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Genres of Population: Biopolitics and the Victorian Novel

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ABSTRACT

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Despite being famously overpopulated with characters, nineteenth-century novels are typically read in terms of the individual. Addressing this incongruity, Genres of Population: Biopolitics and the Victorian Novel examines how novels imagine the human mass in an era of exponential demographic growth. My dissertation argues that Victorian novels conceptualize the population by turning a seemingly inscrutable collective into an object of knowledge and control. I contend that biopolitics—Michel Foucault’s term for the discourses and practices of managing lives—depends on novels to articulate the conditions, methods, and experiences of demographic regulation. Though attempts to enumerate the English population date back to the 1086 Domesday Book, the first census of 1801 made demographic information available at unprecedented levels. The census launched an age of population management that, I assert, influenced and was influenced by novels. Analyzing what I call narratives of demographic crises, my project shows how Victorian novels depict the population as intractable yet governable—prone to chaos, degeneration, and extinction while also amenable to governmental intervention.

Extending Foucault’s claim that biopolitical theories and mechanisms emerged in the nineteenth century, Genres of Population examines the historical roots of biopower, situating its early moments in a century known for its state paternalism, statistical advances, and social reforms. Even as Foucault locates the concept in the nineteenth century, scholarship on biopolitics tends to focus on the present or recent past. By
contrast, I historicize biopolitics and demonstrate how Victorian novels portray the population as a collective to be protected. While Victorians had their own terms for this collective—such as the social body, the aggregate, and the crowd—I call this collective the population so as to emphasize the state’s role in its management. My research thus challenges the usual approach of studying biopolitics in a twentieth- and twenty-first-century setting and the usual critique that the novel is a genre that posits the individual as an agentive subject. In revealing the confluence of Victorian fiction and biopolitical thought, my project exposes the nineteenth-century literary influences of population discourses.

To track how novels form the concept of a governable population, I analyze a diverse set of texts—from social problem novels, where one would expect to find representations of the population, to sensation novels, where the population is no less important but less obviously an issue. I focus each chapter on a novelistic subgenre and an aspect of demographic control. By pairing form with history, I show how each subgenre reacts to the historical circumstances affecting the population in different ways. The first three chapters illuminate how social problem, sensation, and slum novels construct ideas of the population in response to advances in statistics and demography, changes in family structure and reproduction, and movements for housing reform. The final chapter departs from discussing novels’ roles in molding the population into an object of state power by offering the socialist novel as an example of how novels participate in creating rather than regulating mass life. These chapters illustrate Victorian novels’ contribution to theories of population management, ultimately revising our narratives about the rise of demography and the rise of the novel.
Chapter 1 examines Elizabeth Gaskell’s and Charles Dickens’s social problem novels, *Mary Barton* and *Bleak House*, to consider how statistical counting impacts the state’s ability to oversee the population. Gaskell’s working-class radical John Barton and Dickens’s vagrant Jo show how the abstraction necessary to quantify the population also obscures attempts to know it. Continuing to explore the effects of counting and the census, chapter 2 analyzes the household as a tool for population management via readings of Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* and Ellen Wood’s *The Shadow of Ashlydyat*. The household emerges in these sensation novels as the preferred avenue for perpetuating the population, as the aristocratic family becomes associated with antiquated ideas about patrimony, reproduction, and land ownership. Chapter 3 also looks at the unit of the household but in the setting of slum fiction; in it, I show how housing reform colludes with the state’s efforts to track the population. Focusing on George Gissing’s *The Nether World* and Arthur Morrison’s *A Child of the Jago*, I explain how these texts use cartographic language to turn the population into a spatial entity. My final chapter departs from emphasizing control to exploring how socialist novels redeploy biopolitical ideas to imagine a social body that circumvents state power. The utopia in William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* and the cultural center in Walter Besant’s *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* offer alternative forms of mass organization.
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INTRODUCTION

Charles Dickens’s Pip, the protagonist of *Great Expectations* (1860–61), is one of the most celebrated fictional individuals in Victorian literature. Yet, as many critics note, Pip’s individuality derives not from his coherent sense of self but from his understanding that his self-awareness is and only will ever be partial. In David Kurnick’s words, the novel “tells a story of a limited viewpoint becoming aware of itself as such” (96). And, for Jonathan H. Grossman, Pip’s narration proves that “[o]nly in retrospect can one grasp that the constitution of the self comes not through what the self experiences but through the limits of the self’s knowledge” (245). The novel’s designation as a bildungsroman is hence an ironic one. Less about Pip’s self-discovery than about his decentering, the text, I contend, is about Pip coming to realize he is embedded within the population, not hovering above it as the liberal romantic hero he hopes to become. Orphaned and poor, Pip belongs to the segment of the population that society has written out. As the lawyer Jaggers declares, this class of people is “generated in great numbers for certain destruction,” born “to be prosecuted, defended, forsworn, made orphans, be-devilled somehow” (Dickens, *Great* 413). While the convict Magwitch saves Pip from this statistically probable fate by making Pip his heir, feelings of redundancy plague Pip throughout his life.¹ Though he tries to fight his commonness, he eventually recognizes the futility of that fight: “I was common, and … I knew I was common, and … I wished I was uncommon” (70). The novel mimics this commonness formally. Pip is what Alex Woloch calls a “weak protagonist,” who is “constantly overwhelmed by the marginal characters who surround him” (178). This weakness is evident in the opening lines when Pip states that his “infant tongue could make of both names [his first and last] nothing
longer or more explicit than Pip” (Dickens, Great 3). Right away, Pip fails to assert his individuality; it literally exceeds his capacity for articulation. His inability even to utter his full name embodies in miniature his inability to comprehend the social and demographic forces that influence the particularity of his experience. With its protagonist destabilized, Dickens’s novel distorts the generic expectations of its form as a bildungsroman by portraying a subject who is mired in the human mass and, because of this, unable to say with confidence where his individual self ends and others begin.

This reading of Pip as an individual unable to extract himself from the “great numbers” around him exemplifies the central questions of my project: Why do we continue to read nineteenth-century novels in terms of the individual when they are densely and famously packed with characters? And what happens when we shift our attention away from the individual to examine the image of the population that these novels present? Genres of Population: Biopolitics and the Victorian Novel focuses on how novels conceptualize the entity that I will be calling the population. As I later explain, the population is not only the sum of individuals within a given community but also a multifaceted collective that evades enumeration. By studying this collective, Genres of Population departs from prevailing theories about Victorian novels as works dedicated to the rise of the individual. These theories are unsurprising due to the genre’s interest in interiority and psychological depth; the Victorians’ own commitment to a form of liberal subjectivity that emphasized individualism, reflection, and abstraction; and the many beloved fictional individuals, such as Pip, that Victorian literature has produced. Yet these seemingly personal characters came to life during an era of unprecedented demographic growth. Before the nineteenth century, the British population remained
relatively stable, alternating between phases of minor stagnation and expansion. Around 1750, however, the population began to swell, rising sharply in 1800 and then multiplying steadily until the early twentieth century. Over a fairly short number of years, the population of Great Britain nearly quadrupled, increasing from about 10.5 million in 1801 to 41 million by 1901 (Woods 298–9). Examining Victorian novels in light of this demographic transition, *Genres of Population* argues that this literature helped to shape the notion of the population by transforming a seemingly inscrutable mass into an object of knowledge and control.

Given this rapid demographic expansion, the nineteenth century was an age of population, obsessed with understanding, describing, and managing the human collective. Yet it was also an age of the individual, infatuated with the collective’s supposed opposite: the figure of the contained, self-aware, and self-similar liberal subject. Many Victorians viewed the booming population as representing a trend toward social uniformity that directly conflicted with the era’s social and cultural investment in individuation. For John Stuart Mill, this accretive trend rendered man’s capacity to cultivate individuality all the more urgent. As Mill observes,

> The circumstances which surround different classes and individuals, and shape their characters, are daily becoming more assimilated. Formerly, different ranks, different neighbourhoods, different trades and professions, lived in what might be called different worlds; at present, to a great degree in the same. Comparatively speaking, they now read the same things, listen to the same things, see the same things, go to the same places, have their hopes and fears directed to the same objects, have the same rights
and liberties, and the same means of asserting them. Great as are the
differences of position which remain, they are nothing to those which have ceased. And the assimilation is still proceeding. (81)
The heterogeneity that Mill celebrates and that he believes safeguards civil liberties was, in his perspective, increasingly under threat. What he fears most is the establishment of public opinion, which he claims would lead to a kind of tyranny more dangerous than the political subjugation that would take place under an authoritarian government. As Mill explains, in a politically liberal nation such as England where representative rule is the norm, a system of checks and balances is in place to prevent the sovereign from overstepping his power. Because of its liberal history, however, England is vulnerable to what Mill identifies as “the tyranny of the majority,” the oppression that occurs when “the will of the numerous” or “the people” “oppress part of their number” (8). When the power that society should fear emerges from society itself, there are “fewer means of escape,” as that power “penetrat[es] much more deeply into the details of life, and enslav[es] the soul” (9). Though Mill does not explicitly equate the “majority” with the population, in characterizing the majority as “the numerous,” he alludes to one understanding of the population as being too abundant in the nineteenth century. Malthusian fears of overpopulation proliferated throughout the period, influencing policies in public health and housing reform, as I discuss in chapter 3, as well as shaping concerns about reproduction and the Woman Question, as I analyze in chapter 2. The phrase “the numerous” also gestures toward the statistical techniques used to calculate, stabilize, and represent the demographic mass, techniques that I discuss in chapter 1. While Mill’s opus to liberal individualism, On Liberty (1859), promulgates the
cultivation of liberal character, it also warns against a society falling dangerously into uncritical homogeneity—a danger brought on all the more by an already “numerous” and growing population.

Other writers likewise lamented what they perceived as the Victorian era’s drift toward social and demographic accumulation. To them, the experience of living in the mass was simultaneously estranging and claustrophobic. In his poem “The Buried Life” (1852), Matthew Arnold bemoans the alienation and loss of self that is produced by a world where “the mass of men” are “alien to the rest / … and alien to themselves” (lines 16, 22–3). John Eagles similarly alerts his readers to the dual threats of “‘density’ and ‘proximity’” that the mushrooming population brings. As he complains in his 1854 article in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, “[p]eople are approximating fearfully. You may come to touch very disagreeable people; at present you are only a few yards apart” (445). Whether because of conformity, anonymity, or nearness, these authors portray the proliferating population as a disconcerting contemporary phenomenon. The mass existence that these Victorians write about seems to leave little room for the liberal individual to develop. Though these writers praise that model individual, their concurrent depiction of the disorienting mass casts doubt on whether or not individualism can really save society from the amalgamating effects of the growing population. While individualism might assuage the fears associated with demographic increase, such enthusiasm for individualism does not necessarily provide a way out of what some Victorians believed was an inevitable expansion. For Mill, the time to assert the values of individuality is now while “much is still wanting to complete the enforced assimilation” (82). But, for Arnold and Eagles, the time might be too late; “assimilation” is already
here in the form of “the world’s most crowded streets” and the “rapidly approximating” city where “[y]our area is becoming more circumscribed everyday” (Arnold line 45, Eagles 445). With the population so large that people, in Eagles’s mind, are being “run in upon and crushed by [their] neighbours,” what is so dangerous about the surging population is perhaps not only the uniformity it represents but also the death that may come once overpopulation is reached (445). The demographic deluge, then, was a figurative and literal threat, destabilizing the liberal individualism the Victorians so cherished and imperiling the physical lives they lead.

This idea that the population is a threat to itself is famously yet faultily attributed to Thomas Malthus and his *Essay on the Principle of Population*, first published in 1798. By acknowledging the population’s intrinsic volatility, Malthus departed from his predecessors who, influenced by the Enlightenment, believed in man’s biological perfectibility. Basing his findings on the fact that human beings are never wholly rational, Malthus revolutionized political economy by demonstrating how man’s animal drive to reproduce always outstripped his capacity for production. This discrepancy made population checks necessary for the human race’s survival; hence, Malthus’s theory was actually an attempt to secure the future against overpopulation, even as it was derided as “[d]reary, stolid, dismal, [and] without hope for this world or the next,” to use Thomas Carlyle’s notorious phrasing (109). As Catherine Gallagher demonstrates, Malthus was integral to the nineteenth-century relocation of “ultimate value from a realm of transcendent spiritual meanings to organic ‘Life’ itself” (*Body* 3). Writing in a time of a depleted national granary, Malthus favored agricultural over industrial or commercial production since it offered a more direct manner to sustain human life. With the poor
starving because of the nation’s unrealized agricultural capacity, genuine wealth for Malthus was found in maintaining working-class bodies instead of in abstract, exchangeable value (Gallagher, *Body* 44–5). This reappraisal of the organic, though, was highly ambivalent as Malthus showed that the physically robust body, given its capacity for reproduction, would “eventually destroy the very prosperity that made it fecund, replacing health and innocence with misery and vice” (Gallagher, *Body* 37). Man’s vitality was precariously balanced against the prospect of his demise, and organic value emerged through this uneasy junction between human surplus and its equally dangerous other, population death. Yet even as Malthus depended on man’s instability for his theory, the thrust of the *Essay on the Principle of Population* assumes that man was, for all intents and purposes, a calculable being. Underneath its “dismal” exterior, the text claims that demographic expansion can eventually be brought under control through the practice of “moral restraint,” the abstinence from “[p]romiscuous intercourse, unnatural passions, [and] violations of the marriage bed” (Malthus 23–4). If individuals exercised such restraint, death could be prevented since, as Malthus holds, these moral standards would curb excessive reproduction. Despite his reputation, Malthus believed in the value of the population and in the population’s potential to regulate its own vices.

Malthus was not alone in locating value in demographic increase and organic life; other nineteenth-century thinkers similarly interpreted Britain’s swelling population as evidence that the nation was on the rise. The connection between population size and national strength had concerned Britons since before Malthus’s population principle. By the late eighteenth century, people were debating whether or not the population had grown since the Glorious Revolution, as they presumed the population would only
multiply if the nation were flourishing. The continuance of these debates was in part due to the inadequacy of existing population statistics. Before the nineteenth century, demographic figures were incredibly inaccurate and often collected for purposes other than enumeration (Glass 11–3). But with the inaugural census of 1801, the population became intelligible for the first time, and the disputes about population size were finally put to rest. Given that the 1800 Census Act was passed in a time of war with France, poor harvests, and food shortages, supporters believed that counting the population would help determine and affirm Britain’s political clout (Higgs, Information 69–70). As the statistician and eventual census administrator John Rickman wrote just months before the passage of the Census Act, “[T]he grand basis of the power and resources of a nation” is not its “extent” nor its “fertility or mines” but its “industrious population,” which was “what the present power of Britain still inculcates” (106). Later in the century, this notion that a growing population proved Britain’s superiority continued to spread. Herbert Spencer, for instance, claimed in 1860 that demographic growth meant Victorian society was evolving into what he termed a higher “social organism.” In his article “The Social Organism,” Spencer argued that societies are like organic bodies; they enlarge and progress because of “general natural causes” (91). In size and complexity, “our large civilized nations,” according to Spencer, “as much exceed the primitive savage ones, as a vertebrate animal does a zoophyte” (96). The trend toward a more densely populated society, therefore, proved once and for all the advancement and dominance of the British people. Unlike Mill, Arnold, and Eagles, Victorians like Spencer and Rickman, after Malthus, viewed the population boom as a phenomenon to celebrate. Rather than
signaling inevitable death and decline, demographic expansion for them demonstrated the
persisting supremacy of Britons.

As these philosophers, reformers, scientists, and writers show, the Victorians were
uncertain about population growth, commending it in some instances and denigrating it in
others. However, regardless of their outlook on the population—whether they considered
it a chaotic entity on the verge of extinction or a valuable resource whose proliferation
should be cultivated and encouraged—Victorians believed that interventions into the
population were needed in order to ensure its stable continuance. To this end, I read the
Victorian period not only as an age of population but also as an age of biopolitics, Michel
Foucault’s term for the discourses and practices of managing lives. As Foucault explains,
biopolitics is a regime of power that takes the population as its object “to improve life, to
prolong its duration, to improve its chances” (Society 254). While most scholarship on
biopolitics tends to focus on the events or critical attitudes of the present or recent past,²
my research historicizes biopolitics and demonstrates how Victorian novels portray the
population as a collective to be protected. Extending Foucault’s claim that biopolitical
theories and mechanisms emerged in the nineteenth century, Genres of Population
examines the historical roots of biopolitical power, situating its early moments in a
century known for its advances in statistics and demography, numerous social reforms,
and debates about an emerging state paternalism. Although some critics of the British
nineteenth century have begun to analyze the period through a biopolitical lens, most
biopolitical critiques of the era take the idea of the population for granted, centering
instead on questions of liberalism, public health, or economics.³ By putting pressure on
the concept of the population, I interrogate how the concept arose in and impacted
Victorian literature. Specifically, I demonstrate how, through what I call narratives of demographic crises, Victorian novels helped to encourage biopolitical management by conceiving the population as intractable yet governable—as prone to chaos, degeneration, and extinction while also amenable to governmental regulation.

Following other biopolitical theorists, notably Foucault, I use the term “population” to refer to the human collective in order to emphasize the state’s role in its management. As Foucault defines it, the population is not simply the sum total of individuals within a given community but “a new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they might not be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted” (Society 245). This definition highlights several characteristics of the population that my dissertation examines: its countability or rather uncountability, which I explore through the lens of statistics and the census in chapter 1; its bodiliness or biology, which I analyze in terms of reproduction and the idea of the household in chapter 2; and its multiplicity or potential uncontrollability, which I read as oppressive via the concepts of necropower and cartography in chapter 3 and as liberating via the potential of socialist utopian thinking in chapter 4. Evident in these characteristics, the population is both manageable and uncontainable, both subject to and in excess of governmental technologies. Whereas Victorians had their own terms for the human collective—such as the social body, the aggregate, and the crowd—these terms tended to conceive of the collective as either a classed entity or a unified whole, thereby obscuring the diversity and many-sidedness of the population. By focusing on the term population, I study the numerous ways in which the human collective was conceived and how these ways helped to shape a paradoxical conception of the collective as knowable and unknowable, and
thus controllable and uncontrollable. This paradox is most obvious in the population’s relation to counting. While, as I have mentioned, I consider the notion of demographic counting in more detail in chapter 1, I discuss it briefly now in order to illustrate how the concept of the population helps me to explore the powers and limits of the Victorian state’s biopolitical management.

To some degree, our understanding of the population relies on the state’s use of statistics and demography. Through these means, a semblance of the population emerges, as the state transforms the population into a “datum” that is intelligible through calculable figures such as fertility, morbidity, and mortality (Foucault, *Security* 71). These figures help the state to manipulate the population by illuminating the “series of variables” that affect the population, variables that include the environment, food supply, marriage, and commerce (71). In this sense, the population is totally dependent on state power, as statistical calculations render the population visible, making it predictable and manageable. These calculations, however, cannot fully grasp the population. As Foucault maintains, though the population is theoretically countable, it is only partially so in practice since the population is a biological, social, and cultural entity, as well as a statistical one. We see this multiplicity most clearly in nineteenth-century debates about the accuracy of census data where the biological, social, and cultural aspects of the population clashed with what appeared to be the objective ways in which the population was counted. Taken in one night, the census supposedly offered a snapshot of the population. Yet due to the enormity of the task, the census was notoriously difficult to administer. To make sure the data could be gathered at once, census administrators in 1841 began to distribute household schedules and hence had to rely on householders,
some of whom were illiterate, to provide information. The information from these schedules was then copied into enumerators’ books, which were sent to the Census Office for analysis. Given these steps, the information the office received was “several stages removed from reality,” leaving ample room for errors to be made (Higgs, *Making* 14). Even if data was copied conscientiously, the data that was collected did not always reflect the population as it existed. Householders and enumerators were frequently confused about whom to count: for example, do landlords count lodgers as part of their household, or do lodgers belong to their own households? Moreover, the idea of the demographic household, which I discuss more fully in chapter 2, was often superseded by biological, cultural, and/or social understandings of the family. When filling out schedules, householders would sometimes abide by these other understandings rather than the definition given by census officials, thereby causing people to be double counted or miscounted. The population, then, was and continues to be a slippery concept: legible because of the biopolitical technology of the census but ultimately illegible given what the census reveals. This slipperiness is why, as Cary Wolfe writes, “a potentially creative, aleatory element … inher[es] in the very gambit of biopower” (32). My project, in taking the population as a main term, studies this “aleatory element” as it collides with the regulatory techniques of the Victorian state.

The attention that my dissertation gives to the idea of the population sets it apart from other criticism that examines Victorian novels in relation to theories of social power. Scholarship on nineteenth-century power traditionally uses a new historicist lens to think of power in regards to Foucauldian discipline. Under new historicism, “the very antagonism between literature and ideology becomes, in specific historical environments,
a powerful and socially functional mode of constructing subjectivity” (Gallagher, “Marxism” 44). For new historicists, literature and ideology have a reciprocal relationship, as their mutual influence creates consciousness. Since the 1980s, this interpretative approach has been incredibly fruitful for literary critics, especially those interested in challenging the conventional narrative of white propertied men through the alternative narratives of feminism, postcolonialism, cultural studies, and queer theory. But within the last fifteen years, scholars have begun to seek ways to advance new historicism by questioning the continued utility of its antecedent, Foucauldian genealogy. Touted as an anti-essentialist mode of analysis, genealogy assumes the historical contingency of truth: “truth or being,” Foucault postulates, “does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but [at] the exteriority of accidents” (“Nietzsche” 81). Demonstrating the confluence of power and knowledge, genealogical readings—particularly those that rely on Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*—has dominated Victorianist discussions of modern subjectivity from the 1980s and 1990s. Seminal studies on discipline in Victorian novels include Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987), which discusses how domestic writing anticipated and consolidated middle-class authority, and D. A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police* (1988), which explicates the disciplinary function of nineteenth-century novels. Via genealogy, these inquiries aim to destabilize modern conceptions of subjectivity, but more recent criticism has started to view genealogy as unsuccessful in producing the anti-essentialist readings it claims. For these critics, the genealogical method reduces subjectivity to what Lauren M. E. Goodlad describes as “the effect of an inescapable mode of domination,” thus leading some of them to seek refuge.
in Foucault’s later works where he offers a more flexible understanding of subject
formation (2).

In the latter stage of his career, Foucault shifts his focus away from disciplinary
power to individual ethos. Amanda Anderson calls this shift his “aesthetic turn” in which
he leaves “negative critique” behind and moves toward an “aesthetics of existence”
(“Victorian Studies” 198). Anderson invites Victorianists to take a similar shift so as to
better grasp how people within the nineteenth century were not only oppressed subjects
circumscribed by power but also critically engaged subjects who actively shaped how
they lived and experienced the world. In The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and
the Cultivation of Detachment (2001), Anderson models this alternative mode of critique
and explores how Victorian writers conceived of disinterestedness as a characteristic to
promote in order to create critical liberal individuals. Other scholars on Victorian
liberalism also focus less on uncovering ideology than on exploring how Victorians
fostered liberal character. David Wayne Thomas, for example, rethinks liberal
subjectivity in terms of self-reflection and open-mindedness, and Elaine Hadley examines
how Victorians imagined liberal cognition as a form to be embodied. Yet despite
applauding and employing Foucault’s new emphasis, Anderson claims he leaves
unanswered “the larger question of how one might relate practices of selfhood to
systemic understandings” (“Victorian Studies” 200). Conversely, I argue that Foucault
provides such an answer in his studies of governmentality and biopolitics. There, he
explains how the individual serves as an important access point to the population, and
this relation counteracts his prior examinations that ostensibly discount the possibility of
agency.
Some critics are already applying ideas of governmentality and biopolitics to the Victorian period. Most notably, Goodlad, in her work on the Victorian liberal state, departs from previous scholarship by making a case for why Victorians lived in a liberal society instead of a panoptic one. As a result, she finds Foucault’s concepts of governmentality and pastorship more suitable for thinking about British power than his model of discipline. She shows how the decentralized nineteenth-century state, by deploying theories of pastorship, attempted to cultivate individuality and diversity within the populace while also maintaining social stability. Yet because Goodlad emphasizes questions of liberal governance and character, she is less concerned with how Victorian liberalism intersects with matters of the population. In her study of health and liberal citizenship, though, Pamela K. Gilbert recognizes the biopolitical implications of liberalism (Citizen’s). She argues that citizenship in the Victorian period became less about the state granting individuals the vote and more about the state shaping environments to improve the bodies and minds of its populace. According to Gilbert, the liberal citizen for Victorians was the healthy citizen; hence, she links the century’s divergent interests in liberal subjectivity and the maintenance of the population. The attention that Gilbert pays to the population, however, centers more on issues of public health than on the notion of the population itself. My dissertation, by contrast, does not assume an a priori notion of the population. Rather, it examines how the collective known as the population came to be comprehended and regulated by the state and portrayed and deployed by the novels of the era.

