism without Racism? The Invisible Chains of Debt and the Catastrophic Loss of African American Wealth," *Alternet* (January 4, 2014), http://www.alternet.org/economy/can-we-have-capitalism-without-racism-invisible-chains-debt-and-catastrophic-loss-african
61. The actual purchasing of debt by Strike Debt was done through a sympathetic debt buyer so that the debt purchase could be appropriately targeted. I was not party to those transactions and cannot supply more details.
62. http://howtosharpenpencils.tumblr.com/post/35285338188/the-peoples-bailout
63. Yves Smith, http://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2012/11/occupy-wall-streets-debt-jubilee-a-gimmick-with-tax-risk.html and http://www.nakedcapitalism.com/2013/09/owss-rolling-jubilee-refuses-to-explain-what-theyve-done-with-590000-despite-promises-of-full-transparency.html
64. See Pamela Brown, "When Theory Meets Heart: The Rolling Jubilee & Lessons of Occupying Debt," *Occasion*, Volume 7, Number 4 (November 2014). My thanks to the author for sharing her valuable work.
65. Thomas Piketty, "Esclavage: une réparation par la transparence," *Libération*, May 21, 2013, available at http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/fr/articles-de-presse/61
66. Deleuze, "Postscript," 5.
67. Graeber, *Debt*, 350.
68. On "study" (as opposed to studies), see Fred Moten and Stephano Harney, "Debt and Study," in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 58–70.