In taking the idea of the population seriously, I join a few recent scholars who have begun to analyze how nineteenth-century literature reflects and recasts the new
demographic abundance. Emily Steinlight’s latest articles align with my focus on how literary accounts of the population were affected by early biopolitical ideas and techniques. Her interest in the population, though, lies not in how ideas about the population and its management develop over the period but in how the concept of the population exposes a separate political question: that of the mass that exceeds quantification. My research is less interested in the problem that an uncountable human surplus affords to politics than in the epistemological problem that the notion of the population presents to the Victorian state and Victorian novels. In this sense, my project more closely resembles Nicholas Daly’s newest monograph on what he calls the “demographic imagination” (Demographic). For Daly, this imagination refers to “all of the cultural reflexes of demographic change since 1800—including explosive population growth, but also longer lives, smaller families, and immigration” (5). Unlike Steinlight who focuses on conceptions of demographic excess, Daly evaluates “the ways in which the demographic imagination operates through cultural forms that do not always foreground the crowd” (6). Similar to Daly, I also analyze how the population is figured in texts where the concept of the population is perhaps less obviously an issue but no less important. These texts include the sensation and socialist novels discussed, respectively, in chapters 2 and 4, which are ostensibly set in highly localized and mostly rural communities. Yet I, too, explore depictions of the population that highlight its crowdedness. Chapters 1 and 3, respectively, analyze social problem and slum novels that are famous for their images of the urban mass. By including an array of demographic portrayals, my project shows how the demographic imagination was both reactionary and affirmative. Whereas Daly primarily examines texts that are anxious about the population
boom, and thus concludes that the demographic imagination is an unsettling one, I demonstrate how literary responses to the population take a variety of forms—some are frightful of the enormity of the population, some seek to encourage population growth, some are critical of the population’s depersonalizing effects, and some find political possibility in the population’s creative potential. We see this variety in the structure of my dissertation: while the first three chapters focus on how novels depict the population as governable and in need of regulation, either to limit or to perpetuate expansion, the final chapter reveals how novels capitalize on the anarchic quality of the population so as to conceive of new forms of mass existence that evade state power.

In the chapters that follow, *Genres of Population* demonstrates how the biopolitical issue that surfaced in the nineteenth century—the issue of controlling a rapidly expanding population—was ultimately a representational one that depended on how populations were perceived and envisioned. This project contends that Victorian novels participated in biopolitical modes of representation that articulated the conditions, methods, and experiences of demographic management. Though I do not claim that literary contributions to biopolitical thinking are exclusively found in novels, I do believe that novels are particularly adept at exploring the consequences of demographic regulation. Because of narrative’s capacity to depict how events unfold over space and time, novels are able to register the impact of not only demographic change but also the state’s responses to that change on the social and personal levels. By attending to how novels encapsulate the population and the large-scale ways in which the population was controlled, my project challenges the critical history, which I noted earlier, that attributes the rise of the novel to the rise of liberal individualism. Largely influenced by Ian Watt’s
seminal study, this critical tendency has dominated scholarship on nineteenth-century novels for decades. Even scholarship that attempts to destabilize the idea of the liberal individual ultimately views the establishment of this idea as central to the founding of the novel. Nancy Armstrong’s latest monograph exemplifies this tendency. For her, “the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same” *(How 3)*. As she argues, the British novel emerged as authors invented the idea of the agentive liberal subject. “Once formulated in fiction,” Armstrong explains, “this subject proved uniquely capable of reproducing itself not only in authors but also in readers, in other novels, and across British culture in law, medicine, moral and political philosophy, biography, history, and other forms of writing that took the individual as their most basic unit” (3). Armstrong turns what for Watt was a correlation between the individual and the novel into a causation. Watt, that is, grounds his claim that the novel is about “particular individuals having particular experiences at particular times and at particular places” in the “vast transformation of Western civilization” (31). This transformation “replaced the unified world picture of the Middle Ages” with the very different view of the world as decentralized and individualized (31). Armstrong, in contrast, contends that novels created this perspective and that the genre was shaped around those texts that promoted this understanding of the subject and “invalidate[d] competing notions” *(How 3)*. In contending that Victorian novels presented the population as a collective to be protected, my dissertation disrupts this critical convention by demonstrating how these texts were equally concerned with how collectives were formed and maintained.
Because of its focus on collectives, my project aligns more with an earlier convention of novelistic studies that identifies novels as representations of general experiences rather than accounts of concrete, particular perspectives. Georg Lukács’s work on the novel most clearly illustrates this trend. For him, the novel’s “recourse to the biographical form” is a consequence of its inability to capture social totality, yet it is in the limitation of the individual viewpoint that he sees the novel “still think[ing] in terms of totality” (Theory 81, 56). The individual subject, in other words, is an effect of the novel’s attempt to grasp the social whole instead of, for Watt and Armstrong, the concept that produces the novel and that the novel produces. In Lukács’s theory, the individual serves as an anchor point, both limiting what the novel can depict by restricting the content to “the scope of the hero’s possible experiences” and giving meaning to a “discretely heterogeneous mass of isolated persons, non-sensuous structures, and meaningless events” by uniting them under the semblance that they relate to the hero and his journey (Theory 81). The totality that the novel offers is only partial, but it gestures toward the actual totality of the material world. “[B]y representing a limited section of reality, however richly portrayed,” Lukács writes, “[the novel] aims to evoke the totality of the process of social development” (Historical 139). Novelistic particularity is thus a means to generality rather than an end in itself. This relation between particular and general resembles my argument in chapter 1 about how social problem novels use statistical language so as to abstract ideas about the population from individual characters. To an extent, then, Lukács’s articulation of the novel as a genre that tries but fails to capture social life resembles my claim that the vastness and complexity of the population poses an epistemological challenge to nineteenth-century novels and the state.
Whereas the representational problem on which Lukács focuses is that of the secular, capitalist world, I am more interested in the problem that the emerging concept of the population creates. As I have asserted, the population, as a multifaceted entity, is not reducible to the socioeconomic relations that capitalism produces even while the inequities of capitalism pits segments of the population against one another (see my argument in chapter 3). My dissertation, therefore, extends Lukács’s insight by illuminating its biopolitical implications. As I show, novels’ attempts to evoke the totality and intricacy of the population are necessarily inadequate, but that inadequacy is what becomes telling. How novels choose to represent the population—what they include and exclude—are enabled by and correspondingly enable specific social and historical conditions.

To track how novels form the concept of the population, I analyze a diverse set of texts, focusing each chapter on a different subgenre of the novel and an aspect of demographic control. By pairing form with history, I show how each subgenre reacts to the historical circumstances affecting the population, thereby providing a distinct understanding of the population and its management. I structure this project according to subgenre in order to illustrate not only how ideas about the population can be found across various texts but also how these texts contend with the population in discrete yet similar ways. In tracing representations of the population within an array of works, this project demonstrates the heuristic efficacy of the notion of the population. Surprising revelations between and within subgenres emerge, as my dissertation illustrates, when we foreground the images of the mass that novels present.
Intuitively, it might seem as if only London or urban novels are about the population given what I have indicated is the easy association between descriptions of crowdedness and ideas about demographic increase. Certainly, some of the texts in my project center on the urban horde; chapters 1 and 3 highlight social problem and slum novels that are set in London or Manchester, and one of the novels in chapter 4, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, is set in the East End. In emphasizing the term population, though, *Genres of Population* shows how another link arises not between social problem and slum novels but between social problem and sensation novels. While these subgenres might appear unrelated—the former stresses the problems of industrial capitalism, and the latter emphasizes the secrets hidden within middle-class homes—I elucidate how both are interested in how the human mass is enumerated, arranged, and maintained. When interpreted with an eye toward population, the social problem genre becomes less about the horrors of industrialization than about counting and regulating the laboring class. The discourses of statistics and the census in this subgenre thus relate to the ideas about the household and demographic belonging that I claim a biopolitical analysis of sensation fiction reveals—an analysis that revises the typical understanding of the subgenre as dedicated to unveiling middle-class crimes or exploring trembling individual bodies. Another connection that manifests when one reads for the population can be found between sensation and socialist novels. As my chapters on these subgenres explain, the notion of the population appears in provincial novels as well as urban ones. Rather than depicting the population as a chaotic urban crowd, these texts translate the population into either the reproductive household or a perfectly self-regulated community. A focus on the population also exposes a shared commitment to the aesthetics of the mass in slum
and socialist fiction. Both subgenres are critical of late-century capitalism: whereas slum fiction exposes the squalid urban conditions that capitalism produces, the socialist genre replaces capitalism with a more equitable form of social organization. Though critics have recognized these capitalist critiques, I show how concentrating on how these texts portray the population uncovers their underlying biopolitical dynamics. As I argue, the pessimistic depiction of the population within slum novels justifies the state’s strategic abandonment of the poor, and the alternative society that socialist texts portray indicates how novels also participate in creating, rather than regulating, mass life. By structuring my dissertation via subgenre, I not only make these links evident but also illustrate the ways in which Victorian novels contributed to theories of population management. Ultimately, through this organization, *Genres of Population* revises our narratives about the emergence of demography and biopolitics, on the one hand, and that of the novel, on the other.

Chapter 1, “Novel Populations and the Fiction of Counting,” establishes the project’s framework by showing how novels deal with the difficulty of portraying the population in its entirety. This chapter centers on the social problem novel and its implementation of statistical language in order to transform what seems like an unintelligible mass into a countable, predictable aggregate. Focusing on Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) and Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1851–53), I show how these novels imagine the population as quantifiable by employing forms of counting that reduce individual difference into demographic generality. I interrogate these particular texts because they are both famous for the attention they pay to the social mass and yet are often criticized for their simultaneous focus on individual character
development. Critics have tended to view this duality between the one and the many as conflicting, claiming that these novels sacrifice their radical social visions for depoliticized, individualistic endings. In this chapter, however, I demonstrate how the statistical sciences help to unite the one and the many by reconceiving the one as a representative example of the many. Whereas this statistical form of generalization is a source of democratic possibility in Gaskell’s text—the discourse of statistical averages describing John Barton hints at the potential for working-class political visibility—it hinders demographic legibility in Dickens’s text—though the vagrant Jo is part of the poor masses, he cannot represent them because of his singularity. This chapter, therefore, discloses how any effort to calculate the population requires forms of numerical abstraction that, ironically, hinder demographic knowledge since the knowledge gained is less about the population itself than about what is quantifiable.

Chapter 2, “Marriage, Inheritance, and the Demographic Household,” advances my argument about demography through the lens of the 1851 census, particularly through its focus on the household as a reproductive and organizational unit. I contend that much sensation fiction promotes the nuclear household rather than the aristocratic family as the favored avenue for propagating the population—a bias that corresponds with the midcentury census’s deployment of the household as a tool for demographic administration. Given this claim, the texts I analyze in this chapter highlight the importance of and troubles with household formation; each show how the family’s concern with property and inheritance law collides with the social and reproductive needs of the family. My reading of Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859–60) illustrates how the transition from the aristocratic family to the nuclear household occurs via
women who, as wives and mothers, can extend or disrupt the aristocratic line. As I explain, Laura Fairlie’s fertile second marriage breaks away from the nonreproductive, patriarchal family that her first marriage represents. This chapter also analyzes Ellen Wood’s *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (1863), which similarly depicts a family turning away from the aristocratic model in order to form fluid middle-class households. With this text, I highlight the household’s portability, which becomes crucial for the Godolphins’ physical and social survival, even as the loss of their gothic estate and their subsequent move into their family’s banking house appear initially devastating. Chapter 2 shows how sensation novels illuminate the link between domestic ideals of reproduction and concerns about perpetuating the population.

My third chapter, “Slums, Housing, and the Cartographic Imagination,” continues my discussion of the household in the very different setting of the slum novel. This chapter explains how housing reform, which claims environmental improvements can lead to the moral cultivation of the poor, results less in individual uplift than in locating and segregating the population. By analyzing images of London slums in George Gissing’s *The Nether World* (1889) and Arthur Morrison’s *A Child of the Jago* (1896), I reveal how these texts deploy such images to frame the problem of the slums as an issue of demographic trackability. Both texts are known for how locatable their narratives are. Critics have commented on the spatial specificities of these texts and have claimed that these specificities enable readers to map each narrative’s events. Yet, as I show, the cartographic particularity of these texts is strategic; whereas certain people and neighborhoods within these texts are mappable, others are not. This chapter hence illustrates the biopolitical implications of such mappability. While *The Nether World*
spatializes the population via cartographic language that binds the poor to the slum, *A Child of the Jago* intensifies the connection between population and place by conflating slum dwellers with the slum itself. In examining the population’s geographic contours, this chapter explores how slum clearance helps to confine those bodies deemed most criminal and diseased to spaces considered equally blighted beyond repair.

The fourth and final chapter, “Aesthetic Life and the Pursuit of Pleasure,” deviates from my previous emphasis on techniques of population management so as to assess how novels try to depict a positive relationship between biopolitical discourse and the population. This chapter finds this relationship in the socialist novel as a subgenre committed to alternative types of demographic organization that bypass capitalist state power. Chapter 4, which takes Walter Besant’s *All Sorts of Conditions of Men* (1882) and William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890) as its central texts, argues that these works reconceive the population as an agent of change. Though Besant’s novel initially appears to be a typical slum novel given its focus on the Stepney Green slum of London, its socialist dynamics quickly take over and establish the possibility of a different social arrangement that Morris’s novel fully imagines. Promoting ideas of living based on aesthetic pleasure, both texts envision new configurations of mass existence—a working-class cultural center, which materialized as the real-life People’s Palace, in Besant’s case and a socialist utopian future in Morris’s—that evade the state’s biopolitical normalization. Ultimately, this chapter illustrates that novels not only collude with biopolitical technologies but also, as creative forms, redeploy biopolitics for affirmative purposes.
Through analyses that demonstrate the imbrication of Victorian fiction and concepts of the population, *Genres of Population* revises the theories of biopolitics and the history of the novel. Asserting that the cultivation of the population depends on the narratives one tells, my dissertation uncovers how novels help to transform the population into an intelligible and governable entity, as well as how novels were themselves transformed by the period’s fluctuating population. By considering nineteenth-century novels as accounts of the population, we might also consider how these texts anticipate our current twenty-first century moment of demographic change. In the last decade or so, concerns about a declining U.S. birth rate and population growth have coincided with concerns about the U.S.’s falling global influence. The Census Bureau’s latest population projections, released in 2012, predict significantly lower growth for the nation than the previous projection. The newest estimation for 2050 is 399.8 million compared to the 439 million that was estimated in 2008 (Cohn). These numbers are primarily caused by reduced immigration and fertility. Some critics find this decrease alarming, claiming that they suggest the possibility of another nation replacing the U.S. as a global superpower in the future. These claims, I argue, are decidedly Victorian. Like the Victorians who believed that a booming population indicated a prosperous nation, Ross Douthat, the conservative op-ed columnist, writes, “Today’s babies are tomorrow’s taxpayers and workers and entrepreneurs, and relatively youthful populations speed economic growth and keep spending commitments affordable.” As Douthat notes, the biopolitical problem of encouraging demographic growth is intimately tied to economic, political, and global issues. Yet it is also linked to shifting cultural attitudes toward child rearing. The biopolitical, then, as the heightened moment of the
twenty-first century elucidates but that the nineteenth century initially made apparent, is a matter of governmental and economic policy as well as, in Douthat’s words, “individual choices.”

However, the question of individual choice becomes increasingly complicated in what some have called the second era of big data—the first era, according to geographer Hamish Robertson and medical sociologist Joanne Travaglia, occurred in the British nineteenth century. As with the first, the second era similarly tries to use numerical and other demographic information in order to comprehend how individuals and populations are imbricated. Moreover, the second era, like the first, attempts to use this understanding in order to manipulate social and political processes. For many commentators, for instance, the most recent Brexit vote and the 2016 U.S. presidential election were both notable for the role that big data played. Through big data and psychometrics, the science of measuring psychological traits, political strategists deduced which messages to use in order to target increasingly specific audiences (Grassegger and Krogerus). Individual choice in the age of big data—whether in the first or the second—is therefore always circumscribed by demographics. Furthermore, data, as these contemporary examples and Victorian novels alike demonstrate, are always social, cultural, and political—never neutral. Analyzing big data and populations in nineteenth-century literature and culture might help us illuminate the ethical issues at stake with big data today. *Genres of Population*, I hope, provides us with one model of doing so.

NOTES

1 See Klotz for a reading of *Great Expectations* in relation to Victorian social statistics.
2 See, for instance, Hardt and Negri who discuss biopolitics in relation to neoliberalism and globalization, Rose who analyzes biopolitics in terms of genomics and biomedicine,
and Butler who reads biopolitics and terror through the lens of 9/11 and Guantanamo Bay.

3 See, for instance, Goodlad; Gilbert, Citizen’s; and Gallagher, Body.

4 For the human collective as a social body, aggregate, or crowd, see Poovey, Making; Jaffe, Affective; and Plotz, respectively. Poovey shows how the term “social body” referred both to the poor and to the British populace as a cohesive unit, Jaffe explains how the aggregate was conceived through the idea of the average man as smooth and continuous, and Plotz demonstrates how the notion of the crowd took on specifically working-class and politically radical connotations.

5 See Higgs, Making 2–17 for more on Victorian census taking.

6 See Higgs, Making 58–60 for information specifically about how lodgers were counted according to different censuses. In general, Higgs, Making provides a helpful overview of how the various censuses were administered and the problems that arose with their administration.

7 For Foucault’s most succinct exploration of governmentality, see his essay “Governmentality.” He also discusses governmentality in his lectures on biopolitics. For his work on biopolitics, see History, Society, Security, and Birth.

8 See Goodlad 2–21 for her explanation of why Foucault’s theories of governmentality and pastorship are better suited than his theory of discipline for understanding Victorian liberalism and the Victorian state. For Foucault’s theories of pastorship, see, for example, “Subject” and “Politics.”

9 For Steinlight on the political problem of the mass, see her articles “Dickens’s” and “Hardy’s.”
Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848) identifies lack of knowledge—of the poor, of urban conditions, of the anonymous individuals who walk among us everyday—as the primary hindrance to social reform. In the preface, she famously writes that her motivation for penning the novel comes from a curiosity about “the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets” (3). Her literary endeavor to “give utterance” to the grueling network of dependence between the upper and lower classes is an attempt to instigate her readers to find ways to repair the rift between the haves and have-nots (3). While Gaskell softens the radicalism of this intention in the preface, claiming to “know nothing of Political Economy,” the text clearly indicates that knowledge of the poor and the complex relations brought on by industrial capitalism is the first step to fixing England’s social problems (3). As the narrator explains, “the starving multitudes had heard, that the very existence of their distress had been denied in Parliament; and though they felt this strange and inexplicable, yet the idea that their misery had still to be revealed in all its depths, and that then some remedy would be found, soothed their aching hearts, and kept down their rising fury” (86). According to *Mary Barton*, social knowledge leads to sympathetic recognition and reform, both of which are crucial to piecing back together a fractured society. If, for *Mary Barton*, then, social knowledge paves the way for reformist attitudes and policies, the question that remains is how to procure the knowledge necessary to encourage thoughtful and effective action.
The collection of social information for the purpose of reform propelled the disciplines of statistics and demography to emerge as important new sciences in the nineteenth century. Although these sciences were, to some, inimical to the more personal modes of reform that Gaskell preferred, to others, they provided the empirical justification for reform’s moral foundation. These conflicting views on reform stemmed from what Lauren M. E. Goodlad characterizes as the Victorian period’s “antithetical, or ‘dueling,’ worldviews: one moral and idealist and the other materialist” (22). The “moral and idealist” worldview believed that reform should be based on traditional concepts of voluntarism, individual character, and local relations whereas the “materialist” worldview believed that reform should be founded in bureaucratic, rational, and centralized mechanisms of governance. These worldviews informed how the collective we could call the population materialized through the statistical and demographic sciences as both an entity to be nurtured and cultivated and an object of knowledge and control. The regulation of the population became a national imperative in the nineteenth century. As I mentioned in the introduction, the health and increase of the population began to be seen in the early moments of the century as a reflection of Britain’s political power. Over the course of the Victorian period, demographic accounting became associated with social and political stability, as the numbers derived from such accounting served either as evidence of Britain’s superiority or as data to be used for social legislation. Even as earlier forms of demographic accounting existed—dating as far back as the 1086 Domesday Book—the figures that were gathered were incredibly inaccurate and often amassed for purposes of taxation rather than enumeration.¹ Beginning with the first census of 1801, however, demographic information became available at unprecedented
levels, and the population began to coalesce as a calculable, material phenomenon. The
demographic and statistical sciences hence transformed what was considered to be an
unintelligible mass into a theoretically numerable and, by extension, potentially
manageable collective.

In this chapter, I explore how Victorian novels, specifically social problem
novels, deploy statistical and demographic discourse in order to participate in
conceptualizing the population as knowable, countable, and governable. While a sense of
the population as the social collective existed before statistics and demography, that
collective did not become a target of governmental intervention until these sciences gave
it a recognizable, mathematical shape. During the Victorian era, the development of
various practices aimed at describing, classifying, and categorizing the social whole
coincided with an interest to reform and regulate that whole. I argue that nineteenth-
century novels not only engaged with those practices but also served as one of those
practices, as the problem of articulating the population through statistics and demography
is the problem that these novels face when trying to capture the enormity of the
population through realist representation.

Like statistics, realist representation depends on the particularity of individual
cases or characters, even as those characters are generalizable as social averages or types,
in order to grasp the details and totality of social life. Moreover, the realist novel, like
statistics, perpetuates a narrative logic that presumes all individuals can be yoked
together to tell a story of social interconnection in which the actions of others predicate
the actions available for the self to take. Georg Lukács’s theory of the novel, which I
briefly discussed in the introduction, most clearly exemplifies this understanding of
realist fiction. As he explains, what is particular and individual in novels serves the larger purpose of illuminating the general and social. Because of this greater aim, “the typical quality of a character in a novel is very often … a tendency which asserts itself gradually, which emerges to the surface only by degrees out of the whole, out of the complex interaction of human beings, human relations, institutions, things, etc.” (Historical 140). Akin to statistics, then, which makes claims about the population by abstracting from individual cases, realist texts comment on “a social trend” by narrating, through individual characters, the “different ways in which [the trend] asserts itself” (Lukács, Historical 140). Yet the realist novel does not merely inhabit a statistical epistemology in order to render the population intelligible. What novels emphasize that statistics and the census do not is the caesura between the represented object and the object itself. The statistical and demographic sciences would like us to believe that the population is inherently quantifiable. Victorian novels, though, reveal that any effort to comprehend the population requires forms of abstraction and representation that belie the very attempt to know the population itself. Via analyses of Gaskell’s Mary Barton and Charles Dickens’s Bleak House (1851–53), I show how novels, specifically social problem novels, expose the extent to which statistical efforts to manage the population rely on techniques of realist fiction, even while novels collude with statistics and demography to make the population countable and predictable.

In examining social problem novels, I recast what usually has been read as a narrative inconsistency in the subgenre as a product of what the subgenre illuminates is the numerical reduction necessary to know and control the population. Most critics view social problem novels as failed radical projects, whose potentials for imagining political
change via their grim depictions of the working class give way to conservative endings steeped in maudlin domesticity. Raymond Williams provides an early and influential example of this reading. As he states, the withdrawal away from the political in social problem or industrial novels is a consequence of a middle-class “structure of feeling” that feared working-class violence more than capitalist inequities (87). In contrast, I interpret the subgenre’s supposed political and narrative retreat toward sentimentalized social harmony as its reflection on the epistemological abstraction that converts an unruly mass into a tractable aggregate. This understanding of the population as an entity that escapes demographic and statistical inquiry and an entity that this type of inquiry formalizes anticipates Michel Foucault’s articulation of the population as “an idea and a reality” (Security 11). The “idea” of the population is the population, as I noted in the introduction, as a “multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they might not be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted” (Foucault, Society 245). This “multiple body” is not the sum of individuals; rather, it suggests the existence of a collective that, while partly illuminated by, ultimately exceeds enumeration. Conversely, the “reality” or “effective reality” of the population is the population as a “datum” that exhibits a series of statistically regular characteristics (Foucault, Security 47, 71). These characteristics are “accessible to agents and techniques of transformation, on condition that these agents and techniques are at once enlightened, reflected, analytical, calculated, and calculating” (71). The seeming “reality” of the population as a “datum” finds traction through the statistical and demographic discourses that portray the collective as measurable and logical—the very discourses that the “idea” of the population proves insufficient in their endeavors to access and formulate the mass. Whereas Foucault never
quite clarifies the connection between these notions of the population, I contend that social problem novels fuse them in order to comment on the literariness of counting, as well as on the literariness of biopolitics as a regime of power enacted upon the population. By reading this subgenre with an eye toward the concept of the population, I foreground the commitment to “mak[ing] live”—or making populations live and making populations up—that Victorian realism and biopolitics share (Foucault, *Society* 241).

Recent criticism on Victorian novels has begun to establish the genre’s interest in collectivity and social counting. These studies depart from a scholarly tradition that identifies the novel as the exemplary genre of privacy and interiority culminating in the celebration or disciplining of the individual. Yet even as these studies disclose the novel’s concern for the social whole, they tend to view that concern in opposition to its favoring of the particular. They, therefore, construct a telos in novelistic development that begins with a form open to political projects centered on the social mass and ending with a form dedicated to the modern liberal individual. As an example of such scholarship, Nancy Armstrong’s latest monograph, argues that realist novels became a dominant literary form by creating an individualistic subjectivity that invalidated other subjectivities based on notions of collectivity. In Armstrong’s view, one way in which these novels did so was by constructing the character of the “mass man,” a monstrous, often cannibalistic figure who threatened to obliterate individualism by “welding any and all individuals into a single body” (*How* 24–5). Alex Woloch similarly contends that narrative meaning in realist novels depends on an opposition between the individual and the mass—an opposition that he claims these novels formalize through the relationship between protagonists and minor characters. As he demonstrates, realist novels are able to
portray psychological interiority and social expansiveness by employing a “character-system” that pits protagonists and minor characters against each other; this system asymmetrically allocates narrative space to characters according to their narrative importance (14). For Armstrong and Woloch, then, the attention that realist novels pay to the social whole is only in service of their preference for the individual. My dissertation, in contrast, departs from this critical tendency and claims that Victorian novels have a sustained engagement with questions of aggregation.

This chapter in particular maintains that social problem novels demonstrate this engagement through their manipulation of statistical and demographic notions of counting. My research, therefore, corresponds with Audrey Jaffe’s and Gage McWeeny’s most recent works, which illustrate Victorian novels’ continued investment in the social mass. Whereas Jaffe uses the figure of the average man in order to explore how representations of the collective influence understandings of individual identity (Affective), McWeeny uses the figure of the stranger in order to read the idea of social density not as isolating and terrifying but as ordinary and productive. Instead of rethinking identity or sociality, as Jaffe and McWeeny, respectively, do, I explore how the problem of representation that Britain’s expanding population posed to realism helps us to rethink early forms of biopolitical management since attempts to count and understand the population in the nineteenth century dovetailed with attempts to control and contain it. By attending to how novels enumerate the population, as well as to the extent to which novelistic enumeration differs from statistical and demographic enumeration, I align my argument in this chapter—and the project in general—with Caroline Levine’s recent appeal for critics to examine literary and social forms together.
As Levine notes, literary criticism’s penchant to highlight the individual and particular so as to critique “unjust totalities or binaries” obscures the potential that highlighting unities and forms would produce (9). Since “it is impossible to imagine a society altogether free of organizing principles,” Levine challenges scholars to “analyze the major work that forms do in our world” rather than continuing to concern ourselves with “breaking forms apart” (9). Examining what she terms the “affordances” of form—“the potential uses or actions latent” in forms, in addition to the constraints typically associated with forms—Levine asserts that we can come to a more nuanced understanding of the “complex ways that power operates in a world dense with functioning forms” (6, 9). This chapter takes up Levine’s call by considering how social problem novels gave shape to the mass that we now think of as the population by transforming what appeared to be unquantifiable and uncontrollable into a calculable and governable entity.

In what follows, I will look at how statistics and the census tried to capture the population and transform it into a numerable collective to varying degrees of success. I will then analyze how Mary Barton and Bleak House each deal with the difficulty of apprehending the population via their respective understandings of the relationship between counting and demographic management. With Mary Barton, I will demonstrate how this text stabilizes the relationship between the individual and the mass through a narrative technique that I call synecdochic characterization. As I will explain, this technique borrows from the statistical sciences in the link that it forms between the individual character and the social group to which the character belongs. Subsequently, I will examine how Bleak House complicates this link by showing how the productive
relationship between the one and the many that statistics and *Mary Barton* present depends on a form of abstraction that ultimately hinders demographic knowledge.

1.

In 1801, the population became intelligible for the first time in British history with the completion of the inaugural decennial census. The calculations gathered by the census were assembled “for the purposes of consolidating civil society” and were crucial for the functioning of the liberal state (Higgs, *Information* 82). As Patrick Joyce writes, “for the liberal state to operate it was first necessary for it to identify those it sought to govern” (20). Knowing and governing went hand in hand. But while the state’s power relied, in part, on accumulating figures about its constituents, governing through statistics was tricky, as the trouble with abstracting from statistics was that they were calculated via a specific set of data, collected from a specific moment in time. The applicability of statistics was hence limited in its capacity to describe and regulate the population, despite statisticians using such data to refer to scientific truths. John Victorians were aware of this problem as debates about the accuracy of the census proliferated throughout the century. As the census became more detailed, the public became more doubtful of the veracity and value of numerical information. Victorians were especially concerned with the issue of “numerical invisibility,” the possibility that certain individuals within the population could evade and were evading governmental enumeration (Klotz 223). In *All the Year Round*, for instance, an article titled “Census Curiosities,” which was published just a week before the 1861 census was administered, detailed the problems of counting every individual, listing errors that occurred in the past through “stupidity,” “design,” and “necessity” (15–6). Although the author conceded that “the rough estimate obtained [by
the census] … is accurate enough for any useful purpose,” the author still asserted that “[t]here is no such thing as exact truth to be got by the most carefully devised census” (16, 15). Even as social physics, the new science named by statistician Adolphe Quetelet, was turning the population into an object totally subject to numerical regularities, then, debates surrounding the census and statistics suggested that, for Victorians, the population was only partially calculable and, as such, wholly unintelligible.7

The state’s dependence on statistics transformed what could be an epistemological issue into a governmental one. To regulate the population, the state had to comprehend a collective that was theoretically unquantifiable not only because it consisted of too many individuals to count but also because those individuals were vulnerable to seemingly immeasurable biological needs. This undertaking compelled the state to make an epistemological leap from imagining the population as a numerical aggregate to imagining it as an organic mass. We see this leap in Foucault’s contradictory definition of the population as calculable and uncountable—a definition that exposes a space beyond state control. Since the state deploys statistics and demography to formulate and intervene into the population, the dissonance between statistical figures and their real-world referents transpires in the state’s biopolitical practices. On the one hand, biopower, via statistics, renders the population intelligible and governable by “br[inging] life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations” (Foucault, History 143). On the other hand, biopower, as a consequence of statistics, “complexifies the political resource called the ‘body’” by revealing ever-new elements that affect the body (Wolfe 33). Biopower, in other words, makes biological life and the population manageable at the same time that it makes them more challenging to regulate. As Foucault explains, when the population
becomes a “datum,” we begin to see how “a range of factors and elements that seem far removed from the population itself” actually affect the health, perpetuity, and security of the population (Security 72). Because biopower makes the body knowable, it stands apart from the body it purports to control. As Maurizio Lazzarato writes, “[b]iopower coordinates and targets a power that does not properly belong to it” (103). Creating phenomena it cannot rein in, biopower disrupts its own authority, which explains why statistical information that tries to make the population legible never quite captures every fluctuation. The numerical invisibility about which the Victorians were so worried becomes a liberating possibility when considered through a biopolitical lens.

As biopolitical theory reveals, biological processes outpace biopolitical calculations. The lag between discovering biological phenomena and realizing and quantifying biological complexity divulges an opportunity for resistance in a biopolitical world. In the nineteenth century, the natural sciences helped to turn the population into an organic and potentially anarchic entity by reconceiving it in biological terms and calling into question the statistical means through which the state claimed to manage it. Of the scientists who contributed to this new conception, Charles Darwin most clearly articulated why the totality of biological life surpassed human intellect when he showed that man could not predict evolutionary development and hence could not control the species via statistical knowledge. Though, on the surface, On the Origin of Species (1859) provides a theory explaining organic life, it does so by presenting a system so complex its own theorist could not fathom its extent. According to Origin, evolution can only be inferred through incidental manifestations: “we see beautiful adaptations everywhere and in every part of the organic world”; however, “our ignorance on the
mutual relations of all organic beings [is] a conviction as necessary, as it seems to be difficult to acquire” (Darwin 132, 143). Given that the totality and complexity of evolution escape human reason and control, it follows that demographic figures, gathered to organize and govern the population, would also prove useless once the population is conceptualized as a species contingent on evolutionary forces. In a revolutionary twist, Darwin suggests that all organisms share a biological kinship even as the intricacies of that kinship are humanly inexplicable. He thus radicalizes life by forcing Victorians to recognize, without comprehending, their biological continuity with other species and each other.

Victorians were already concerned with the egalitarianism that Darwin’s theory implied due to the political movement toward universal suffrage. With the passage of the Reform Bills, political inclusivity was becoming a more imminent prospect, and by midcentury many Victorians began to associate their anxieties about democracy with their anxieties about the rapidly expanding population. To offset this amalgamating trend, some Victorian writers began to expound the importance of liberal individuation. John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty (1859) and Samuel Smiles’s Self-Help (1859) are quintessential examples of mid-Victorian attitudes about the need to cultivate liberal character and self-governance so as to fight social conformity. But as Elaine Hadley demonstrates, to “live liberalism” proved problematic, for it meant enacting the paradox of what she terms “abstract embodiment” (3, 18). Because midcentury liberalism both praised and distrusted abstraction, liberals believed that fostering a situated form of universalism would retain the positive aspects of universalism while protecting against its negatives. Yet this situatedness relied on the particularity of embodied existence, which threatened
liberal objectivity by contaminating the individual with social markers and biological drives. While political practices tried to mitigate the dangers that social identity and biology posed, they often overcompensated and homogenized subjects, thereby exacerbating the mass’s perceived undifferentiation. The ballot box, for instance, was one of those practices that theoretically set the individual apart from the mass so he could vote according to his conscience; however, by eliminating all identifying characteristics, the ballot box turned individual voters into “neutral electors” who became “especially susceptible to personation because, so this thinking goes, one such elector seems much like another and to some extent … must ‘think’ much like another” (Hadley 224). This fear of political continuity in democracy and certain types of liberal practices resembled the fear of biological continuity in Darwinian evolution. In showing how distinguishing between species and varieties was “vainly to beat the air,” Darwin collapsed not only any sense of hierarchy but also any meaningful notion of difference (125). Biology and democracy, therefore, made it impossible for one to be certain where the self ended and other, mass or otherwise, began.

While this blurring of individual and mass threatened biological and political order, the Victorian state relied on it since the state’s reliance on statistical information meant that every individual held the same quantitative weight. Rather than insisting on the uniqueness of the individual, as liberal political philosophy did, the state presumed individuals were, at least, numerically equivalent. The quantitative equality on which counting depends dangerously aligns with the social and political equality that democracy implies. The individual and the population thus have an ambivalent relationship in the Victorian period, as the government’s use of combination and calculation bumped heads
with the culture’s commitment to freedom, privacy, and individualism. The social problem novel, I contend, crystallizes this conundrum by showing how the forms of counting that the state deploys reduce individual difference into demographic generality. Whereas Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* treats this reduction favorably as a way to increase the working class’s social and political visibility, Dickens’s *Bleak House* critiques this reduction as an abstraction that obstructs the demographic and social understanding that quantification supposedly makes possible.

2.

*Mary Barton* uses the concept of the average in order to stabilize the relationship between the one and the many that biology, democracy, and the liberal state agitate. The idea of the average merges the individual and the mass by containing the multiplicity within a single composite. The average thus preserves the discreetness of the individual within a single figure even as that figure is produced through aggregation. In the nineteenth century, Quetelet introduced the notion of the average through his concept of the “average man,” a “fictitious being, for whom every thing proceeds conformably to the medium results obtained for society” (8). Reducing the population into this imaginary person, Quetelet united the individual with the whole and turned actual individuals into deviations from the mean. Despite being fictional, the figure of the average man generated real consequences, as Victorians compared themselves to the norm he exemplified. Through the idea of the average man, the individual became a data point within a permissible set, and nineteenth-century novels reinforced this relationality. As Jaffe states, the Victorian novel “construes individual character and emotion as a degree of similarity to or difference from a norm, just as statisticians create the possibility of
viewing reality as a system of perturbations from an average” (*Affective* 7–8). Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* follows this use of the average in its construction of character. But rather than simply comparing the individual to the norm, the text shows how the notion of the average can resolve not only the conflict between accumulation and individuation but also the biopolitical problem of comprehending and controlling the seemingly infinite and infinitely multiplying population through a more manageable few.

This problem of regulating the ostensibly innumerable population becomes amenable in *Mary Barton* through a literary technique that I identify as synecdochic characterization, which blends the individual character with the social group to which he or she belongs. The imbrication of the one and the many within these characters enables the text to count the ostensibly uncountable population through what Gaskell terms the indeterminate “one or two” (3). In synecdochic characterization, characters appear as individuals because they are exceptional and representative—or, more accurately, exceptional because they are representative. As Gaskell states in the preface, she accomplishes her goal of “giv[ing] utterance” to the lives of industrial workers by writing a narrative that zeroes in on the “hearts of one or two” (3). These “one or two” are exemplary as well as typical because they offer specific insight from which she can extrapolate to the “many of the poor” (3). In the preface, the one and the many coincide since knowing the many develops out of inferring from the one. *Mary Barton* thus controls and even produces the laboring population that it narrates by using a literary technique that fuses the individual and the mass without subordinating the individual to the mass or the mass to the individual.
The synecdochic logic of the average appears immediately in the novel, which commences with generic accounts of the Manchester people. These accounts are possible because they are abstractions of particular figures; hence, they demonstrate the constitutive relationship between the general and the specific. When describing a group of factory girls, for instance, the narrator notes that the ages of these girls “might range from twelve to twenty” (6). This range implies that the narrator is aware of each girl’s age even as the narrator hides these details to present the girls as an overall body. Moreover, by defining the girls’ beauty as “below the average,” the narrator hints at a calculated mean that considers how beautiful each girl is despite attending to the group as a whole (6). The text further utilizes the average to connect the universal and the particular in its sketch of a young family. Estimating that this family has “three or four children,” the narrator insinuates that this family is not a specific family but an averaged depiction of the actual families existing outside of the text (7). Like the girls, the portrayal of this family relies on abstracted norms. The average, however, can only be determined after counting has occurred. The novel’s deployment of theoretical, statistical knowledge, then, suggests a previous unnarrated moment of data accumulation. This tacit dependence on concrete data insinuates a narrative penchant for inductive reasoning wherein observed particulars lead to abstract conclusions.

*Mary Barton* produces literary characters via inductive thinking by showing how general types derive from examining individuals. Yet the novel likewise produces characters via the reverse logic by showing how individuals emerge from the types that the examination of these individuals supposedly generates. In moving from general to specific, the text exhibits what could be perceived as the problem with induction even as
the text abides by such reasoning. This analysis coincides with Catherine Gallagher’s interpretation of the Victorian novel as a genre that revises the “empiricist logic by invoking both a knowledge that types are induced from persons in the world and a further awareness that characters are deduced from types” (“George” 62). While the narrator’s abstractions of the industrial population presumably develop out of empirical data, these abstractions concurrently determine who should count as part of that population. The influence that the general has on the specific is apparent when the opening focuses on the protagonist John Barton, whose defining trait is the very type that he embodies. As a “thorough specimen of a Manchester man,” John materializes as distinct because he is ordinary; he is a believable individual due to what is assumed of a “Manchester man” (7). By classifying John as such a man, the narrator uses the type to differentiate the common. As much as the type depends on the individual from which to induce its characteristics, the individual depends on the type to determine his idiosyncrasies. This circularity marks the epistemological relationship between the individual and the population that the novel employs to construct its characters, and, through such characters, the text exposes how this circularity underlies statistical and biopolitical thought.

Whereas the Victorian state’s use of statistics ostensibly followed an inductive logic to uncover demographic information, the facts from which that information was extrapolated were not always rooted in empirical reality. As Mary Poovey illustrates, statisticians in the 1830s legitimized their discipline by claiming to pursue scientific truth, yet they also asserted “some role in defining and formulating policies about the social problems that industrialization and urbanization had exacerbated” (“Figures” 259). Despite its inductive pretense, statistics relies on deduction, and the critics who
questioned the new science seized upon this contradiction. For example, John Robertson of the *London and Westminster Review* condemned the Statistical Society of London for what he identified as the Society’s paradoxical commitment to facts. He writes: “There is an ambiguity in the word facts … it either means evidences or it means anything which exists. The fact, the thing as it is without any relation to anything else, is a matter of no importance” (69). Even as facts seem empirical, they are only significant when viewed as evidence corroborating a theory. In “separat[ing] the facts from the propositions they support,” the Statistical Society, Robertson notes, rendered facts “utterly meaningless” by “stripping them of that for the same of which they are noticed at all” (69). *Mary Barton* acknowledges this relationship between fact and theory in its production of literary characters. While Gaskell claims to “write truthfully” about working-class life, the veracity of her account relies on how closely her characters align with historical working-class individuals (4). These individuals only count as working class, however, due to an extant consensus of what counts as working class. Just as the abstract depends on the historical, the historical depends on the abstract.

Though this circularity may form an epistemological roadblock, *Mary Barton* treats it as an epistemological sleight-of-hand that must be accepted for knowledge to be gained. To manage the population, the state first needs to determine which aspects of the population require controlling or, at the very least, that the population requires controlling at all. In essence, the state has to manufacture an idea of the population before it can regulate that population. Poovey’s statement about epistemological bias supports my point: “the statistical population is produced by … abstraction … [F]or the purposes of a particular calculation, the analyst wants to control for one factor and not others” (*History*)
The state, that is, must first imagine a population that is being threatened by a certain set of crises in order to justify biopolitical interventions into that population. Demographic knowledge is, therefore, constructed; its claim to the phenomenal world is an effect of systems of knowledge production. By using a statistical logic to create characters, Gaskell’s novel reveals what Poovey deems is “the peculiarity written into the modern fact” (History xxii). The modern fact is particular and systematic, “mere data, gathered at random” and “data gathered in the light of a social or theoretical context” (Poovey, History xxii, 96). *Mary Barton*’s concern with the constitutive relationship between individual and population consequently parallels the relationship between facts and the epistemological system in which facts are entrenched. Evident in John’s introduction, Gaskell’s fictional individual gains meaning as an individual not because he is incommensurable but because he is a unit of and embodies a group. As Michael Klotz explains in his article on *Great Expectations* and social statistics, “Victorian fiction routinely exploits this type of double vision in representing individuals as unique, separable members of a community and at the same time instantiations of one or more classes or categories of persons” (216). And yet this “double vision” in *Mary Barton* is less paradoxical, as Klotz might read it, than codependent, as I argue here. The manifestation of the individual through the population defines *Mary Barton*’s vision of demographic government, as the narrative manages its population by envisioning the one in the many and the many in the one.

This conflation of the one and the many culminates in the novel’s synecdochic characters, who, as narrative versions of the average man, transform individuals into social representations. By showing how the one and the many constitute each other, these
characters illustrate how this co-constitution allows for the numerical equivalence that statistics needs but that retains the singularity that liberalism wants. The scalar equivalence between the individual and the population, wherein the former represents the former and the latter is inferred from the former, allows the novel to claim that it speaks for all of the poor even though it only focuses on the lives of a specific subset. We see this scalar equivalence most clearly when the character Job Legh tries to explain to the wealthy mill owner Mr. Carson the anger of the working class. Job uses the violent crime that John commits as an example of this anger; early in the novel, John kills Carson’s son in a moment of political frustration. In expounding on John’s motivation for the crime, Job simultaneously expounds on the anger of the working class, speculating that what “rankled in [John] as long as I knew him (and, sir, it rankles in many a poor man’s heart … ), was that those who wore finer clothes … cared not whether his heart was sorry or glad” (384). With this statement, Job clarifies John’s rationale. Instead of focusing on John, though, Job extrapolates from John to “many a poor man” to John again without hesitation. In doing so, Job enacts the synecdochic equation that the novel uses in its initial description of John as a “Manchester man.” Through the one, Mary Barton gives us the many, as John’s desperation becomes for Job the desperation of the industrial population. By using a representative particular to make the mass knowable, Job contains what was considered an uncontrollable, unknowable, and uncountable force. John’s working-class radicalism gets reinscribed through Job to target the middle-class Carson, and Job manufactures and manages the industrial population through his synecdochic translation. Job’s narration, therefore, miniaturizes the effects of Gaskell’s novel since he
performs the actions that the novel intends: to explicate the working class to middle-class readers and to stabilize the population it imagines.

By having Job do what the novel does, the text corroborates its own biopolitical strategy, as Job successfully controls the working class in his elucidation to Carson of the collective psyche of industrial workers. After Job’s explanation, Carson realizes that “a perfect understanding … might exist between masters and men” (388). This “perfect understanding,” a moral account of a regulated population, could only result from Job’s depiction of the working class as funneled through John. Mary Barton’s biopolitics manifests through its epistemological objective; by making abstractions about the population while seemingly retaining the specificity of the individual case, the text creates and governs the industrial population via the synecdochic “one or two.” The novel hence makes apparent how demographic management relies on abstractions since it is only through abstractions that the state can gain the knowledge required to know and regulate the population. As Mary Barton demonstrates, the idea of the population—whether for the novel or the state—is a construct produced through literary techniques of characterization.

3. Whereas Mary Barton solves the biopolitical problem of comprehending the population by alluding to a collective contained through discrete synecdochic characters, Bleak House questions the possibility of accessing any collective through the individual, even a collective that the narrative itself produces. The difference between these novels regarding their confidence in literature’s capacity to capture the population lies in perhaps their respective positions to Chartism, the working-class political movement of the late
1830s and ’40s. Published shortly after Chartists were unsuccessful in obtaining universal male suffrage, *Mary Barton* seems to retain their optimism for enfranchising the working class. Although Gaskell’s text narrates the Chartists’ fruitless attempts at electoral reform, the novel still appears to view the poor as England’s democratic future given that the depiction of specific working-class characters transforms the working class overall into a politically and literarily representable group. In contrast, *Bleak House*, serialized three years later, reflects the Chartists’ political failure through the novel’s failure to depict the mass. While Dickens’s text tries to gesture toward an idea of the population by demonstrating the interconnectedness of the social whole, the figure of the “supernumeraries”—an uncountable mass that exists in the background of the text—disrupts this endeavor to encapsulate the whole in what Levine calls the narrative’s networked logic (Dickens, *Bleak* 191; Levine 122–3). In Dickens’s work, the population or the “supernumeraries” can only be glimpsed when the individual disappears. By exceeding the narrative grasp, the supernumeraries destabilize a democratic vision that bases equality on the recognition of all individuals. This destabilization ostensibly discloses a new realm for politics founded on collectivity, not on the countability and singularity of the enfranchised subject. Ultimately, though, the text reveals how such a politics is impossible by showing how the concept of the innumerable population continues to rely on a practice of individuation and counting.

The difficulty of demographic legibility does not initially appear to be something that concerns *Bleak House* since the novel’s protracted scope and dual narrators presumably place the fictional population under full narrative control. Dickens’s work reads like a microcosm of London, allegedly portraying every corner of the city,
including the slum of Tom-all-Alone’s, which is usually “avoided by all decent people” (256). Furthering this sense of the text’s comprehensiveness are, of course, the two narrators: the impersonal, third-person narrator and the first-person narrator, Esther Summerson. As many critics note, these narrators together seem to present a more complete depiction of demographic life than any one narrator could supply. Through this narrative exhaustiveness, the novel apparently offers absolute knowledge of and command over the population. However, the novel’s immensity actually produces the opposite effect; the two narrators inevitably leave some things unnotated. As Robyn Warhol argues, “texts have limits,” and because of these limits “an unimaginably large quantity of information is literally left out of any text” (48). *Bleak House*’s redundant narration fails to capture every minutia of its fictional world—a failure that corresponds to the failure within the novel of the many documents generated to apprehend Jarndyce and Jarndyce, the legal case at the center of the narrative that has “become so complicated, that no man alive knows what it means” (16). As Chancery continues to acquire more information about the case, the court becomes more clueless about how to resolve it. This overflow parallels the state’s effort to count its members. Just as demographic phenomena exceed calculation, the novel’s population exceeds the narrative record.

*Bleak House*’s unnarratable population dismantles the link between knowledge and power on which the liberal state depends, as the narrative’s ambiguity points to the trouble with knowing and governing the population. Like the solicitors who cannot make heads or tails of Jarndyce and Jarndyce’s “mountains of costly nonsense,” neither narrator can definitively say what *Bleak House* is trying to convey (14). Esther “seem[s]
to be always writing about [her]self” despite her efforts to “write about other people” (137). Unlike the demographic immersion of Mary Barton’s synecdochic characters, Esther’s immersion in the population disorients rather than clarifies, lending her no critical distance from which to grasp the population’s entirety. The impersonal narrator also offers little clarity to the purpose of the relations it recounts. Though the narrator witnesses the population as a whole, it cannot synthesize the population’s significance, a confusion apparent in the famous questions: “What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabout of Jo … What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world” (256). Even as the novel proposes a “connexion” through Esther’s genealogy—as we later discover, the identity of Esther’s parents helps to bring narrative closure to the text—these questions insinuate that any explanation depends on the scale of the narrative one is trying to tell. This relativism is evident in the narrator’s jump from the text’s immediate events to history writ large; Esther’s lineage explains what unites the people in one set of events but cannot explain what unites the “many people in the innumerable histories of this world.” To assess the population, one must first choose a scale from which to gauge it—a choice that precludes the demographic fantasy of absolute knowledge. While Esther may appear to be the key to uncovering the links holding the population together, the limited perspective that she provides inevitably hinders total demographic comprehension. The novel thus leaves unclear whether it can narrate the population it depicts in a meaningful, manageable way.

The text’s lack of narrative control corresponds to its depictions of governmental inadequacy, yet, to a degree, such inadequacy helps the state to maintain power.
Although the novel notoriously portrays Chancery as a bureaucratic mess, the court’s ineptitude keeps individuals within its grasp by denying them the privileges of political legitimacy. Representing the state’s attempt to cut the population down to size, the court determines which individuals are worthy of the safeguards it affords to citizens by determining who does and does not have a familial inheritance awaiting them. Those with familial legitimacy theoretically buy into a state legitimacy via the family’s distribution of heritable property. Since the state enfranchises those with property, Chancery’s role in dispersing it has a hand in the state dispersing the vote. But, in practice, this system fails to reward even those deemed worthy given Chancery’s stalled proceedings. *Bleak House* exemplifies these subjects in Jarndyce and Jarndyce’s legatees, who believe “the longer [the case] goes on … the nearer it must be to a settlement one way or other” (215). Unfortunately, judgment never comes since, once conferred, subjects will no longer look to the state for legitimacy. John Jarndyce complains, “we can’t get out of the suit on any terms, for we are made parties to it, and *must* be made parties to it, whether we like it or not” (119). The state’s dependence on delay explains why, when the case finally concludes, legal expenses drain the legacies in question. The court’s deferral is a product of the state’s conservatism, for this legal model abides by a linear time in which the future, not the present, stands as the moment when rights will be bestowed.

While Chancery’s deferral reinforces state power, it is also a byproduct of the population’s unintelligibility, as the legal model of government only succeeds if individuals are comprehensible as such. In actuality, however, individuals are incomprehensible because of their demographic entanglement. Although in *Mary Barton*, this entanglement makes characters abstractable—turning them into synecdochic
representations of the mass—in *Bleak House*, it hinders the singularization of the part that synecdoche requires. Dickens’s characters are not average men and women who embody the population. Instead, they fight to individuate themselves in what Terry Eagleton describes as a “wonderfully overpopulated work” (vii). *Bleak House* is crammed with characters virtually indistinguishable from each other given their sheer numbers. Even Esther wavers in her identity; she narrates half the novel yet does not materialize coherently as a character. To John Jordan, this incoherence is due to her serving as subject and object of her own narration (3–5). It likewise comes from the sense that her identity is not completely her own. Constantly reminded that “[y]our mother … is your disgrace, and you were hers,” Esther is burdened with the knowledge that her identity hinges on the actions of a mother she has never met (Dickens, *Bleak* 30). The cross-temporality of “is” and “were” speaks to the “great deal of difficulty” that she faces in composing her narrative since she cannot keep the past and the present, self and other separate (27). This chiasmus reflects Esther’s later confession that “I had for a moment an undefinable impression of myself as being something different from what I then was”—an undefinability resulting from her struggle with self-narration and history (489).

In light of her disorientation, Esther’s compulsion to “always writ[e] about [her]self” regardless of her effort to “write about other people” takes another meaning. Her lack of critical distance from the story at hand, though signaling her inability to comprehend the population, denotes, too, her absorption into the population, as she “can’t be kept out” (137). By writing about others, Esther inevitably writes about herself since the population and the individual unsettlingly commingle.
Esther’s overcrowded self parallels the overcrowded city, and their shared incomprehensibility points to the insufficiency of the inheritance model to govern either the massified individual or the population. The ungovernability of the latter is most palpable in the celebrated opening paragraph that introduces London’s congested streets. Given the density of the “tens of thousands of … foot passengers,” it is impossible to tell one pedestrian from the next (13). The narrator presents not a group of distinct individuals but a mass in which presumably separate people blur into one another. The human mass is even inextricable from the environment, as foot passengers not only find themselves “slipping and sliding” into the “crust upon crust of mud” but also become that mud as their muddy descent “add[s] new deposits” (13). The allusion to the stratigraphic record suggests that the population, like the earth, is unknowable.13 To comprehend the population, one would first need to conceive of an expanded time scale that could acknowledge and contain its vast complexity. Within the first paragraph, the novel locates the social collective in the deep history of the world in which multiple epochs coincide. These epochs include biblical times, as Noah’s flood has “but newly retired from the face of the earth”; the Jurassic age, evinced by the “Megalosaurus … waddling … up Holborn Hill”; the ongoing Industrial Revolution, with the “flakes of soot” falling from the sky; and future astrological events, such as the “death of the sun” (13). Despite this layered temporality, the state, through Chancery, only recognizes a single, linear time that anticipates, even as it forecloses, a future wherein inheritance will be distributed. The state, therefore, cannot know the multi-temporal population, which, like the multi-temporal individual, invalidates the legal model as a form of government.
By demonstrating Chancery’s deficiencies in apprehending the population, *Bleak House* ostensibly advocates for a new politics that can accommodate the mass—a politics based not on synecdochic figures who contain the mass by abstracting it but on the mass’s unabstractionability. The novel hints at the population’s anarchic potential via its indifference to parliamentary politics. Whereas Parliament’s squabbles have led to a governmental standstill, the supernumeraries “ha[ve] not seemed to care very much about it, but ha[ve] gone on eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage” (638). The population continues to follow its urges for food, drink, and sex since it persists through these drives, not through Parliament’s political games. For Emily Steinlight, this disregard evinces how the population has outgrown the present political frame and how an alternative order focused on the mass has begun to take hold. The first to articulate *Bleak House*’s biopolitical investment, Steinlight maintains that the supernumeraries represent the possibility of equality by “subsuming the entire population within the null set of the quantitatively uncounted and qualitatively discounted” (230). According to her, the supernumeraries disclose a “the tension between the category of population and the mass that resists incorporation” (234). While I agree that Dickens’s text exposes the difference between the countable and uncountable collective, I differ in regards to Steinlight’s hopeful analysis of the egalitarian future that the supernumeraries embody. In my reading, it is less that the supernumeraries nullify the liberal state’s dependence on numbers and individuation than that the ostensibly democratic incalculability of the supernumeraries paradoxically depends on counting.

The novel is ambivalent about the freedom found in the population since the innumerability of the population only becomes a meaningful political alternative when
contrasted against the numerable individual. In *Bleak House*, the mass can neither be contained in a synecdochic character nor be abstracted through the statistical enumeration upon which the liberal state depends. The existence of the supernumeraries thus suggests the need for a different governmental order that protects the entire population, not just the population that can be individuated and quantified. The novel, however, does not let go of the individual altogether. Instead, *Bleak House* shows how the population can only be accessed, however imperfectly through the individual, who operates as a conduit to the population. As Foucault asserts, in a biopolitical regime, “individuals … are no longer pertinent as the objective, but simply as the instrument, relay, or condition for obtaining something at the level of the population” (*Security* 42). And yet what *Bleak House* comprehends that Foucault does not is how the individual can still obscure the population even as he serves as an “instrument” to it. This paradox is most obvious in the relationship between Jo, the young crossing sweeper, and the poor masses of which he is a part. Throughout the novel, Jo represents the poor as the only distinguishable character from the slums. And yet it is only when he dies that we realize that there were others like him hovering in the shadows of the text. At the moment of Jo’s death, the novel evacuates the impersonal narrator sweeps in to transform the individual tragedy into a social critique. Jo is in the middle of reciting the Lord’s Prayer when the narrator intrudes to announce the boy’s premature demise: “Dead, your Majesty, Dead, my lords and gentlemen, Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us, every day” (734). With this interruption, the narrator capitalizes on Jo’s death to condemn the nation’s moral institutions—the Crown, Parliament, the Church, and the middle class—
for their indirect killing of Jo and those like him. Only by sacrificing Jo does the narrative make the rest of those who are “dying thus around us, every day” comprehensible. Though Jo represents and belongs to the population, the population becomes most tangible when Jo vanishes from the text. The novel uses Jo to render the mass intelligible, but the novel also renounces Jo to focus on the mass. While, in some ways, Jo acts as a representative particular—a synecdochic character—his singularization competes against the supernumerary that he supposedly elucidates.

This antagonistic relationship between the individual and the population proliferates throughout *Bleak House*; individual characters illuminate the mass by disappearing from the text. Nemo, for instance, operates as an individual who clarifies, through death, the connection between the novel’s characters. His demise knits together the novel’s many plots since only after his death is the solicitor Mr. Tulkinghorn able to procure the letters confirming Nemo’s real identity—an identity that reveals how Esther’s narrative relates to Lady Dedlock’s, Lady Dedlock’s to Jo’s, etc. A similar reading applies to Krook, as his spontaneous combustion concludes the seemingly interminable Jarndyce and Jarndyce. Like Jo and Nemo, Krook needs to die for the case to be resolved because the final will is only discovered among his papers after he implodes. These thanotic exchanges show how the population’s legibility paradoxically relies on a method of individuation that undercuts the collective politics that the idea of the population insinuates. In *Bleak House*, a politics of population can never divest itself of a politics and practice of individuation because the latter is necessary for making the former knowable. Accordingly, the population that *Bleak House* creates is one that always
extends beyond the text’s epistemological limits and beyond the realm of possibility for a sustainable political mode.

4.

As *Mary Barton* and *Bleak House* illustrate, the population proves as difficult to know and control for social problem novels as it was for the Victorian state. Because of the population’s complexity, narrative struggles to comprehend it. Similar to how the state turns to statistics and demography in order to transform the population into a set of manageable figures, the novel turns to discourses of counting in order to formulate and narrate the mass. Whereas *Mary Barton* implies that the social whole can become palpable and containable via synecdoche, *Bleak House* depicts a self-negating relationship in which the many becomes legible by deploying and eliminating the one. Despite their differences, both novels suggest the fictionality of the population by demonstrating how the population gains visibility through either a technique of characterization or a narrative logic that sacrifices the one for the group. Gaskell’s and Dickens’s texts elucidate how, for either the state or novels to know and control the mass, they must construct a substitute, fictional mass—one that seems as real as, if not more real than, the actual population living outside their epistemological reach.

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NOTES

1 The Domesday Book, the first form of demographic accounting commissioned by a sovereign, William the Conqueror, was completed in 1086 (Higgs, *Information* 2). The census followed a long line of state information collection, including the practice of political arithmetic beginning in the 1660s, the predecessor to nineteenth-century statistics. See Higgs, *Information* 28–63 for early modern state information gathering and Porter 18–23 for political arithmetic. See also Glass 13–6 to learn more about the inaccuracies and limitations of early attempts at demographic reckoning.

2 See, for example, Plotz; P. Morris; Jaffe, *Affective*; and McWeeny.

3 See, for example, Watt; Armstrong, *Desire*; and D. Miller.
See also Plotz who articulates a literary trajectory in which the figure of the crowd as a legitimate, collective actor in the public sphere becomes subsumed by the figure of the individual as a discrete and private subject.

See Porter 151–92 for nineteenth-century critiques of statistical abstractions. The problem of statistical abstraction is the problem of induction, which David Hume first articulated as a philosophical issue (Poovey, _History_ 197–213). Poovey, however, dates this problem back to as early as the late sixteenth century (_History_ 29–91).

See also Higgs, _Making_ for the many difficulties and problems that arose with administering the census and thus with counting the population.

See Porter 41–55 for more on Quetelet and statistical regularities.

Though I focus on how Darwin anticipates the gap between knowledge and power that biopolitical theory illuminates, Thomas Malthus and Charles Lyell, as many have noted, were foundational to Darwin’s thought in this respect. See Beer 29–31 and 37–40 for Malthus’s and Lyell’s influences on Darwin, respectively.

See Poovey, _History_, esp. 2–7.

See Machin 31–8 for more on Chartism’s rise and fall.

See Jaffe, _Vanishing_ 129–30n14 for an overview of the critical debates about the novel’s double narration.

See Jaffe _Vanishing_ 128–49, wherein she problematizes the “supplementary relationship the split narration of _Bleak House_ suggests, in which one part supplies knowledge the other doesn’t possess” (129).

Several critics comment on _Bleak House_’s use of geological allusions, particularly in the opening paragraph. See, most recently, Zimmerman 144 and Buckland 262–8.
Halfway through Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859–60), the invalid bachelor Mr. Frederick Fairlie condemns married people for placing undue pressure onto their single counterparts. This pressure is not the reproductive pressure calling for bachelors and spinsters to procreate but the demographic pressure stemming from the overabundance of children born in wedlock. In Fairlie’s opinion, single people, such as himself, should be praised for being “too considerate and self-denying to add a family of [their] own to an already overcrowded population” (Collins 352). But, to his dismay, single people are vindictively marked out by [their] married friends, who have no similar consideration and no similar self-denial … Husband and wives talk of the cares of matrimony; and bachelors and spinsters bear them. Take my own case. I considerately remain single; and my poor dear brother, Philip, inconsiderately marries. What does he do when he dies? He leaves his daughter to me. She is a sweet girl. She is also a dreadful responsibility. Why lay her on my shoulders? Because I am bound, in the harmless character of a single man, to relieve my married connexions of all their own troubles … Poor single people! Poor human nature! (352)

Though this complaint could be read as another example of Fairlie’s inflated self-worth, I claim it discloses an underlying biopolitical concern in *The Woman in White* and sensation fiction in general. This concern centers on the family and its role in the increase and maintenance of the population—a role that entangles the family’s private intimacies
with the nation-state’s investment in the security and perpetuity of the population. In this chapter, I elaborate on what was a minor point in the previous chapter regarding the place of the family in an age of population. Whereas, with *Bleak House*, I demonstrate how the family, in terms of its role in distributing inheritance, loses its political utility in a demographic era, this chapter demonstrates how the family changes shape in such an era and, in doing so, retains its significance as a reproductive and organizational unit.

As Fairlie articulates, the “cares of matrimony” and the children who result burden not only the husbands and wives who produce those children but also the bachelors and spinsters whose celibacy should excuse them from shouldering any responsibility. The extra bodies, Fairlie insinuates, exert a Malthusian pressure that negatively affects the entire population by upsetting the balance between population growth and the means of subsistence. More children, according to Fairlie, will bring what is “an already overcrowded population” closer to the Malthusian nightmare of overpopulation. His lament, “Poor single people! Poor human nature!” thus captures the dire realities of a population ostensibly doomed to propagate itself to death. And yet *The Woman in White* does not end with the human race in misery because of the unregulated reproduction that Thomas Malthus famously anticipated. On the contrary, it ends with the optimistic birth of a new heir to Limmeridge House, the Fairlie family estate, via Laura, Fairlie’s niece, and her second husband, the art instructor Walter Hartright. Significantly, it is this second marriage that proves fruitful, as opposed to her first marriage to her dead father’s chosen suitor, Sir Percival Glyde, who nearly terminates the Fairlie lineage by faking his wife’s death and imprisoning her in a mental asylum before she can sire an heir. Percival, in fact, actively prevents the siring of an heir, as his
purpose in marrying Laura is to pay off his debts by stealing her inheritance, which, per her marriage settlement, would first go to their children if they had any instead of him upon her passing. To ensure the money will be his, Percival never consummates his marriage; Laura alludes to her continued chastity when she confesses to her half-sister Marian Halcombe how her husband rejected her on their honeymoon (261–2). Despite Fairlie’s statement, then, that reckless procreation will lead the population to wretchedness, it is the nongenerative marriage of the gentry that does so instead.

What saves the population and the Fairlies is Laura and Walter’s cross-class marriage, and the success of their union hints at the failure of the aristocratic family, which adheres to a patriarchal kinship system, to guarantee social and demographic stability. This chapter considers how sensation fiction depicts the implications of this failure in the context of the midcentury census, which differed from previous censuses in the greater attention it paid to family structure and dynamics. The midcentury census crucially changed how the population was enumerated. To ensure a more accurate count—as I discussed in chapter 1, the task of counting the population was rife with practical and theoretical difficulties—the midcentury census started to use household schedules in an attempt to garner more accurate and efficient knowledge. Because of these schedules, the midcentury census explicitly imagined the family as a household: a cellular unit focused ideally on the conjugal couple, a male householder and his wife, who occupied a distinct, single-family home with their children and servants (Census 11, 7). As this chapter will show, sensation fiction, particularly Collins’s *The Woman in White* and Ellen Wood’s *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* (1863), pits the household against the aristocratic family; the former emerges as a viable avenue for propagating the population
only after the latter’s decline. The sensation novel reveals how precarious the aristocratic family is both as a model for cultivating the population and as a unit through which members of the population are nurtured and reproduced. Though the aristocratic version of family promises social and demographic continuity via the seemingly reliable practice of primogeniture, the requirements for primogeniture—begetting sons and preserving land—prove incredibly difficult to fulfill. Primogeniture is disrupted in each work. In *The Woman in White*, this disruption arises primarily from the lack of sons while, in *The Shadow of Ashlydyat*, it stems from a broken entail that can no longer bind the family to the estate. By illustrating the inability of the aristocratic model of family to perpetuate itself and its landed lifestyle, sensation fiction makes room for the more modern concept of the household to surface as a better paradigm for demographic reproduction.

Unlike the aristocratic family that narrowly values the propagation of sons for the transmission of property, the household values all of its members since its purpose is, first, to reproduce bodies for population growth and, second, to turn those bodies into productive and reproductive national subjects. The idea of the household thus mimics the democratic possibility of the concept of the population as analyzed in chapter 1. Just as the notion of the population supposedly makes everyone equal because everyone equally counts, the notion of the household makes everyone equal because everyone has the potential to reproduce and contribute to the population. This emphasis on reproduction and productivity turns the household into a concept of particular interest for the British state, as the conjugal and procreative status of the population directly contributes to the nation’s self-perceived superiority. According to the 1861 census report, “While other nations have been cutting up their small plots of land into smaller plots, living unmarried
on life annuities, and reducing the number of their children in various ways, the English people … have married, worked with increasing industry, skillfully struck out into new fields of employment, and peopled cities and colonies with millions of their descendants” (General Report 20). Though, in admonishing other nations for “cutting up their small plots of land,” this statement presumably begins by making a case for the continuance of primogeniture, it veers off to argue for the importance of another model of family where marriage, reproduction, and hard work lead to greater national and imperial payoffs. The report asserts that British industrial, economic, and imperial strength depends on the “increase of families living in the healthy condition of matrimony” (20). But the families who exemplify this condition are not the aristocratic families that Collins and Wood portray as stubbornly refusing to modernize. Such families, to their detriment, cling to the destructive traditions of patrilineal succession. Rather, the families who “liv[e] in the healthy condition of matrimony” are those that the texts represent as embracing the modern form of the household, which allows for a broader understanding of familial and, by extension, demographic and national belonging.

In Collins’s and Wood’s novels, then, the household stands as both the mechanism through which the population perpetuates itself and the model for demographic perpetuity. This duality anticipates, to some extent, Michel Foucault’s articulation of the family in relation to governmentality, the techniques and strategies by which a society is rendered governable. As he explains, in the late eighteenth century, the family transformed from “the chimerical model of good government,” wherein the state controlled its citizens by replicating the care that the father showed to his family, to “the privileged instrument for the government of the population,” wherein the family served
as an access point for the state to the population (“Governmentality” 100). For Foucault, the shift in the concept of the family was part of a larger shift toward an era of governmentality in which decentralized, bureaucratic rule arose in order to respond to the needs of an expanding population. However, as Lauren M. E. Goodlad illustrates, Foucault’s demotion of the family in an age of population does not account for the persistence of a “moral, religious, and familial way” of conceptualizing government in Victorian Britain (20). The British family remained a governmental paradigm even as the growing population demanded a more effective, rational form of governance. This chapter applies Goodlad’s amendment of Foucauldian governmentality so as to argue that changes in family structure also contributed to the Victorian family’s dual role as model and instrument of managing demographic reproduction. This contribution is particularly apparent in sensation fiction given the subgenre’s interest in modernity and the modern nuclear family.³ By exploring the emergence of the modern family contra the deterioration of the aristocratic family, this chapter contends that sensation fiction makes evident the demographic effects of family formation. This novelistic subgenre, I claim, conceives of developments in family formation as part of a biopolitical state project whose aim was not only to encourage the proliferation of the population but also to better understand the intricacies of the population via the reproductive and administrative capacity of the household. The state’s investment in the household was most perceptible in the midcentury census, which utilized the structure of the household to ascertain and influence the demographic makeup of the population. Starting in 1841, census administrators began to use household schedules to obtain demographic information, and,
by 1851, the questions asked by these schedules delved significantly more deeply than earlier censuses into the lives of individuals. As a result, the household became an administrative tool used to glean demographic knowledge, as well as an object of state knowledge in its own right. The census’s dual usage of the household thus demonstrates the state’s assumption about the population—that it was already organized according to households—and the state’s interest in the domestic shape of the population—that it should conform to the conjugal lifestyle associated with the household. In light of the sensation novel’s concern with the modern family, I argue that the subgenre shows how the state deployed the family for biopolitical purposes. Sensation fiction frames the family in terms of the state’s commitment to population management by highlighting the household’s procreative and regulatory potential—a potential made all the more convincing with the image of the dying aristocratic family that such fiction offers as a foil.

In what follows, I will illustrate how the sensation novel conveys the biopolitical implications of family formation by juxtaposing readings of The Woman in White and The Shadow of Ashlydyat with discussions of contemporaneous debates about the census, inheritance law, and land ownership. Beginning with the subgenre’s depiction of the aristocratic family, I will examine how The Woman in White and The Shadow of Ashlydyat connect the diminishing social influence of the Fairlies and Godolphins, the texts’ respective fictional aristocratic families, with concerns about the health of the population. Then, I will show how these texts offer a way out of this waning aristocratic order through a modern, nuclear conception of the family that resembles the notion of the household as described by the midcentury census. Finally, this chapter will conclude by
reflecting on the political repercussions resulting from the rise of the household via a look forward to the 1867 Reform Bill, which expanded the vote with a reconsideration of the value of households and the definition of the householder.

1. Even as Fairlie is more interested in bemoaning his responsibility as his niece’s guardian than in discussing population statistics, his comments about the demographic burden that married people leave behind reflect the condition of the population in the 1850s and ’60s. As I have noted, the population expanded astronomically over the Victorian period due to what modern demographers call a demographic transition, wherein a decline in mortality, caused by agricultural and sanitary improvements, sparked an exponential growth in population starting around 1750 (Hinde 177–8). Having reached over twenty-one million people in 1851, the population of Great Britain nearly doubled since the beginning of the nineteenth century (Census 3, 5). In addition to the fall in mortality, a predominant portion of this growth was owed to a rise in fertility and nuptiality (Hinde 183–8). Although the 1851 census marked the first time that information about the marital status of the population was officially gathered, the writers of the corresponding report argue that “it is to the increase of the marriages and of the births … that we directly owe a large part” of the population explosion (Census 46). Claiming that an improvement in sexual morality, which was encouraged by the passage of the 1753 Marriage Act, inspired a new generation of men and women to take marriage seriously, the report sought to demonstrate that marriage was a key factor not only to Britain’s population boom but also to its national and global prosperity. As the 1851 census report states, the increase of marriages and the population led to “a corresponding
increase in the strength and in the external as well as internal action of the kingdom” (52). In some sense, then, Fairlie is correct to blame husbands and wives for contributing to “an already overcrowded population.” However, whereas Fairlie anticipates an eventual limit to this overcrowding—that Britain cannot sustain an increase in numbers forever—the writers of the report are optimistic about Britain’s future. In contrast to Malthus’s population principle, the writers state that “[f]uture generations of Britons, if they have genius, science, skill, and industry—and if they are more numerous—will necessarily produce more than the country now yields” (54–5). The writers’ confidence in the ingenuity and perpetuity of the British people thus serves as a balm for Fairlie’s Malthusian complaint.

Like the general message of the census report, the overall tenor of The Woman in White differs from Fairlie’s observations. The novel’s concern for the population centers not on the possibility of overcrowding but on what it sees as the dangerous—indeed, self-defeating—marital traditions of the landed class. The aristocracy offers a model of familial perpetuity based on the law of primogeniture that passes land dynastically from male heir to male heir, and this model has been upheld as the ideal to which the rest of the classes should aspire. But, as Collins’s narrative shows, the aristocratic standard hinges on the difficult task of producing sons and the illogical manner of excluding other, namely female, children from inheriting property. This exclusion destabilizes the family’s ownership of the estate and makes the future of the aristocratic family—a future dependent on the family’s rootedness to the land—vulnerable to exogamous individuals who try to infiltrate the line of inheritance. By acting as suitors to daughters who cannot inherit, these individuals open up the possibility of begetting the sons that the previous
generation could not procreate. However, this skipping over of the daughter compromises rather than preserves the aristocratic family. In depicting the difficulties of patrilineal succession, focusing on the requirement that the family produce male heirs, *The Woman in White* dismantles the notion that the aristocratic family provides social and demographic stability. To the text, this version of family is inherently self-destructive due to its reliance on an unsustainable mode of self-perpetuation.

Before any major events in the inheritance plot take place, the novel hints at the failure of that plot to bring a positive resolution to the Fairlies by insinuating how tenuous their hold on their estate has become. The primary indicator of this weakness is the Fairlies’ lack of reproductive fitness. As Anne remarks early in the story, “Mrs Fairlie is dead; and her husband is dead; and their little girl may be married and gone away by this time. I can’t say who lives at Limmeridge now” (Collins 26). With the head of the family deceased and no immediate heir in place, Anne presumes that the family no longer resides at Limmeridge House and hence no longer lays claim to the land, a claim that once ensured the family’s social and political power. The Fairlies’ potential deracination and social decline echo the loss of aristocratic influence that was part and parcel to the rise of the middle class in the early nineteenth century. Anne’s speculation about the Fairlies anticipates what we later realize to be the crisis of inheritance that plagues a family whose estate and numbers are dwindling. In wondering “[i]f any more are left there of that name,” Anne predicts the very actions that Percival will take in order to extinguish the Fairlie lineage so he can abscond with the family’s wealth (26). Though, by refusing his wife’s sexual advances, Percival ensures that no heir will inherit the property before he can steal it, this action is perhaps unnecessary given how biologically
feeble the Fairlie family is. Described as “rather nervous and sensitive,” Laura and her uncle are frail, delicate beings whose constitutions hardly appear sturdy and virile enough to generate and sustain new life (36). Yet because the Fairlies follow a primogenitary model of inheritance, the family’s future hinges on Laura’s, albeit unpromising, prospect of producing the son that her father and uncle could not. With Philip Fairlie gone and Frederick Fairlie a permanent bachelor, it is up to Laura to keep the family alive, for, as Anne foretells, the end of the Fairlies will also spell the end of the social structure that has kept the Fairlies and families like them in power for generations.

Whereas the Fairlies’ inability to produce sons impedes the family’s goal to propagate itself, what stands most in the way of the Fairlies’ survival is their dependence on inheritance law to structure their method of perpetuity. Like most aristocratic families, the Fairlies follow a primogenitary pattern of descent that favors male over female heirs, though, as Randolph Trumbach states, “[i]t is unlikely … that any European aristocracy ever managed to construct complete patrilineages” (17). When men were unavailable, aristocrats were forced to consider the option of female inheritance in order to ensure the continued transmission of land and the continued existence of the aristocratic family as a landed entity. However, the possibility of female inheritance proved so objectionable that laws were developed to prevent its occurrence, even as excluding female heirs meant that the estate could be removed from immediate, biological descendants. As Trumbach writes, “aristocrats might try to bypass female inheritance and tie their estates to their titles as a means of maintaining family continuity, [yet] they might nonetheless be forced by demographic failure to adopt a sister’s son or a son-in-law through intestacy” (17). The desire to keep the estate in male hands was hence occasionally opposed to the desire
to consolidate wealth and status within families. The fact that many aristocrats preferred the estate to go to an unrelated man instead of to a daughter indicates that aristocrats were not really interested in keeping family and property together. On the contrary, they were more interested in patrilineage—an interest that *The Woman in White* reveals is the aristocracy’s Achilles’ heel via Laura’s marriage to Percival.

Though Laura’s father arranges her first marriage, presumably to merge the Fairlies’ and Glydes’ fortune through wedlock, this union ironically strikes the fatal blow to both families. The seeds of this destruction are first planted during the drawing of the marriage settlement, which for Laura concerns two parts of her inheritance: the real property, or land, which she would most likely receive given the improbability of Fairlie leaving an heir, and her personal property, which amounts to 20,000 pounds and will be hers when she comes of age (Collins 149–50). According to Mr. Gilmore, the Fairlie family’s solicitor, the “real knot of the case” is Laura’s 20,000 pounds (151). Gilmore recommends that the money be settled in such a way that Laura receives it as her income for life; then, it should pass onto Percival for life and finally be given to any children if there are any. If the couple has no children, Gilmore suggests that the money should go to whomever Laura chooses. Percival’s lawyer, on the contrary, wants the money to go to his client in such a scenario. While Gilmore stridently advises against this settlement, Fairlie acquiesces to Percival’s wish and, in the process, accuses Gilmore of “hat[ing] rank and family” (161). In this situation, though, Gilmore, who is merely an employee of the family, acts more with the Fairlies’ welfare in mind than Mr. Fairlie. As Gilmore states of himself, not only does he consider Laura to be “a daughter of [his] own,” but his job as the solicitor also compels him to protect the family’s legal interests (156). Yet
Fairlie, by citing the family as his reason for capitulating to Percival, illustrates his ignorance of the intimate relationship between law and family. Fairlie additionally implies that, in favoring Percival, he believes a man unrelated by blood and not yet related by matrimony has a greater claim to the estate than his own niece. In observing patrilineal principles, Fairlie unwittingly facilitates Percival’s later deception that could only occur because of the settlement that Fairlie permits.

The contrast between Gilmore’s and Fairlie’s approaches to Laura’s settlement parallels the contrast between the presumed and actual purpose of the marriage settlement. Also known as the strict settlement, this legal development emerged in the seventeenth century in reaction to the 1540 Statute of Wills. This statute gave landholders the freedom to devise a will that determined who would inherit their estate rather than leave the passage of inheritance to the rules of common law. Put simply, under the statute, parents could bestow their property upon anyone they wished. To restrain the potential damage that could ensue from such freedom, the strict settlement was established in order to limit estate planning to the moment of marriage, at which point a sequence of inheritance could be determined that would have to be followed for generations (Spring 33). While historians traditionally claim that strict settlements encouraged equality, especially in regards to improving daughters’ portions, Eileen Spring argues that the settlement, and inheritance law in general, evolved out of the idea of preventing the bequeathing of land to women. What Spring means is that, although the common law preferred male heirs, this preference was limited since, in common law, “the daughter where there was no son was heir, not her uncle, nor her nephew, nor her male cousin” (9–10). However, because of the strict settlement, “female inheritance was
reduced to less than one-third that to be expected at common law” (16). By allowing people to plan their estates at marriage, the settlement was negotiated when “the aristocratic imperative that demanded descent in the patriline had fullest sway”—when the couple, in other words, believed that the production of a male heir was still possible (18). Any daughter who resulted would probably have had restricted claims to the estate due to what was most likely the patrilineal bias of the settlement created before her birth (18–9). Whereas Gilmore’s support of Laura exemplifies the marriage settlement’s egalitarian potential and its potential to protect the family, Fairlie’s concession to Percival reflects the actual patrilineal practices of the settlement, which prove injurious to the aristocratic family. As The Woman in White depicts, Fairlie lays the groundwork for his family’s ruin by yielding to Percival, the beneficiary of patrilineage, who nearly extinguishes the Fairlie bloodline.

Percival exploits inheritance law’s preference for men in order to abscond with Laura’s fortune and, by doing so, illustrates the aristocracy’s penchant for self-annihilation. Because the marriage settlement favors the husband over the wife, Percival is able to embezzle his wife’s money with the full support of the law. He does so by turning the Fairlies into an extinct family, which is another consequence that the law allows. Inheritance, that is, depends on death to be transmitted. As Count Fosco, Percival’s Italian friend, points out, if Percival wants to settle his debts via Laura’s money, then Percival must come to terms with the fact that Laura must die. “The respectable lawyers who scribble-scrabble your deeds and your wills,” Fosco notes, “look the deaths of living people in the face … Here is your position. If your wife lives, you pay those bills with her signature to the parchment. If your wife dies, you pay them with
her death” (Collins 334). Referencing an earlier, unsuccessful attempt to get Laura to sign over her money so Percival can access her funds during her lifetime, Fosco elucidates the morbid reality of not only Percival’s predicament but also his and Laura’s marriage settlement. In preparing for the possibility of Laura and Percival having no children, the settlement, to an extent, sanctions Laura’s death, enables the termination of the Fairlie line, and eradicates the Fairlies’ connection to their wealth, even as the settlement purports to protect family and estate. Aristocrats, in fact, used this claim of protection in order to justify the settlement’s patrilineal bias. As Trumbach writes, “an aristocratic family could best guarantee its continuing consequence by attempting to construct a patrilineage in which title and land were inherited by the eldest male,” since “allow[ing] women to inherit land or other significant property” meant that the family “had no regard for a family identity that extended over several generations” (42, 46). Preferring men to blood, the settlement helped to normalize the partiality for male heirs under the guise of familial preservation. Female succession thus began to be viewed by the eighteenth century not as “the natural means of continuing the family, but [as] the end of the family, its very dying out” (Spring 19). This notion that men are more suited to perpetuate the family—that women are familial liabilities—is precisely what The Woman in White shows is the aristocratic family’s downfall.

Percival’s attempt to eliminate the women from his life reveals the aristocracy’s dangerous reliance on patrilineal inheritance. While Percival does not actually kill his wife, he figuratively does so by declaring her legally dead in order to switch her identity with that of Anne, Laura’s mentally feeble double. This switch enables Percival to imprison Laura as Anne and to kill Anne as Laura—a scheme that he believes will let
him acquire his wife’s money, as well as eliminate the person whom he thinks holds the key to his ruin. 12 Through Anne, we realize that Percival’s manipulation of Laura’s marriage settlement is not the first time that he has used inheritance law and its preference for male heirs to his advantage. Percival is actually a bastard son; his mother and father were unmarried at the time of his birth, so, upon learning this truth, Percival forged his parents’ marriage certificate in order to claim his father’s baronetcy. Because the rightful heir is a distant relative who is ignorant of his birthright, Percival easily steals the inheritance, as there is “no one to suspect him, and no one to say him nay” (542). Indeed, Percival “took possession, as a matter of course,” which suggests how desperate inheritance law is for a male heir; law is not neutral but rather only appears to be so in its partiality toward men (542). Since the rightful heir is abroad, Percival possibly will never be discovered. Indeed, his discovery would result in the end of the Glydes given that, without an heir, their property would be transferred to the crown or state. 13 Keen to preserve his family legacy and fake title, Percival dies in a fire of his own making, set to the vestry that contains the proof of his bastardry. In his eyes, it is worse to die an unknown, as the man who “never had a name,” than to die a counterfeit aristocrat (541). His death, therefore, illustrates the moral illegitimacy of the aristocracy—it is a system based on the disinheritance of female heirs and of those not privileged or aware enough to be born to such a seat—and the extreme means that the aristocracy will take to retain its false legitimacy. Percival’s tragic plight discloses how the aristocracy is innately suicidal. Its survival depends on the consolidation of wealth and status within select male hands—a selectivity that works against the family’s reproductive capacity by further minimizing the exclusive pool from which heirs are chosen. Via this narrative of
(dis)inheritance, *The Woman in White* depicts the aristocratic family’s failure to sustain and grow the population so as to make room for a different familial model to take over as the favored mode of demographic revivification.

2.

Akin to *The Woman in White*, *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* portrays a waning aristocratic family in order to advocate for a new paradigm of reproducing the population. Whereas Collins’s novel illustrates the aristocratic family’s self-destructive dependence on patrilineage, Wood’s novel conveys its outdated adherence to land ownership, as the Godolphins’ obsession with remaining in their estate marks their way of life as dying and obsolete. Like the Fairlies’ harmful bias for male heirs, the Godolphins’ antiquated understanding of land as property passed down generationally for the steady transmission of power signals how inept the figure of the aristocratic family is at perpetuating a population increasingly uninterested in owning land and unable to own land. As *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* shows, the aristocratic conception of land no longer holds within a contemporary world wherein the value of land has changed and land ownership and political power have begun to decouple. The Godolphins’ fixation on their estate thus turns their presumed privilege as a landed, aristocratic family into a delusional belief about the importance of landedness as markers of social and political status and demographic wellbeing. Wood’s text demonstrates how the decline of the aristocratic family from the once favored segment of the population to the population’s weak link stems from the aristocracy’s persistent observance of an outmoded lifestyle.

The novel hints at the archaism of the aristocratic family with its depiction of the aging population of Prior’s Ash, the small town in which the Godolphins reside. Though
extended lifespans typically denote demographic health, Wood’s narrative illustrates the burden that the aging segments of the population place on their youthful counterparts. In a way similar to *The Woman in White*, *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* gestures toward this burden with a suggestion of overpopulation. As poor Mrs. Bond comments after being nearly run over in the street, “Little matter if ye’d fell over me and killed me … If the one half of us was out of it, there’d be room perhaps for them as was left” (Wood 92). But unlike in Collins’s work, this overcrowding is not the speculated result of nuptiality and fertility. Instead, it is the result of longer lifespans that create an excessive population in which the old grow older rather than die. The falling rate of mortality adds to the pressures of population survival, and the Godolphin family is especially guilty of contributing to those pressures with its aging members. For example, Sir George, the family’s patriarch, is on the brink of his sixty-sixth birthday when the novel opens, and his eldest son Thomas is at the age of forty-three or forty-four (2–3). This attention to age indicates what Nicholas Daly calls the “demographic imagination,” the “[cultural] response to the unprecedented population explosion of the nineteenth century” (*Demographic* 5). Explicit examples of this imagination include novels that “deal with numbers directly,” while more subtle examples include representations of aging and longevity that correspond with the century’s “actuarial realities” (4). In the 1850s and ’60s, the life expectation at birth was around forty-one years, an increase of four years since the late eighteenth century (Woods 305). The Victorian population was hence an aging population, as well as an expanding one. Evident in how Sir George and Thomas both surpass the average life expectancy, we see how the problem of the old, particularly of caring for the old, emerges as a central concern for the novel. The retired gardener Old
Jekyll expresses as much, “wondering always what was going to become of him in his old age” (Wood 167). Worried about being a financial drain on his sons who have wives and children of their own, Jekyll reveals the expense of keeping the old alive. This issue of caring for the old afflicts the Godolphins too but as a question of inheritance, as their aging patriarch keeps the family chained to him even after his death.

Literally and metaphorically old, the Godolphins remain linked to the wishes of people from the past, a link that prevents the family from moving forward into the future. The burden that Sir George places on his family is the burden of keeping the lineage and the estate conjoined. Believing that the Godolphins’ connection to Ashlydyat, their ancestral home, secures their privilege within the community, Sir George insists that the family stay in the home even when events arise that indicate the family should leave. This demand that the Godolphins continue to reside in Ashlydyat originates from the legends surrounding the family and their relationship with the estate. Intimately linked to Prior’s Ash since its founding, the Godolphins have always been known as the “owners of Ashlydyat,” the estate in which generations of Godolphins have lived and died (9). While the home is “not the most consonant to modern taste,” “the Godolphins loved it from its associations and traditions; from the very fact that certain superstitions attached to it. Foolish superstitions, you will be inclined to call them, as contrasted with the enlightenment of these matter-of-fact days” (10). These superstitions focus on the entail of the estate, which was broken, as legend has it, by an evil ancestor, the Wicked Godolphin, who killed his first wife and married another before the first was buried. These actions prompted the Wicked Godolphin’s father-in-law to place “a curse upon the Godolphins’ house for ever” (220). Presumably, this curse led to the loss of Ashlydyat, as
the Wicked Godolphin, following a life of vice with his second wife, cut off the entail and gambled away the estate. Though the estate was eventually recovered, the entail was never renewed. Ashlydyat only remains in the family because of a primogenitary assumption that the current male heir will bequeath it to his first son. Regardless of the family’s historical association with the property, then, no legal contract binds the family to the estate. Rather than being its eternal guardians, the Godolphins are its short-term occupants; their “uncertain tenure” depends on each heir obeying primogeniture and leaving the estate to his first son, who hopefully will leave the estate to his first son (221). Ironically, this contingency makes the Godolphins’ observance of tradition even stronger than it probably would be if they were confident in their ownership of Ashlydyat.

The broken entail uproots the Godolphins, yet they remain at the estate because of an adherence to patrilineal tradition that springs from a fear of what leaving Ashlydyat would bring. The family clings to a landed past that has been destabilized by the actions of a dead ancestor, choosing to live according to a law that has long become irrelevant and justifying that choice through the superstitions that the family tells about itself. As part of the curse, the Godolphins were raised to believe that “the estate is to pass finally away from them” and, when that time comes, “the end of the Godolphins is at hand” (221). What this end means, however, is unclear. As Lady Godolphin accuses her husband, “You hold a superstition that if you were to leave Ashlydyat … some dreadful doom would overtake you. Sir George, I thought we lived in the nineteenth century” (16). None of the Godolphins can articulate what the curse threatens other than that some disaster will strike. And yet none are willing to admit that the curse is not real. The curse holds power even as the family wants to disregard it as mere fantasy. In response to Lady
Godolphin’s accusation, Sir George sheepishly blushes, for “[t]o be suspected of leaning to these superstitions chafed his mind unbearably; he had almost rather be accused of dishonor: not to his own heart would he admit that they might have weight with him” (16). Sir George, though, most stridently of all the Godolphins believes in the curse’s command that they never leave the estate. His younger son, George, also secretly believes in the curse. Despite dismissing it and the shadow that supposedly casts over the estate as “fanciful forms to a vivid imagination,” George later admits to thinking that the shadow portends something about him and what we discover to be his financial troubles (7). Only Thomas comes to terms with the curse’s inexplicability. Speaking of the shadow, Thomas concedes that even as a “rational being[,]” who “live[s] in an enlightened age,” he cannot comprehend the shadow’s presence: “there was the Shadow, visible to his eyes, his senses; but of explanation as to its cause, there was none” (248). The curse and the shadow insinuate that even illogical dogmas can hold sway in the modern Victorian age. And considering that the curse compels the Godolphins “never to quit Ashlydyat”—a decree that the family interprets as patrilineal succession—the curse becomes the excuse for the family’s unwavering observance of primogeniture (17).

By associating primogeniture with the shadow, the text hints at the senselessness of this type of inheritance, regarding it as an archaic superstition that should have no authority in contemporary times. While The Woman in White treats primogeniture as detrimental primarily due to its bias for male heirs, The Shadow of Ashlydyat views it as harmful because of its antiquated model of land ownership. According to Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, “Male heads of landed families thought in dynastic terms, believing the intact estate to be the basis of power and status” (205). This understanding
of land endured in the nineteenth century, as “[o]wnership of landed property remained the greatest source of wealth, power and social honour, the real patrimony and the basis of citizenship” (198). The Godolphins’ insistence to stay at Ashlydyat thus indicates not only their fear of whatever horror leaving the estate would bring but also their more practical fear that abandoning the estate would lead to their social and political decline. As Sir George notes, Ashlydyat is the Godolphins’ “pride, their stronghold, their boast”; it sets them apart from the other residents of Prior’s Ash (Wood 10). In his view, the estate testifies to the family’s grand history—a function that echoes John Ruskin’s idea in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) that the home memorializes the past, standing as record and witness of a bygone era. However, Ashlydyat is not the prize it once was. As it appears, the property is “a poor place at best” (10). The narrator even compares it to a “deformed child” who “a mother loves … because it was ugly” (10). Ashlydyat, then, is as susceptible to decay and age as the Godolphins are—a susceptibility that stands in direct contrast with what Sharon Marcus reminds us is the principle of property ownership that associated the house and land with durability: with “resistance to decomposition, persistence in time, and the transcendence of the corporeal vulnerability and eventual death to which individual owners were subject” (93). Given the decrepit condition of the ancestral home, the novel uses the estate as a sign not of familial endurance but of familial volatility. Ashlydyat’s dilapidated state denotes the family’s social and physical diminishment. Yet by ignoring this state, the Godolphins hang onto the status that the home used to signify, refusing to realize that the property has depreciated into a “cranky old house, full of nothing but passages” (14). This ignorance fuels the family’s deterioration, as the Godolphins are “ridiculed from one end of the
country to the other” because of the “absurd superstition” attached to their estate (248). Their resolve to retain the estate despite its depreciation, therefore, suggests how destructive the aristocratic notion of land ownership is, especially in a period when the practicalities of owning land no longer corroborate with its ideals.

The Godolphins’ conviction in aristocratic land ownership triggers their social regression, as the supposed stability of this type of land ownership gives way to the instability of land value. As Davidoff and Hall explain, while owning land in the nineteenth century continued to be equated with having wealth and power,

the concept of land itself was undergoing change. Resources on and under land such as minerals and timber were being exploited commercially and land as a basis for urban building meant that ground rents were becoming a form of property. Mortgages, extensively used to circumvent the rigidities of entail, were also coming to be regarded as a liquid asset. The very solidity and stability of land could be a disadvantage compared to these more flexible forms of property; for example, in a crisis when land might have to be sold at a loss. (198)

In light of these circumstances, the Godolphins ironically expedite their social descent by adhering to an aristocratic understanding of land. Their refusal to modernize in terms of property parallels their refusal to let go of the superstitions holding their family enslaved to their history. Just as the Godolphins believe themselves still to be cursed by the actions of their wicked ancestor, they too are cursed by their steadfast obedience to patrilineal inheritance as a way to remain connected to the estate. Both superstition and patrilineage keep the family in “a state of thraldom,” as their appeals to land and the actions and
wishes of past relatives prevent the family from moving forward (Wood 16). Unable to accommodate a changing society, the Godolphins—like the Fairlies in *The Woman in White*—stagnate, blindly acquiescing to tradition, while the rest of Prior’s Ash and England evolve. Even as the fantasy of property ownership persisted in the Victorian period, most families rented their homes since “English land remained concentrated in the hands of a very small percentage of proprietors, most of them aristocrats or institutions” (Marcus 108). The discrepancy between fantasy and reality thus instigated a movement for land reform that sought the end of the English leasehold system. Under this system, leases were determined to last for a maximum of ninety-nine years. Accordingly, tenants could not follow the dynastic principle of property ownership set by the aristocracy because tenants could only bequeath a portion of the leaseholds to their heirs (110). Although reformers wanted aristocratic landlords to sell their land, effectively “call[ing] for the completion of the economic shift from a feudal system of land tenure to a capitalist one with a free market in commodified land,” their ultimate goal was to free up land for eventual, absolute ownership, not to “mak[e] land more mobile through potentially endless exchanges” (110). The conservativeness of this goal notwithstanding, the reality in which most of the population leases rather than owns and the push for reform insinuate the inevitable erasure of the Godolphins’ aristocratic lifestyle.

Whereas the novel tends to depict the Godolphins as holding onto the past in regards to the estate, the novel briefly entertains the possibility of the family progressing in its relation to land under Lady Godolphin’s direction. Unwilling to live in Ashlydyat any longer, Lady Godolphin builds a folly with all the modern conveniences that the
ancestral home lacks. After much debate, she convinces her husband to move to the folly and to put Ashlydyat “up in the market for hire” (Wood 17). For a moment, not only do the Godolphins abandon the patrilineage for the matrilineage by following Lady Godolphin to her property, but they also facilitate the capitalist exchange of land by leasing the ancestral home. Through this latter action, the Godolphins begin to conform to the reformers’ wants since allowing the masses the opportunity to rent Ashlydyat aligns with the reformers’ intention to disperse and democratize land ownership. The novel depicts this egalitarian possibility via the estate’s new tenant Mr. Verrall, who is a stranger in Prior’s Ash. His anonymity turns his presence into another example of the Godolphins’ irrelevance. By virtue of occupying the estate, Verrall becomes “one worthy to be courted” and his family becomes “the fashion in the neighbourhood” (17). The Verralls essentially replace the Godolphins simply by residing in Ashlydyat; this easy replacement thus suggests the meaninglessness of aristocratic status and property. Yet this replacement additionally reinvigorates the Godolphins since the leasing of Ashlydyat exposes them to contemporary land usage. Because of Lady Godolphin’s leadership, Ashlydyat turns into a flexible asset, a source of income through rent rather than a depreciating plot that the family stubbornly retains. With female land ownership and land leasing, Lady Godolphin introduces the family to a future sans primogeniture. The Godolphins hence fleetingly become modern landowners who participate in the capitalist circulation of property, a participation that could result in familial continuity since it means that the family has broken away from the past and has left its ancestral home for the contemporary world.
However, this modernization is only temporary, as the Godolphins attempt to reinstate their patrilineal order by returning to Ashlydyat. This attempt unsurprisingly fails due to the impossible tasks of reconnecting land and family and of converting Ashlydyat back into a dynastic estate after it has become an exchangeable commodity. Although Sir George never steps foot in Ashlydyat again before dying, his will tries to reverse his abandonment of the estate and paper over the fragmented lineage. In primogenitary fashion, he bestows Ashlydyat to Thomas and demands that Lady Godolphin place all the items she removed from the estate back “in the old spots where they had formerly stood” (113). The will endeavors to pretend that the Godolphins never left Ashlydyat. But even as the home’s original appearance is restored, the aristocratic family cannot reestablish its former glory. The estate remains rundown, and the family remains old-fashioned. Though he is the new patriarch, Thomas is a copy of the former master, “sett[ling] down in his father’s place: head of the bank, head of all things, as Sir George had been” (114). The family stagnates once more, as Thomas turns into Sir George and the Godolphins attempt to recuperate their old way of life. But with Thomas childless and aging, the old way of life cannot sustain. As the new heir, George will be expected to “settle down to steadiness … to be more as [Thomas has] been” (200). George, unfortunately, is not Thomas; indeed, he is merely a Godolphin in name. While George should be “the fit and proper representative of Ashlydyat,” “his ways were so different from [the Godolphins], that [the estate] would seem to be no longer in the family” when it passes to him (180–1). Whereas this difference could revivify the family as Lady Godolphin did, George’s inheritance of the estate adheres to patrilineal tradition. Similar to the problem of patrilineage in *The Woman in White*, the aristocracy’s need for
male heirs gives the estate to George, who, like the Wicked Godolphin, gambles the property away. This repetition of history demonstrates the aristocracy’s inability to adapt to the future—one in which the patrilineal transmission of property no longer exists as the favored model for the population. Luckily enough, the Godolphins’ inability to adapt harms only them, not the population in general; Prior’s Ash continues to subsist even when the Godolphins do not. The isolation of this failure, therefore, indicates the insignificance of the aristocratic family to the population at large, insinuating that a new paradigm has already taken over as the preferred mode of demographic organization and procreation.

3. 

*The Woman in White* and *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* both portray deteriorating aristocratic families who serve as poor models for population reproduction given their literal inability to persist and reproduce. While Collins’s novel provides a portrait of the self-annihilating aristocratic family through the Fairlies, whose dependence on male heirs threatens familial security, Wood’s novel illustrates the obsolescence of the aristocratic family through the Godolphins’ archaic commitment to land ownership. In these works, the aristocratic family fails to preserve the population because its observance of patrilineal inheritance turns the family into a nongenerative, outdated entity. Hence, the concept of the aristocratic family is incompatible with the continuance and maintenance of the population. In depicting this incompatibility, sensation fiction makes room for another type of family to emerge that is more conducive to the needs of demographic perpetuity.
This other family resembles the figure of the household, which became increasingly important in the midcentury for the collection of demographic information and as an object of demographic inquiry. As Edward Higgs explains, the 1841 census marked the beginning of modern census taking, and contributing to this modern age was the introduction of the household schedule, which put the onus of demographic enumeration onto individual families (*Making* 7, 10). Though the household for the census was not equivalent to the family, the census used the terms interchangeably, even as it tried to differentiate them. The 1851 census report, for example, defines the family capactively, not as “the children of one parent but as the persons under one head; who is the occupier of the house, the householder, master, husband, or father, while the other members of the family are the wife, children, servants, relatives, visitors, and persons constantly or accidentally in the house” (*Census* 6). While this report acknowledges that “family” could imply the conjugal group of husband, wife, and children, the report claims that, “in its essential sense,” a family consists of any combination of people living in the same dwelling; it could even consist of a single individual (5–6). What I call the demographic family—the impersonal, administrative household held together by proximity and economics—was, therefore, not limited to the conjugal family—the affective, biological, and marital unit of immediate kin. But despite this attempt to depersonalize and broaden the category of the family, the family, according to the writers of the census report, remained preferably “composed of husband, wife, children, and servants” (35). The findings of the 1851 census more or less reflected this preference. As the first census in which the marital condition of the population and the relation between household members was recorded, the 1851 census found that the majority of
households consisted of a married couple at its center: about 62% of households were headed by husbands and wives and approximately two-thirds of men and half of women over the age of twenty were married (11, 36). The report, moreover, concludes that the population’s “existence, increase, and diffusion, as well as manners, character, happiness, and freedom, intimately depend” on marriage (36). The importance of marriage to the maintenance and perpetuity of the population, alongside the preponderance of marriage within the population, thus transformed the family, particularly the conjugal family, into a critical tool for the state.

As articulated by the midcentury census, the family was a multifaceted unit: administrative and impersonal, while also conjugal and reproductive, though decidedly not dynastic and patrilineal like the family structure of the Fairlies and Godolphins. If the census provides any indication, the population was divided into distinct households—or at least was imagined as such—whose separation from each other contrasted with the sprawling, multigenerational kinship network of the aristocratic family. Whereas the paradigmatic aristocratic family had stable ownership of its ancestral home in which generations of the same family cycled in and out, the demographic family, or the household, was unattached to the structure in which its members resided; multiple households could live in a single house, building, or tenement. Furthermore, the members that constituted the household were highly variable and contingent. For the census, the only requirements for someone to be recorded as belonging to a household were for that person to be present in the house on census night and for the householder to identify that person on the household schedule (Higgs, Making 57). Consequently, the household was an unstable entity. Its parameters and content were constantly changing
and difficult to standardize and pin down. And yet the household was the preferred unit of the census because its ambiguity offered a way for every individual to belong to a household and, accordingly, to be counted as part of the population. Though the ideal household emphasized marriage and familial belonging, the requirements for belonging to a conjugal family were less stringent than those for belonging to an aristocratic family. Pretty much anyone could get married and have children, but not every member of the aristocratic family counted as fully belonging because he or she could not inherit. The household provided a way for every person in the population to have demographic and familial value—to count toward the increase of the population, which, for the 1861 census report, directly reflected and contributed to “the prosperity of the country.”

In *The Woman in White*, the idea of the household becomes plausible after Laura is declared dead—a declaration that dismantles the aristocratic family, as it ostensibly marks the end of the Fairlie lineage and transfers Laura’s inheritance to Percival per the rules of her marriage settlement. No longer a Fairlie “[i]n the eye of reason and of law, in the estimation of relatives and friends, according to every received formality of civilised society,” the supposedly dead Laura is liberated from the patrilineage that once dictated who she could marry and who could control what should have been her birthright (Collins 421). Her new anonymity affords her a level of freedom that her aristocratic status did not by transforming her into just another individual within the population. As Walter states, Laura, Marian, and he are now living under pseudonyms in a “populous and a poor neighborhood” where they “are numbered no longer with the people whose lives are open and known” (420). However, despite being “obscure” and “unnoticed,” the three of them are still “numbered” in the sense that they form a recognizable household.
They live within the same lodging (two floors of a leased house), share finances (Marian and Walter pool together their income), and divide labor (Marian stays at home to care for Laura and the house, while Walter works as a wood engraver) (420, 441). Because they constitute a household, they would not only be enumerated as part of the population via the census but also participate in that enumeration via the household schedule. Even as their recorded names would not correspond with their real names, Walter, Laura, and Marian continue to count toward the population as numerable, if not identifiable, bodies. While Laura’s presumed death and disinheritance strip her of aristocratic belonging—a belonging that has always been tenuous given her gender—she continues to belong to a household and, by extension, to the population.

Laura’s countability within the household restores her legal identity since, in remaining a countable member of the population, she can regain the state recognition she lost when she was registered as legally dead. The novel takes great pains to prove Laura’s legal death by presenting readers with multiple records of her demise. But even with these statements of death, Laura is physically alive: “Alive in poverty and in hiding. Alive, with the poor drawing-master to fight her battle, and to win the way back for her to her place in the world of living beings” (421). The strangeness of being physically alive yet “socially, morally, legally—dead” implies that being merely living is not enough to qualify as being alive (421). Though Laura is not quite the “bare life” that Giorgio Agamben defines as someone “who may be killed and yet not sacrificed” by virtue of being excluded from the juridical order, Agamben’s distinction between bare life and political life helps to clarify Laura’s precarious position as what Marian calls the “dead-alive” (Agamben 8; Collins 421). For the novel, there is a critical difference between the
“dead-alive” and a living being; there is also a critical difference between Laura as a living being and Laura as Laura Fairlie. While the remainder of the text depicts Walter reestablishing Laura as Laura Fairlie, a large part of his success relies on Laura’s transition from being “dead-alive” to being a recognizable “living being.” This transition, I contend, occurs through her position in the household. Walter’s claim that he seeks to reinstate “her place in the world of living beings” has to do less with convincing others of Laura’s identity than with finding a way for Laura to become recognized as belonging to “the world of living beings,” or to the population. Her position within a household makes her “alive,” not so much in the corporeal sense but in the legal-demographic sense as a member of the population. The census only counts those considered alive—it is the General Register Office that keeps records of those who are dead—and the census does so through the administrative mechanism of the household. As a member of a household, Laura is also a member of the population; she is countable and thus recognizable by the state. Her demographic identity, therefore, paves the way for her to recuperate her identity as Laura Fairlie.

Laura’s readmission to the Fairlie family through the demographic household suggests that the aristocratic family no longer serves as the privileged mode of population reproduction. Fairlie only recognizes Laura again as his niece after she and Walter marry—in other words, after Walter, Laura, and Marian transform their impromptu household into an ideal, conjugal one. Marian is integral to initiating this transformation. As she asserts, “There must be a change in our little household, Walter; we cannot go on much longer as we are now” (Collins 572). With this comment, Marian alludes to the idea that Walter, as Laura’s husband, can better “publicly establish[] the fact of Laura’s
existence” since marriage would give her a legal identity as Walter’s wife (573). This marriage, though, unlike her previous one to Percival, creates a new household, as Laura and Walter’s union is one of choice, not of convenience set up by her dead father. By marrying Walter, Laura leaves the Fairlies in a way that she did not when she married Percival. She turns away from the aristocratic family—this time out of her own decision instead of being expelled by the dictates of patrilineage—in order to produce a conjugal household with Walter.\(^{19}\) Given that this second marriage is reproductive, we see how the novel positions the household as the source of demographic perpetuity, as it is Laura and Walter’s conjugal household that replaces the aristocratic family as the new gentry—a replacement that is apparent in Fairlie naming Laura and Walter’s son his new heir. By the novel’s end, the household subsumes the aristocratic family, for in placing the household of Walter, Laura, their son, and Marian in the seat of power, the text signals the beginning of an alternative order. This order uses the more flexible, inclusive household as the model of population reproduction, as opposed to the exclusive, nongenerative aristocratic family. As the novel insists, the presence of this household in Limmeridge House is not a “refer[ence] to the past” but a “more interesting … refer[ence] to the future,” in which social value and membership depend on demographic recognition and countability rather than the parameters of patrilineal succession (642–3).

Though *The Shadow of Ashlydyat* similarly concludes with the household triumphing over the aristocratic family, it does not tie its vision of the household to a reinstatement of dynastic inheritance, even if that reinstatement is a revised one, as in *The Woman in White*. On the contrary, in Wood’s text, the household prevails over the aristocratic family because it abandons inheritance altogether as a form of property
transmission in favor of capitalist exchange. The model of the aristocratic family completely breaks down in the novel when the estate fully becomes a commodity. Prompting this commodification is George’s financial ruin. Caught in an investment scheme, George embezzles money from the Godolphins’ banking house in order to settle his debts—an action that eventually forces him to declare the bank insolvent. This declaration results in the bank liquidating its assets, which include Ashlydyat. As Thomas tells Lord Averil, “Any stranger who bids most will get Ashlydyat,” indicating that the estate is no longer the Godolphins’ ancestral home but a commodity to be bought by anyone who has the means to acquire it (Wood 373–4). Akin to when the Godolphins momentarily rent the house when they move to the folly, the forced sale of Ashlydyat severs the relationship between the aristocratic family and the estate. This severance demonstrates the failure of the aristocratic family, given its reliance on the patrilineal succession of property, to serve as a model for the continuance of the population. In addition to forfeiting Ashlydyat, the Godolphins sell all they own in order to accord with bankruptcy law. “[A]ll had gone,” the narrator states, “houses, lands, money, furniture, personal belongings” (377). Everything has become “public property. Men would walk in and ticket all the things, apportion them their place in the catalogue, their order in the days of sale; and the public would crowd in” (382). In having to place everything on the market, the Godolphins open up their once exclusive estate and are now just another family in the mass. With their private things and spaces deemed public, the population “crowd[s] in” to reclaim the family as its own. The Godolphins are no longer apart from but a part of the population. The commodification of their property, which separates them from their land, thus demotes the Godolphins from their previous position as Prior’s
Ash’s aristocrats to their new position as “tenants on sufferance: the things remained, but their right in them had passed away” (387).

Propertyless, the Godolphins transform from a landed aristocratic family to an unlanded household. Like the majority of the population, they are short-term occupiers of property rather than long-term, hereditary owners—a switch that emphasizes flexibility over landedness as a marker of population stability. Because the household is not tethered to property but stands as an independent unit, it is more adaptable to changes that affect the population. All the Godolphins’ wealth was tied to the banking house and Ashlydyat; thus, they suffered egregiously for George’s financial failures. For the family, its bankruptcy is on par with the extermination of the lineage. Without Ashlydyat, the Godolphins are effectively no longer the Godolphins, given how prominently they define their familial identity through the estate. And while the residents of Prior’s Ash were certainly affected by the Godolphins’ fall, particularly in regards to the bank shutting down, with time, “[t]he great crash … was beginning to be forgotten as a thing of the past” (394). As the narrator notes, “There were no startling changes to be recorded,” except for the bank turning into an ironmongery (394). Overall, then, Prior’s Ash is unaffected by the loss of the Godolphins, which signals the resilience of the population to absorb such setbacks. Since the population, according to the census, consists of numerous households, the disappearance of the Godolphins is merely the disappearance of one of many households who contribute to demographic perpetuity, as opposed to what under the aristocratic model would have been the disappearance of the sole family that directs how the population continues.
Although, in a way, the Godolphins return to Ashlydyat through Celia, one of Sir George’s daughters, her return to the estate is predicated on it remaining a commodity and on the creation of a conjugal household with her husband Lord Averil. Averil buys the property from Thomas in order for Ashlydyat to be “disposed of privately” before it can officially enter the mass market (374). But even with this provision, Ashlydyat only gets restored to the Godolphins as a commodity instead of as a hereditary estate. This distinction proves that the aristocratic model of land ownership has given way to the modern concept of land as an exchangeable asset; Ashlydyat is now something to be bought and sold rather than bequeathed patrilineally. Via Celia and Averil, the Godolphins reoccupy Ashlydyat, this time as a household that happens to be able to afford the estate, not as the new heirs of the same family that has lived in the estate for generations. The emphasis on the newness of Celia and Averil’s ownership corresponds to the fresh vision for the population that their union offers. As Averil assures Celia, “we will drive away all the ghostly superstitions, and that ominous Shadow,” and, indeed, upon settling into Ashlydyat, the shadow that once haunted the Godolphins disappears (376). The curse has been lifted, as the property becomes renewed under the direction of this alternative household. Averil literally tears out the old grounds in order to rebuild the property anew. Promising Cecil that “[t]here may be children here some time,” Averil replaces the Dark Plain, the site where the Wicked Godolphin is rumored to have buried his first wife, with a garden, playground, and summerhouse (376). Celia and Averil reinvigorate Ashlydyat, converting it from a place of archaism and superstition into a place of possibility and reinvention. Their household becomes the source of futurity for the estate and, accordingly, for the population.
4.

Through readings of *The Woman in White* and *The Shadow of Ashlydyat*, this chapter shows how sensation fiction elucidates the biopolitical effects of family formation in the nineteenth century. By connecting the failure of the aristocratic family to reproduce itself with concerns about the health and continuance of the population, these texts make room for a different type of family, the household, to emerge as a more viable avenue for demographic perpetuation. While this subgenre figures the aristocratic family as nongenerative and archaic given its obsession with patrilineal inheritance—an obsession that depends on the production of male heirs and the hereditary transmission of land—the sensation novel conceives of the household as procreative and innovative given the household’s emphasis on marriage and fertility, as well as its central role in modern demography as articulated by the midcentury census. The household offers an alternative paradigm for the increase and maintenance of the population by redefining familial and demographic belonging. Rather than limiting familial membership to first sons and tying the family to a dated understanding of land ownership, the concept of the household enables any number of people to qualify as a family and releases the idea of the family from the ancestral home. This reimagining of the family as a capacious yet nucleated household transforms the once exclusive aristocratic notion of family into an inclusive entity that contributes to the cultivation of the population. Sensation fiction makes apparent the household’s privileged position within the population by contrasting it with the nonreproductive and obsolete aristocratic family.

If we consider the sensation novel as a subgenre portraying the rise of the household, then it is also possible to consider the sensation novel as a subgenre connected
to the midcentury debates leading up to the 1867 Reform Bill.\textsuperscript{20} Considering that a large part of these debates were about redefining which householders qualified for the vote, we can see how the sensation novel’s elevation of the unlanded household within the population can be interpreted as a radical show of support for democratic expansion. In giving the vote to working-class men, the Second Reform Bill further decoupled citizenship from property ownership—a decoupling that began with the First Reform Bill that enfranchised middle-class men in 1832. And while, by loosening property requirements, the Second Reform Bill certainly moved Britain closer toward universal suffrage, it still relied on property to differentiate between the respectable working-class man, newly considered to be worthy of the vote, and the pauper. Whereas the former was thought to be a “regularly employed, rate-paying working man (possessed of a house, a wife, children, furniture, and the habit of obeying the law),” the latter was viewed as part of the “residuum which was ‘intemperate,’ ‘profligate’ and ‘naturally incapable’” (Harris 74–5). As Keith McClelland explains, by “[r]estricting the vote by residence and rating qualifications,” reformers “exclude[d] the mass of the poor and poorer sections of the working class” (97). Despite reformers advocating for household suffrage, then—for all household heads to have the right to vote—the exclusiveness of the household as denoted by reform debates belied the inclusiveness of the household as defined by the census and as depicted in sensation fiction. Although, like sensation fiction, reformers deployed the concept of the household in order to promote a more inclusive politics wherein simply belonging to a household qualifies one for certain privileges, the reformers’ concept of the household retained a degree of exclusivity that sensation fiction attempted to strip the household of in its own narration of the relation between family and population. In the
sensation novel, demographic belonging corresponds with social and political belonging, a correspondence that does not exist in the political atmosphere of the nineteenth century. Sensation fiction thus holds out hope for a more egalitarian world even as it illuminates the contradictions that persist around the household as a social, political, and demographic unit.

NOTES

1 See Malthus esp. 14–5.
2 For another critic who links the sensation novel with ideas of population, see Steinlight, who argues against disciplinary readings of the subgenre in order to show how sensation fiction is actually about the impossibility of demographic containment (“Why”). My focus is less on the possibility or impossibility of containment than on how the state utilized and manipulated the concept of the family in order to effect demographic management.
3 A common critique of the sensation novel is that it is about modern life and the modern, middle-class home, as opposed to its antecedents, such as the gothic novel that distances itself from its contemporary moment by setting its plot back in a distant historical past. See, for instance, Hughes 6–8 and Brantlinger 9. See also Daly, Sensation and Daly, Literature for arguments that connect the sensation genre to political and technological modernity, respectively.
4 See Higgs, Making 1–17 for an overview of the development of the census in the nineteenth century.
5 The 1753 Marriage Act tried to end common law and clandestine marriages by requiring that marriage ceremonies take place in a church after the publishing of banns or the procurement of a license. In contending that this act helped to expand the population, the writers of the 1851 census report argue against critics of the act who believed the act would discourage marriage and decrease population (Census 49).
6 See Trumbach 41 for the model of familial perpetuity offered by the aristocratic family; Davidoff and Hall 19–20 for the middle class’s continued privileging of property; and Marcus 93, 110 for the persistent idealization of land ownership and inheritance.
7 See Davidoff and Hall 19–20, 198 for the link between aristocratic land ownership and social and political power.
8 See also Ceraldi 185–8, who reads the Fairlie’s biological weakness as evident of the English’s evolutionary degeneracy.
9 Under the strict settlement, a man could establish a line of inheritance for almost three generations, first by “sett[ling] his estates on himself for life, then on his living heir and on any other living persons, and finally for a period of 21 years beyond the death of his heir or the last living person … named in the settlement. This meant that he had limited what could be done with his land for his lifetime and for that of his heir, and until his unborn grandson came of age” (Trumbach 72–3).
See Spring 9, 124 for how historians traditionally have interpreted the strict settlement.

See Spring 17–9 and 138–9 for more on how the strict settlement facilitated patrilineal principles of inheritance.

While Percival does not actually kill Anne—she dies unexpectedly—he would have allowed Fosco to do so as part of his plan to steal Laura’s inheritance if Anne did not die on her own (Collins 628).

“Escheat” is the common law doctrine that transfers the property of a person who dies without heirs to the crown or state. See Baker 274–5 for the feudal origins of this doctrine.

See Higgs, *Making* 57–62 for the various ways in which different censuses defined the household and family and the relation between these concepts.

The 1851 census report states that, though the ideal household was composed of husband, wife, children, and servants, the household was most commonly composed of husband, wife, and children (*Census* 11, 35).

I calculated the figure that 62% of households were headed by husbands and wives by taking numbers from the 1851 census report’s analysis of fourteen subdistricts. In these fourteen subdistricts, which are unspecified by the report, there were 67,609 families, or households, in total and 41,916 of these families were “natural families,” or had household heads consisting of husbands and wives (*Census* 11).

The census returns make clear that a house is not the same as a household, though there is ambiguity in terms of what constitutes a house or household. See Higgs, *Making* 48–56 for the various attempts by different censuses to define a house. See n14 for the attempts to define a household.

See Michie 57–8 on the reorientation that is expected after marriage for one to move one’s identity away from one’s birth family and toward one’s new conjugal family.

Other critics who also read the sensation novel as contributing to debates over social and parliamentary reform in the 1850s and 1860s include Loesberg and Daly, *Sensation*. However, rather than focusing on how the sensation novel uses the image of the household to evoke these debates, Loesberg and Daly focus, respectively, on images of class mixing and crowds.
Like most slum novels, George Gissing’s *The Nether World* (1889) and Arthur Morrison’s *A Child of the Jago* (1896) are packed with images of London’s teeming streets, crumbling tenements, and overstuffed rookeries. In contrast to the middle-class households and houses of England’s provincial towns, which, as I discussed in the previous chapter, order and reproduce the population, the city’s roads and buildings seemingly can neither contain nor direct the bodies that live there. The slums are particularly marked by such unrestraint. As described in *The Nether World*, the slums’ “highways and byways” are filled with toilers, of young and old, of male and female. Forth they streamed from factories and workrooms … Along the main thoroughfares the wheeltrack was clangorous; every omnibus that clattered by was heavily laden with passengers; tarpaulins gleamed over the knees of those who sat outside … There was a ceaseless scattering of mud; there were blocks in the traffic; attended with rough jest or angry curse; there was jostling on the crowded pavement. (Gissing 10)

According to texts like *The Nether World*, London slums are crammed to the brink with swarming bodies. Because of their sheer numbers, slum dwellers nearly obliterate the city in which they work and reside. The “ceaseless scattering of mud” is evidence of how the throngs of “toilers” quite literally destabilize and destroy their surroundings, as their movements demolish and disturb the physical environment. The combined weight of the workers who “stream[]” out into the streets pushes to the limit the capacities of the wheel
track, omnibus, and pavement to hold their respective passengers and pedestrians in place. In the above passage, the potential annihilation of the slum hints at a possible future when its inhabitants may need to move into other neighborhoods where one would usually not find them. Bursting with life, the chaotic world of the slum, at least as slum fiction depicts it, is both a hazard to itself and to more reputable areas such as the more affluent and genteel West End. By threatening to spill out of their expected locales and into richer districts, the poor masses appear to endanger those places that, while geographically proximate, are figured as wholly opposite in social and moral terms. The slums supposedly undermine the spatial order that the modern city represents, an order based on cleanliness, visibility, and linearity where liberal individuals—not hordes of wearied workers—are free to circulate in economic and civic exchange.

Yet even as The Nether World and A Child of the Jago portray the slums as potentially erupting and expanding, these texts do not conclude with the collapse of social and geographic boundaries, after which all of London becomes infested with squalor. Nor do they conclude with the eradication of the slums even though they gesture toward a day when the areas where these texts are set will be vacated and razed to the ground. The Nether World, for instance, hints at the inevitability of slum clearance when its narrator marvels at how the archway in St. John’s Square has yet to be “swept away, in obedience to the great law of traffic and the spirit of the time” (51). And in A Child of the Jago, the “gradual removal” of the text’s East End slum—based on the real Old Nichol slum cleared in the 1890s by the London County Council—becomes a crucial part of the plot (Morrison 135). Despite these hints at a future without slums, these novels ultimately reinforce the spatial status quo. Not only do slums remain tied to the city, but slum
dwellers also remain tied to these indigent areas as any attempt to escape—whether through physical departure or a rise in class, both are often linked—is quelled by narrative’s end.

The continuance of the slums thus raises questions about this fiction’s political intention: what action, if any, do slum novels call for in order to target the problem after which they are named? While scholars typically conceive of this novelistic subgenre as the late-century version of the social problem or industrial novel, the subgenre analyzed in chapter 1, slum novels—specifically, Gissing’s and Morrison’s—do not carry the same hope for social unification as their midcentury predecessors. Often disparaged, as I have noted, for turning away from a more progressive resolution to the inequities it narrates, the social problem novel, for many critics, shortchanges its radical opening in order to conclude neatly in sympathetic understanding and marital bliss. Whereas The Nether World and A Child of the Jago do not take that domestic turn for which earlier social problem novels are criticized, neither do they imagine the possibility of social upheaval that some readers may want. Declining to offer a solution for the sordid conditions that it portrays, slum fiction ends fatally, unable to envision a world without slums: a world that is harmed by such spaces and yet, as I will demonstrate here, is curiously stable in spite or even because of them.

In depicting the slums as a stable feature of urban life, slum novels, I argue, reveal that the greater issue jeopardizing the population is not the slums themselves but a social system that depends on slums to serve as repositories for the demographic detritus it creates and controls. This chapter analyzes slum fiction’s inability to conceive of an escape from the slums—in terms of the individual characters who fail to leave and a
society that fails to eliminate destitute areas—as a comment on the inadequacy of existing attempts to revive decrepit districts, as well as a critique of the Victorians’ reliance on a social system that exploits a dying yet multiplying population. The British urban population increased significantly over the nineteenth century. By 1851, more people lived in urban places than rural ones, and, by 1901, the urban population was almost quadruple that of the rural population (Woods 303–4 and 311). And yet despite or rather because of this increase, the urban population suffered a higher mortality rate and a lower life expectancy than the rural population, even as mortality dropped and life expectancy increased overall across the century (Hinde 195–6).

Nineteenth-century attempts to alleviate poverty and its related pressures usually took the form of sanitary developments, street improvement schemes, better urban housing, and suburban expansion. While these attempts overtly focused on the poor’s physical and moral health, they often aggravated the problems of the poor, particularly the problem of overcrowding, which housing reform presumably addressed. Instead of building more homes to accommodate the urban mass, housing legislation ironically made it easier to demolish homes. Without places to live, more and more people became seemingly redundant, as the very policies passed to house them actually evicted them. Moreover, when homes were constructed, they were often too expensive or far away from the city center to be useful. These new residences tended to implement strict policies that deterred the poor from renting. As Anthony S. Wohl explains, rules demanding prompt or advanced payment of rent, restrictions against subletting, and the stringent screening of applicants prevented the most destitute from moving in.
Overcrowding, therefore, intensified in the slums, along with waste accumulation, economic competition, hunger, disease, and crime (Wohl 141–78).

Ostensibly, then, the slums were an irresolvable biopolitical disaster, as they could not be removed without further exposing residents to the conditions that their clearance was supposed to ameliorate. For Wohl, this double bind resulted from the Victorians’ reluctance to renounce the capitalist system that produced poverty and its associated ills (310–41). As he argues, Victorians were hesitant to admit that, without state intervention, the free economy could not resolve the housing crisis since it was responsible for polarizing the poor and the rich. I expand on Wohl’s insight and maintain that this economic polarization was also a geographic one. By keeping the rich and poor physically and socially separate, the state, as it was depicted in novels, was able to manage and contain those groups that it considered most vulnerable and dangerous within spaces similarly declared as beyond repair. As The Nether World and A Child of the Jago illustrate, securing the population required creating a demographic excess that had to be delimited but not expunged since the existence of this excess was advantageous for the larger population it supposedly weakened.

Gissing’s and Morrison’s texts reveal how the various social movements aimed at dispersing the poor and freeing them from the slums further tied the working class to devastated locales so as to prevent them from contaminating the population with the physical and moral maladies that they and their neighborhoods represent. Though these movements aimed to relieve the poor, they were more successful at controlling the poor’s location, not only regulating the spaces in which the impoverished lived but also implicitly dictating where they lived. Slum fiction, as this chapter will demonstrate,
illuminates the restrictive consequences of housing legislation: how it was better, perhaps unintentionally, at localizing and confining the poor within certain neighborhoods than at uplifting and helping them per its stated objective. In narrating this effect, slum novels, I assert, expose the biopolitical contours of late-century housing reform. By concentrating the poor even more within congested areas, such reform aggravated the problems of poverty and overcrowding while also making the poor trackable and manageable. As Gissing’s and Morrison’s texts show, the isolation of the poor within the slums—however inadvertently exacerbated by housing reform—served a biopolitical purpose in preventing this most precarious demographic from threatening, enfeebling, and encroaching upon the rest of the population.

This idea of demographic control via the geographic space of the slums echoes the environmental and bodily containment advocated by medical professionals and sanitary reformers who mapped the city’s health conditions. Since the early nineteenth century, the poor and the places that they inhabited were viewed as the moral and physical filth imperiling the British nation and population. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White demonstrate, the metonymic associations among the slums, slum dwellers, and sewage in both Victorian novels and reformist texts were “constantly elided with and displaced by a metaphoric language in which filth stands in for the slum-dweller” (131). To protect against this filth, slum dwellers had to be observed and their bodies “penetrate[d] and subjugate[d]” so as to return to a state of cleanliness (126). By midcentury, this comparison to filth had evolved, as the city and its inhabitants were “increasingly thematized as disease” (Gilbert, Mapping xii). Pamela K. Gilbert explains how, in the Victorian period, “[t]he body becomes both the sign and the metaphor of the
nation, individual bodies and their ills, as representatives of classes and populations, become indices of the condition of that less tangible entity, the social body” (Mapping 4).

The Victorian nation, then, was not only figured as a body but also thought to be inextricable from the bodies of its citizens, transforming racial and demographic health into a marker of national health. With the nation biologized as the social body and the city pathologized as disease, health, Gilbert argues, came to be associated with “a careful mapping and containment of the city’s (and citydwellers’) ‘guts’” (xii). Medical and sanitary maps, in pinpointing those spaces most susceptible to disease, helped to diagnose the city and, through the act of representing those spaces, helped to contain and stabilize them.

Like these maps that associated impoverished locales with disease, slum fiction associated those areas with a subset of the population imagined to be the poorest, weakest, and most criminal of the British stock. By linking geography to demography, slum novels were not so much interested in diagnosing those areas with and curing their residents of overcrowding and poverty but in revealing how those residents were confined and how this confinement worked in conjunction with the biopolitical goal of preserving the more palatable sections of the population. Via cartographic language, slum novels illustrate how the attempts by housing reformers to disarticulate population from place actually intensified the poor’s geographic identification with the slums. In so doing, these attempts, as slum fiction shows, preserved the slums as a means for locating and segregating particular groups for the sake of protecting the population as a whole.

In what follows, I will illustrate how slum fiction portrays the biopolitical implications of housing reform by juxtaposing readings of The Nether World and A Child
of the Jago with discussions of contemporaneous debates about urban mapping and slum clearance. Beginning with the subgenre’s use of cartographic language, I will examine how The Nether World offers two conflicting visions of the city—one as overcrowded and ungovernable, the other as potentially legible and abstractable. Then, I will show how Gissing’s text, in concluding that the slum cannot be made manageable via cartographic abstraction, alternatively demonstrates how biopolitical containment depends on the slum’s unabtractability, thus turning the slum into a holding area where the portions of the population deemed too vile to be saved can be quarantined. Finally, I will turn to A Child of the Jago as a text that portrays the consequences of this demographic and geographic sequestration, where the population becomes conflated with the slum. To conclude, I will explain how this concern with urban bodies and space relate to concurrent concerns about the expanding electorate.

1.

As Stephen Gill writes in his introduction to The Nether World, “Gissing’s use of real names of streets and buildings invites the reader to look at a map” (393n2). The novel’s implicit invitation turns explicit toward the end of the text when the narrator finally invites the reader to “[l]ook at a map” and take in what seems to be a totalizing view of the city (Gissing 364). In this moment, the potential for cartography to turn London into a legible space becomes most apparent. On this hypothetical map of Greater London, “the town proper shows as a dark, irregularly rounded patch against the whiteness of suburban districts, and just on the northern limit of the vast network of streets you will distinguish the name of Crouch End” (364). As this passage indicates, central London is knowable and visible on the map even with its spatial convolutions.
Despite being contrasted against the “whiteness of suburban districts,” the city remains recognizable and representable as “a dark, irregularly rounded patch.” Though the “vast network of streets” making up this part of London may appear disorderly, the map still identifies the streets, carefully tracing how they entangle so as to capture accurately the complexity and density of urban space. As Gilbert explains, “Mapmaking sought to make visible what was invisible, to simplify spatial information by subjecting it to the abstracting process of mapmaking. This process eliminated extraneous information and reduced complex, obscure spaces to clearly understandable lines and symbols subject to a consistent series of measurements” (Mapping 7). The map to which the narrator asks the reader to refer already has abstracted and simplified the urban environment it represents, thereby implying that the city—as anarchic and opaque as it may appear—is, in the end, amenable to liberal ideas about universalizing and regularizing space. According to Patrick Joyce, “If not inherently ‘liberal,’ [the modern map] certainly opened up a sphere in which the universal, human subject of liberalism could begin to be identified and operated upon,” as the abstraction of space that the map represents also implies an abstraction of individuals into theoretically equal, liberal subjects (44). In the cartographic fantasy of the map, space and the populations that live in that space are ever comprehensible and governable, as the map is “the mode by which the city can be produced as object of knowledge and, in turn, managed so as to perpetuate itself along the lines prescribed for it” (Gilbert, Mapping 37). The map thus not only appears to describe the city as it exists but also serves as an ideal to which the city and its residents can conform.
And yet the same passage that depicts this capacity of the map to apprehend and regulate the city also acknowledges the map’s limitations, particularly how it cannot illustrate and control every geographic detail. In parsing out the differences between cartographic representation and the social and material reality of the city, Gissing’s novel anticipates Henri Lefebvre’s theory of space as produced through a conceptual triad that includes perceived space (space as constructed through social practice), conceived space (space as defined by scientists, cartographers, and other experts), and lived space (space as experienced and sensed by individual bodies) (38–41). As The Nether World demonstrates, London does not consist of empty, timeless space ready to be laid onto a cartographic grid—space, that is, does not merely consist of conceived space. Instead, the city is filled with buildings and people that are subject to geographic, social, and organic change. The passage, for instance, gestures toward the map’s inability to accommodate temporal difference when the narrator hints at the possibility of the map becoming outdated. As the narrator remarks, “Another decade, and the dark patch will have spread greatly further; for the present, Crouch End is still able to remind one that it was in the country a very short time ago” (Gissing 364). Eventually, the map that portrays the city will no longer be able to claim power over it once the space of London, which evolves in conjunction with social and demographic change, deviates from the static space of the map.

By indicating that “the dark patch … will spread,” the narrator alludes to the city’s potential uncontainability. While the empty space of the map suggests a perfectly organized population, the economic disparity plaguing London makes it so that the actual place is overflowing with people clamoring for houses and jobs. The narrator draws
attention to the difference between the abstracted visual of the map, which presents a
clear division between the urban center and its surrounding suburbs, and the social and
individual experience of the space. Although, according to the map, the suburban Crouch
End is just on “the northern limit of the vast network of streets” and thus technically
beyond the city, this neighborhood in reality does not reflect the pristine “whiteness” of
the cartographic image. As the narrator reveals, while the “one-storey cottages” in
Crouch End appear to exemplify the architectural ideal that reformers favored—the ideal
of single-family homes, each with their own gardens and gates—these homes are in fact
“pretentiously fashioned” and falling apart as they are “unsubstantially … made” from
“lath and sand” (364). Moreover, the families that inhabit these residences are not the
perfectly nucleated households of middle-class domesticity, as analyzed in chapter 2.
Rather, they are the overcrowded, multigenerational families of the working class who
can only afford such housing because they fill it beyond its intended capacity. The
laborer John Hewett, for instance, occupies one of the houses with his four children,
granddaughter, and son-in-law, Sidney Kirkwood. Like the map and its promise of total
control and legibility—a promise that coincides with the organizational promise of the
demographic household—Crouch End and its illusion of comfortable middle-class living
are “found to be sham” (364). Both give way to the social realities affecting the urban
space and population. By contrasting the map with the actual experience of living in
Crouch End, the text questions how abstractable and governable the city and its
inhabitants really are.

Evident in this scene, The Nether World offers two visions of London and its
population: as mappable and manageable and as inscrutable and intractable. Throughout
the text, these visions battle for dominance, as the liberal desire to bring to light the dark, alien slums and their residents is constantly challenged by what feels like the slums’ demographic superfluity. These visions, however, are not incommensurate. Although *The Nether World* reveals the limits of cartography to control the urban space and population, in subverting cartographic order the novel does not suggest that the city—especially the slum and slum dwellers—are free from regulation. Instead, the novel demonstrates that the slum’s incomprehensibility is key to the type of social control at work in Clerkenwell, the slum in which the novel’s events primarily take place. Clerkenwell remains curiously stable even as it is also overcrowded and on the verge of collapse. Given this seeming incongruity, for *The Nether World*, Clerkenwell exemplifies how the slums serve as repositories for the demographic surplus that Victorian society generates and yet must deny. The containment of this surplus depends on the slum’s unmappability, which enables the slums to become the holding areas that hide away the necessary yet unacknowledged excess population. Through what I call the text’s cartographic imagination—its use of street names, cardinal directions, and landmarks—*The Nether World* appears to collude with cartographic power to standardize space and track its characters’ movements. The novel, however, only establishes this imagination in order to undermine it so as to articulate the existence of a different kind of power at work within the slum.

As opposed to what we might claim is the disciplinary power of the map, which tightly controls bodies and space through methods of illumination and regularization, this other power is more circuitous in its application. This other power resembles Achille Mbembe’s necropower, which exerts an indirect control over life by exposing certain
populations to death. In a necropolitical regime, the sovereign perceives “the existence of the Other as an attempt on [the sovereign’s] life, as a mortal threat or absolute danger”; this perception thus justifies the “biophysical elimination of the Other” as it “would strengthen [the sovereign’s] potential to life and security” (Mbembe 167). For Mbembe, the quintessential way that necropower is deployed is through colonial occupation in which an external territory becomes rewritten as an exceptional space where the sovereign can exercise necropower in order to protect life back home (173–7). Gissing’s novel shows how this rewriting can also occur within the sovereign’s already established domain, as it is the London slum that becomes a space of death—a space so physically and morally despondent that residents internalize their oppression and associate survival with surrender. By elucidating how slum dwellers perpetuate their own subjugation, The Nether World discloses how a more productive answer to the problem of the slums lies less in urban renewal schemes that, akin to cartography, attempt to bring order and visibility to such spaces than in changing a social system that hinges on the production, containment, and eradication of an irredeemable human excess.

In deploying spatial references, The Nether World presumably orients its readers in a manner that mimics a cartographic perspective. This perspective gives the assumption that the city and the bodies residing in it, regardless of how chaotic they may appear, are conducive to the abstract, disciplinary order of the map. The precision of the novel’s spatial markers makes it seem as if, should one consult a map, one could locate every instance of the novel geographically. But as accurate as these markers may seem, The Nether World actually undermines the reliability of cartography. This duplicity is evident, for example, in the text’s portrayal of St. John’s Square as both mappable
through cartographic indicators and unmappable given the material existence of the square on the ground. As the narrator explains, the square is “cut in two by Clerkenwell Road” and that “[t]he exit from it on the south side is by St. John’s Lane” (Gissing 51). Through this cartographic language, the narrator allegedly identifies the square’s exact location in the city. The narrator, though, immediately destabilizes this location by describing St. John’s Square as being so “irregular in outline” that “the buildings which compose it form such a number of recesses, of abortive streets, of shadowed alleys, that from no point of the Square can anything like a general view of its totality be obtained” (51). Even as St. John’s Square presumably fits onto the city’s cartographic grid—on the corner of Clerkenwell Road and St. John’s Lane—it concurrently undermines the validity of that grid by offering no vantage point from which a cartographer or city planner can see the area as a whole. The text hence subverts the illusion of absolute visibility and disciplinary surveillance that its cartographic references imply.

Another example of this thwarted cartographic imagination can be found in how the novel fails to track its characters. While the text seems to chart characters’ movements across the city through the use of geographic details, characters—like the space of the city itself—ultimately escape this mapping. For instance, the same scene that tries to pinpoint St. John’s Square similarly tries to locate Sidney who is on his way to his office in the square from Tysoe Street (50). Whereas the mentions of street names, signs, and landmarks give the impression that the narrator will trace Sidney’s route, the narrator flouts this expectation by refusing to narrate this journey. Rather than follow Sidney, the narrator meanders across time and space to recount Sidney’s personal history with the area: beginning with Sidney’s first residence in the city, his father’s house on St. John’s
Lane, the narrator moves imaginatively and historically with Sidney to his uncle’s place elsewhere in Clerkenwell and finally to his first room in Islington where Sidney initially became acquainted with John (51–7). Only after this temporal foray into Sidney’s life does the narrator return to the present moment where the current Sidney, having just arrived in St. John’s Square, is climbing the staircase to his office (57). Although the cartographic vision exists in tandem with the city, Sidney’s unnarrated commute across London demonstrates how one can still traverse the city without being seen. The narrator’s historical excursion, moreover, proves how, even as the city can be intelligible through cartographic knowledge, one can continue to relate to the city in non-cartographic ways. By offering alternative experiences of the urban environment, *The Nether World* shows how certain portions and understandings of the city and population evade cartographic abstraction.

While this evasion hints at a possible liberation from the normalizing power of cartography, the text makes clear that the people and spaces outside of the map’s epistemological reach also exist outside of the social whole. Similar to the supernumeraries in *Bleak House* that exceed countability and thus reinforce the idea of a numerable population, the slum population in *The Nether World* exceeds cartographic representation and thus reinforces the idea that only those who are mappable are salvageable. The exclusion of the slums and their inhabitants enables society to retain the semblance of liberal progress by ignoring and labeling as redundant and expendable those bodies and spaces that challenge this linear narrative. To counteract this social neglect, some of Gissing’s characters try to rise out of the poor, abandoned masses and find the opportunities for social and moral advancement that the slums cannot offer. By
attempting to obtain the distanced view exemplified by the map, these characters try to abstract themselves from their social and geographic origins so as to become the universal subjects that liberalism endeavors to construct. As Amanda Anderson explains, despite being “wary of certain distancing effects of modernity,” the Victorians valorized certain forms of detachment that “represent[ed] the distinct promises of modernity: progressive knowledge, full comprehension of the social totality and the possibilities of transformative self-understanding” (Powers 4). The cultivation of detachment was thus a liberal practice. Predictably, however, the characters in The Nether World who strive to achieve liberal detachment fall short, as they are unable to separate themselves from their histories and geographies. Their entanglement indicates that geography is not reducible to the neutralized lines and symbols of cartographic expression but is instead inextricable from personal and social identity.

One character who attempts to distinguish herself from her background and the slum is Jane Snowdon, who tries to expand her outlook on the East End during a trip to rural Essex. As she passes “the pest-stricken regions of East London” on the train, her grandfather, Michael Snowdon, directs her attention to “the view from each window” (Gissing 164). “[A]nxious that Jane should not regard with the carelessness of familiarity those desolate tracts from which they were escaping,” Snowdon guides his granddaughter’s perception in hopes that he can cultivate in her the critical distance and ethical awareness that are integral to Victorian liberal subjectivity (164). Only on the train can Jane approach the detached standpoint that liberalism and cartography venerate. This is the first time that she observes the city from a place that allows her to visualize a large segment of London at once—a much larger segment than she could observe on her
own from the limited perspective available to the slum dweller on the street. In fact, this train ride elevates Jane “above [the] streets,” enabling her to see “across miles” (164). This panoramic view literalizes the expanded liberal outlook that Snowdon wants Jane to acquire. His goal is to prepare Jane to become the redeemer of her class, seeking to “raise up for the poor and the untaught a friend out of their own midst” (178). Jane’s holiday in the countryside marks the beginning of her transformation into a working-class savior, but, soon after this plan is revealed, it becomes clear that Jane will never fulfill her grandfather’s wishes since she is incapable of coping with this new prospect. The text portrays her incapacity in scalar terms: “The world had all at once grown very large, a distress to her imagination … The one thing affecting herself over which she mused frequently was her suffering as a little thrall in Clerkenwell Close” (224). Unable to envision for herself Snowdon’s ambitions, Jane finds comfort in the retracted, contained space of the slum, a space that “still … cling[s] to her” given her self-image as a “little thrall” (224). Regardless of her and her grandfather’s efforts, Jane cannot distance herself from her geographic roots and acquire a worldview different from that expected of those born into the slums.

Another character who attempts to dissociate herself from the slums geographically and socially is Clara Hewett, John’s daughter and Sidney’s eventual wife, who also fails, despite her best efforts, to achieve the self-actualization that the novel’s cartographic imagination implies. Unlike Jane who tries to extract herself from Clerkenwell but only so she can become a model for its residents, Clara seeks to shed herself completely of any connection to the area by running away, becoming an actress, and discarding herself of her old identity with a new stage name, Clara Vale. To the
friends and family whom she abandons, Clara’s disappearance essentially indicates that she no longer exists. As Sidney asserts, “I think of her just like we do of people that are dead,” suggesting how, for slum dwellers, there is no world outside of the slums (168). Clara, though, is unique—or, at least, she considers herself to be. From her first description in the novel as an “uncommon type,” the text characterizes Clara with this struggle between her desire to differentiate herself from the slum population and her fate to become another statistic of the working class (25). Clara initially treats her history with and residence in the slum as challenges to overcome. She, therefore, rejects the possibility that she could be a synecdochic character along the lines of John Barton in *Mary Barton*. To Clara, “[t]he better she understood how difficult was every way of advancement, the more fiercely resolute was she to conquer satisfactions which seemed beyond the sphere of her destiny” (82). This spatial metaphor of seeking accomplishments “beyond the sphere of her destiny” describes Clara’s dream not only to transcend her social class but also to break free from the slum’s physical boundaries.

Yet even though Clara leaves Clerkenwell, she eventually returns after a rival actress scalds her face with acid, symbolically stripping her of any individuation that she may have achieved (208–9). Unsurprisingly, Clara is defeated by this moment, as she realizes that “as long as she lived she could never hope to rise again above this world to which she was born” (274). Even when, like Jane, Clara literally “rise[s]” above the city, the bird’s eye view does not infuse her with liberal feelings of empathy or openness; instead, it embitters her against the world that she can see but cannot join. From the window in her room in Clerkenwell, “the view … was of wide extent, embracing a great part of the City” (280). This panorama, however, quickly contracts, as Clara focuses
“[d]own in Farringdon Street,” where “human beings, reduced to their due paltriness, seemed to toil in exasperation along the strips of pavement, bound on errands, which were a mockery, driven automaton-like by forces they neither understood nor could resist” (280). Akin to Jane, even when Clara occupies that aerial position, she remains “bound” to the street, unable to shed her geographic skin and detach herself from the place she reluctantly calls home.

Clara’s and Jane’s inabilities to leave Clerkenwell demonstrate how the slums are not only geographic areas where one resides but also discursive spaces, rife with historical and sociocultural meaning, that stigmatize their inhabitants. This essentialization of the slums within its residents is why these neighborhoods can never become the empty, impersonal space that cartography needs in order to create a flat, homogenous map. It is also why simply removing people from the slums or removing the slums altogether, as dictated by late-century clearance schemes, would not eradicate the problems that these areas represent. As The Nether World shows, population and place are inextricably entwined. Not all slum dwellers are intrinsically pure like Jane who has “no spot of uncleanness in her being” (135). But neither are all slum dwellers innately corrupt like Clementina Peckover who can unleash her natural “savagery” and “lust of cruelty” without censure in these locales (333). Though many of the slum dwellers that the novel depicts are similarly crude and vicious, the novel makes apparent that their dispositions ensue from their social and physical environments. “Society produces many a monster,” the narrator declares, “but the mass of those whom, after creating them, it pronounces bad are merely bad from the conventional point of view; they are guilty of weaknesses, not of crimes” (218). These weaknesses are pardonable because they are the
results of a social system that “expect[s] [the poor] to practice a self-denial that the rich can’t even imagine, much less carry out” (175). This system “misleads a helpless child and then condemns it for being found astray,” boasting, on the one hand, a narrative of liberal progress that encourages the poor to seek a life beyond hand-to-mouth existence and punishing, on the other, those who revert to crime or other social transgressions in order to do so (82).

In this context, the narrator specifically discusses Clara who is too clever to remain in Clerkenwell but too entrenched to leave. Though her intelligence should carry her beyond her class, her location in the slum marks her as one fated for deprivation and death. Through Clara, the novel shows how the slums imprint onto the “nature[s]” of their residents, effectively tying residents to the slums even when they try to escape. As Sidney implores, “How can [Clara] help her nature? How can we any of us help what we’re driven to in a world like this?” (102). Whereas the deterministic relationship that slum dwellers have with their environment exonerates them, to an extent, of the full consequences of their actions, it also prohibits them from becoming the agentive liberal subjects that the modern city and map idealize. Ironically, the idea of environmental determinism constrains the poor further to their geography, linking population and place, even as it attempts to depersonalize poverty and turn the poor into sympathetic and potentially salvageable figures.

On the surface, environmental determinism makes room for the poor’s eventual recuperation by suggesting that removing the poor from the slums would give them the opportunity to develop into the venerable citizens these locations could not cultivate. The Nether World, in contrast, shows how a deterministic understanding of poverty actually
strengthens the tie between slums and slum dwellers. As depicted by the text, the belief that the poor can one day rise out of poverty by first leaving the slums does not account for the fact that the poor cannot physically escape the areas from which they originate because social barriers are in place that prevent them from advancing. These social and geographic rigidities feed into one another, evident in the intense economic segregation plaguing Victorian London—a segregation that many critics argue led to the common identification of the slums in the nineteenth century as an abyss, or, to use journalist George R. Sims’s oft-cited words, a “dark continent that is within easy walking distance of the General Post Office” (5). Because of this figuration of the slums as an epistemological black hole, most Victorians ascribed to the usual understanding of London’s social geography wherein the spatial division of East and West End coincided with the social division of the impoverished and wealthy.

The reformer Charles Booth, however, complicated this opposition in his influential *Life and Labour of the People in London* (first published in 1889–91). In this multivolume study, Booth proved that London’s poorest classes frequently lived in the middle of London’s richest communities. His famous “Maps of London” portrayed this interweaving most vividly. By color-coding the different areas of the city according to social status, the maps revealed that some places outside of the East End were just as devastated by poverty and that the East End was more heterogeneous than was popularly assumed. But even while Booth challenged the idea of East London as an unadulterated place of extreme poverty, he reproduced the tropes of degeneration, contagion, and disorder that were prevalently used to describe the slums in order to distinguish between who he considered to be the deserving and undeserving poor (Walkowitz 32). Although
he detached some of the working class from indigent locales, he continued to declare that
the most contemptible were stuck in condemned zones since “overcrowding in the center
forced the poor to move out to other neighborhoods, thus precipitating a flight of
respectable residents to the suburbs and more outlying areas” (Walkowitz 32). Unable to
erase the language of morality from his study, Booth reinforced the idea that only the
undeserving poor remained in the worst sectors of the city, thereby showing how London
remained socially and spatially separated even as his research understood this separation
with increasing complexity.

*The Nether World* critiques this inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to disentangle
moral judgment from geography by examining the relationship between population and
place. By revealing the stigmatizing power of the slum, Gissing’s text interrogates the
subtle yet powerful mode of regulation controlling the population—a mode that
capitalizes on the poor’s internalization of its own geographic containment. Through
spatial imagery, the text equates the claustrophobia that characters feel with the social
conditions binding them to the slums and the dreadful existences that such places
maintain. For instance, the novel amplifies Clara’s frustration in returning to Clerkenwell
by comparing it to being “crush[ed] … out of being” (Gissing 295). Clara, moreover, is
not the only one who is “crush[ed]”: as “a child of the nether world whom fate had
endowed with intellect, she gave articulate utterance to what is seething in the brains of
thousands who fight and perish in the obscure depths” (207–8). Despite Clara’s
protestations about being a “type,” her struggle with her geographic origins reflects the
larger struggle that the slum population faces as the demographic apparently destined to
“perish” in those “depths.” Without explicitly claiming its existence, the novel alludes to
a necropolitical system that exposes certain groups to starvation, poverty, and death for
the sake of securing the larger population. To ensure the wellbeing of the wider populace,
those who “threaten the frame of society” must be “crush[ed]” (295). As the novel makes
apparent, the necropolitical system is geographically entangled since the exposure of the
poor is linked to their residence in the slums. For some, the slums represent the poor’s
inherent unworthiness; for others, the slums turn the poor, through no fault of their own,
to people of low moral, physical, and social stature. But regardless of perspective, the
slums are a necessary evil that confine and, when called upon, “crush[]” the life out of
those who, like Clara, try to climb out of the “depths” and subvert the geographic order
separating the impoverished remainder from the rich. The slums, then, manage the poor
through the sense of fatal claustrophobia that these areas impress—a claustrophobia that
teaches the surplus population to, at best, surrender and, at worst, perpetuate its own
disempowerment.

*The Nether World*’s use of specific, localized knowledge ostensibly renders the
chaotic urban population and space legible and predictable. But the disciplinary precision
of the novel’s cartographic language gives way to the overwhelming superfluity of the
slum; the text hence creates an image of the slum and slum dwellers as uncontainable. As
*The Nether World* explains, this seeming uncontainability operates as the engine for a
necropolitical system that produces, spatializes, and excludes those groups deemed
redundant so as to label as included and mapped those bodies and spaces designated as
proper, liberal, and abstract. The text, moreover, illustrates how this system becomes so
naturalized and inflexible that the poor, out of sheer desperation, effect their own
marginalization. The terror of being “crush[ed]” out of existence should they attempt to
“pass beyond the bounds of suffering” trains slum dwellers to comply with the necropolitical order and stay within their designated geographic and social spaces (295). Even the irrepressible Sidney must concede that, for the poor, it feels as if “the rich world [is] always crushing us down”—a concession that he makes when he tries to convince Clara to hope for a better future (378). But by novel’s end, Clara can hope no longer, as her active “desire to escape” her circumstances dwindles into a passive “fear of yielding” to them (295, 379). Eventually, those characters—Clara, Jane, and Sidney—who, in the beginning of the narrative, seem most likely to escape the slum’s “crushing” grip all submit to its constraining power. In depicting the poor’s inevitable capitulation, *The Nether World* discloses how difficult emerging out of the slums—in terms of physical relocation as well as social and mental abstraction—really is. This revelation shows how biopolitical control relies on an asymmetrical exposure that makes some people more vulnerable and restricted than others.

2.

Echoing *The Nether World*, *A Child of the Jago* also portrays an isolated slum community that ostensibly threatens to infect the city with the physical, social, and moral disease that its inhabitants carry and represent. And yet despite embodying this threat, this community, similar to the one represented in *The Nether World*, is remarkably stable, remaining intact regardless of attempts in the late century to clear insolvent areas and relocate their residents. The endurance of these communities indicates that the slums are not simply a complex social issue for which a viable solution has yet to be found. Instead, their endurance signals the existence of a type of governance that creates and uses these spaces to confine the impoverished in order to protect the larger population. Whereas
Gissing’s novel emphasizes how the laboring classes internalize their sequestration within the slums, Morrison’s novel intensifies the connection between population and place by conflating the slums with the people who live there. Through this conflation, *A Child of the Jago* reveals how the poor perpetuate their own social and geographic confinement not only because, as depicted in Gissing’s novel, the slums’ oppressive conditions compel the poor to give into their marginalization but also because the poor’s connection to the slums makes them view their own survival as dependent on the survival of these spaces. In Morrison’s text, slum removal schemes, at least in the minds of the poor, threaten the existence of the slum population itself. *A Child of the Jago* thus enacts the necropolitics alluded to in *The Nether World* in order to show how the designation of the slums as places of deprivation results from both the state strategically abandoning indigent neighborhoods and the poor believing that their lives are protected by the very neighborhoods created to eradicate them.

Like *The Nether World*, *A Child of the Jago* hints at the possibility of London’s cartographic legibility only to negate it so as to establish the slums as a space of deliberate social neglect. While Gissing’s text alludes to the existence of a map of London, Morrison’s novel literally begins with a map of the Old Jago:
The frontispiece is an image of the “Old Jago Sketch Plan,” in which an abstracted aerial view of the city suggests that the neighborhood where the story is set is comprehensible and manageable. The narrator’s opening description of the Jago supports this insinuation since the slum, despite being the “blackest pit in London,” appears totally knowable via a cartographic grid. As the narrator states, “A square of two hundred and fifty yards or less—that was all there was of the Jago … Old Jago Street, New Jago Street, Half Jago Street lay parallel, east and west: Jago Row at one end and Edge Lane at the other lay parallel also, stretching north and south” (Morrison 11). Presumably, the institutional perspective exemplified by the map permeates all corners of the city, even Jago Court,
“the blackest hole in all that pit” (11). This permeation supposedly turns the city into an object of state power, a testament to the government’s ability to grasp and control every inch of its domain. But this semblance of cartographic visibility swiftly gives way to the inscrutability of the slum, for “in that square the human population swarmed in thousands … Old Jago Street lay black and close under the quivering red sky; and slinking forms, as of great rats, followed one another quickly between the posts in the gut by the High Street, and scattered over the Jago” (11). Unaffected by the power exemplified by the map, the poor masses disregard cartographic lineation, as bodies “swarm[],” “slink[],” and “scatter[] over the Jago.” Slum dwellers defy the spatial and demographic regulation that the map embodies, rebelling against cartographic attempts to direct urban bodies and movement by traversing indistinguishably across the city. Although this challenge to cartographic order insinuates that the Jago is too chaotic to be controlled, *A Child of the Jago* demonstrates how this sense of liberation is contingent on the slum following a set of rules established by a society in which the slum seemingly has no part.

As the novel shows, the Jago’s perceived independence hinges on how well its residents abide by the norms that are supposedly characteristic of the slums and slum dwellers. These norms are decided upon not by the residents but by the larger London society whose expectations of how slum dwellers should act determines what counts as permissible behavior. While the Jago’s inhabitants might brag about their freedom, this freedom depends on them conducting themselves in a manner that does not warrant explicit intervention. Dicky Perrott, the young street rat who comes of age in the novel, is hence only partially right when he observes that “the police were gone, and that the Jago was free” (42). His assumption echoes that of many of the slum dwellers who view the
Jago as “an unfailing sanctuary, a city of refuge ever ready, ever secure” (88). In their experience, the police dare not cross the Jago’s boundaries since the community unites to rid the Jago of what it considers to be hostile external authorities. As the residents boast, “Beyond the archway [of Jago Court] the police could not venture, except in large companies. A young constable who tried it once … was laid low as he emerged from the passage, by a fire-grate adroitly let drop from an upper window” (88). However, just because the police are not explicitly present does not mean that the Jago is free from governmental influence. Though the chaotic violence of the Jago might suggest a kind of anarchic freedom, the slum dwellers are aware that “if fighting persisted too long at a time, the police were apt to turn up in numbers, subjecting the neighborhood to much inconvenient scrutiny” (108). The slum community must maintain an internal order—a “Jago custom and ethic”—if it wants to keep the police at bay (51). This self-regulation is not total autonomy as it arises in response to outside laws that establish a baseline of normal behavior—which is determined statistically as much it is determined culturally and socially, as I discussed in chapter 1—which residents must follow. The Jago’s independence thus depends on its residents keeping violence and crime under a certain threshold, for while “a faction fight in the Jago, with a few broken heads and ribs and an odd knife wound here and there—even with a death in the hospital from kicks or what not—was all very well; but when it came to homicide in the open High Street, the police drew the line, and entered the Jago in force” (34). This contingency indicates that the Jago is only free because the police allow it. What the residents of the Jago consider to be freedom hence depends on how well the slum population self-surveils. Instead of proving
the slums’ exclusion from society, then, the Jago’s so-called liberty proves that the slums are included though not fully folded into the social order.

The Jago’s tenuous position within Victorian society indicates how much middle- and upper-class Victorians relied on the slums and slum dwellers as points of departure from which they could distinguish themselves as upright citizens. The perceived opposition between the slums and the rest of London had vital consequences, as the rich who could visit the slums but ultimately leave could lead healthy, unadulterated lives; the poor, in contrast, were stuck in the slums and left to sicken there and die. Even as the mortality rate of the British population greatly diminished over the nineteenth century, it remained high in major cities, particularly in the areas most afflicted by poverty. For example, on Boundary Street, one of London’s most neglected areas, the death rate was almost double that of the city—a discrepancy that Morrison references when he writes that “the Jago death-rate ruled full four times that of all London beyond” (Wohl 270, Morrison 77). Moreover, only nine percent of the houses on Boundary Street were structurally sound, and almost half were too insanitary for rehabilitation (Wohl 270). Slum dwellers were thus disproportionately dying simply because of the areas and buildings in which they lived. For some medical officers, these death rates were indefensible since sanitary reforms should have ameliorated most public health issues. As the medical officer for St. Marylebone noted in 1865, the mortality rate had not declined in impoverished places despite sanitary developments because of “the inability of house accommodation to keep pace with population growth” (qtd. in Wohl 117). In the early half of the century, most reformers, following Edwin Chadwick, concentrated on engineering remedies such as expanding sewerage, cleaning and paving streets, removing
waste, and purifying the water supply (Wohl 6). Evident in these actions, sanitation and
the deaths associated with its lack were thought to be unconnected to poverty or
overcrowding. By the mid-to-late century, though, poverty and overcrowding began to be
viewed as issues needing attention in their own right. Unlike with sanitation, the solution
to these issues could not be found in engineering or architectural improvements. Instead,
it had to come from economic and social upheavals that the Victorians were not quite
ready to permit.

As the century passed, reformers and politicians began to realize that the
existence of the slums indicated a much bigger socioeconomic problem that condemned
the free market, which the Victorians so idealized. While the Victorians’ commitment to
the free market was part of their larger commitment to liberty and liberalism, their
adherence to free market logic not only justified the lack of legislation passed to help the
poor but also resulted in the economic and social conditions that created poverty and the
slums. Mike Hill and Warren Montag use the term “necro-economics” to describe this
logic, as it produces a form of government that deploys the ideology of laissez faire in
order to allow certain populations to die (263). This allowance of death is not the result of
direct exposure but, in line with liberal economic principles, the result of a “deliberate
refraining or withdrawal from action—not simply the inertia of non-action, but a
strategically conceived retreat, a leaving alone or an abandonment, often in the face of
powerful counterforces, whose effects could be far more devastating than any advance of
government controls” (263–4). A Child of the Jago narrates how this necroeconomic
system, wherein the state lets the poor die because of the supposedly natural ebbs and
flows of the market, dovetails with a necropolitical system, wherein the state maintains
the population through a deliberate production of death. As Morrison’s novel reveals, this production of death is geographically focused: the people upon which “the status of living dead” is conferred are specifically slum dwellers who reside in neighborhoods produced and ignored by capitalist society (Mbembe 186). This transformation of the slums into a place of death is immediately evident in *A Child of the Jago’s* opening scene where the narrator portrays the Jago as hell on earth—the slum is literally on fire as the sky glows with “an infernal coppery glare” (Morrison 11). Through this hellscape, the text indicates that the Jago’s residents are the “living dead” that necropower creates. As the narrator states, every “child of the Jago comes unconsenting into its black inheritance” upon his or her birth (133). Life and death are hence synonymous in the Jago, as the slum’s inhabitants are marked for death as soon as they take their first breath. In portraying the Jago as a “death-world[,]” a space that both confines those who are marked for death and marks for death the people who are confined there, Morrison anticipates Mbembe’s theorization of a necropolitical state that manages life by subjugating it (Mbembe 186).

For most of the century, Victorians did not recognize—or perhaps refused to recognize—the connections among the capitalist economy, the slums, and poverty. By the 1880s, however, Victorians started to conceptualize the slums as less a moral or sanitary issue than a socioeconomic one in part because parliament began to discuss, in the context of housing reform, the perplexing continuance of urban poverty in the midst of increasing prosperity. As Wohl explains, before this decade, “it was widely thought that the slums were cancerous growths on an otherwise healthy body, [thus] the legislative response was surgical, not diagnostic” (221). Earlier housing acts such as the 1868 Artisans’ and Labourers’ Dwellings Acts and the 1875 Artisans’ and Labourers’
Dwellings Improvement Act reflected this belief, emphasizing inspection and demolition so as to remove the slums rather than add to them with new housing (84–107). Eventually, though, the slums were seen less as social maladies in themselves than as “a symptom of a much larger social ill, a sickness in the economic system that called for critical examination of land values, building costs and rents on one hand, and wages and the forces affecting employment, both urban and rural on the other” (223). While this reevaluation of the slums incited a reevaluation of the nation’s socioeconomic system, laissez faire was far from being replaced. The belief that “free market forces would bring prosperity to everyone” held strong despite the emergence in the late century of socialist groups, which I will explore further in the next chapter (224). Whereas the rise of these organizations hinted at a reconsideration of traditional Victorian tenets about economic liberty and private enterprise, policies dealing with the slums remained on the side of the free market because politicians feared being accused of socialism should they support legislation encouraging subsidized housing. Even as new housing bills sought to construct state-sponsored dwellings, most of these bills were gutted by the time they were passed in order to favor private over municipal buildings. For example, although the 1890 Houses of the Working Classes Act included a provision for the London County Council to build and maintain working-class lodgings, this act required that such lodgings be sold within ten years, thereby minimizing the state’s involvement (252–3). Moreover, the rooms that the London County Council erected were, like the rooms constructed by private companies, too expensive and far away to alleviate overcrowding (254–62). The slums, therefore, persisted because of a continued adherence to liberal economic and political principles even though reformers and politicians were starting to acknowledge
that such principles were the cause of the problems they sought to solve. This unwillingness to use legislation to intervene into an economy that was clearly asymmetrical points to how necroeconomics and necropolitics worked together in order to benefit the wealthy by abandoning and subjecting already vulnerable people to even riskier conditions.

Reflecting the historical endurance of the slums, the slum clearance schemes depicted in *A Child of the Jago* are similarly unsuccessful in their stated objective to eliminate decrepit areas. Like their historical counterparts, these fictional attempts at urban improvement exacerbate poverty and overcrowding in other places. The most notable of these schemes is Reverend Henry Sturt’s plan to revitalize the Jago by “wiping out the blackest spot” in the slum, Jago Court, and replacing it with a new church that “should have by its side a cleanly lodging-house, a night-shelter, a club, baths and washhouses” (Morrison 76). Initially, this plan appears to have promise, as it seeks to extend the positive impact that Father Sturt has had in the slums. In the “make-shift church” that the reverend has been using for his work, Sturt has been giving the inhabitants of the Jago a space for recreation: “there [the men] smoked, jumped, swung on horizontal bars, boxed, played at cards and bagatelle, free from interference save when interference became necessary” (76). In offering the Jago’s residents a retreat in the slums, Sturt presents them with an opportunity for moral rehabilitation. As he discovers, slum dwellers can be turned into moral citizens if they are given the chance to escape their surroundings. By only enforcing one rule, “good behaviour on the premises,” Sturt proves that the poor are not the criminals that the police reports declare them to be (76). He learns that they can be redeemed with what Lauren M. E. Goodlad calls pastorship, a...
form of power that constructs liberal subjects through moral and affective care (18–21). As the embodiment of pastoral authority, Sturt demonstrates that the poor can be “governed with an invisible discipline, which, being brought to action, was found to be of iron” (Morrison 76). Given this achievement, Sturt presumes that his urban renewal project will find similar success. This project, however, aggravates the housing problem by providing inadequate accommodation for those who would be evicted so that Jago Court can be demolished. As a result, “[t]he dispossessed Jagos had gone to infect the neighbourhoods across the border, and to crowd the people a little closer … And so another Jago, teeming and villainous as the one displaced, was slowly growing” around the area that Sturt clears and rebuilds (141). Despite his intention, Sturt reproduces the Jago in another form even as his project destroys and revitalizes the original Jago. This example demonstrates how it is not the poor who fail themselves by falling back into immoral ways but the reformers who fail the poor by proposing policies that compound the slums, further constraining the poor within spaces that purposely manufacture deprivation and death.

While *A Child of the Jago* shows how the slums persist through necroeconomic and necropolitical principles, it also illustrates how slum dwellers encourage the existence of the slums because of their deep-seated belief that these spaces are essential to their survival. Like *The Nether World*, *A Child of the Jago* portrays how profoundly geography shapes one’s self-concept. Whereas Gissing’s novel depicts a population that internalizes the stigma of the slum, Morrison’s depicts a population that perceives itself not as socially and morally dragged down by but as vitally connected to the slum. In Gissing’s novel, a gap exists between a character’s self-image and what the character
understands is expected of him or her as someone raised in indigent areas. Gissing’s characters recognize that their environment is what harms them even if they ultimately cannot leave their places of origin. Morrison’s novel, in contrast, closes this gap and turns what in *The Nether World* is an intimate association into an ontological equation. By equating population and place, *A Child of the Jago* explains why the poor, like reformers and politicians, might also be hesitant to demand systemic social change.

This equation is most notable in the novel’s use of “Jago” to refer to the neighborhood and its inhabitants. In calling the people who live in the Jago “Jagos” (first used in this regard on page 31), the text blurs the division between the slum and slum dwellers that reformers like Father Sturt need in order to view the poor as a salvageable demographic. Because, for Sturt, the geographic space turns the poor into criminals, when he finds “any denizen a little less base than the rest,” he “hasten[s] to drive [this denizen] from the Jago ere its influence suck him under for ever” (77). Sturt abides by the logic of *The Nether World* wherein the poor can be saved if they can be removed from the slums. *A Child of the Jago*, however, narrates a different logic where people and place are the same; thus, the Jagos associate slum removal with their own demise. After hearing about Sturt’s urban renewal project, the Jagos contend that demolishing Jago Court is a “grave social danger” and ask, “What would become of the Jago without Jago Court?” (88). With this question, the residents express concern about not only the sense of community that would be lost but also the stability of their survival once the court is destroyed. Their anxiety about “[w]hat would become of the Jago” is also an anxiety about what would become of the Jagos since, without the Jago, the Jagos themselves would cease to exist. Therefore, even though the slums are the products of a social order
that constrains and endangers the poor, the poor, as the novel shows, ironically support
the continuance of these neighborhoods in hopes that geographic perpetuity means
demographic perpetuity.

By illustrating how slum dwellers conflate their endurance with the endurance of
the slums, the novel illustrates how the poor become complicit in their own subjugation
and confinement. This complicity also arises from what I have argued is the slum’s
transformation into a place of death. Whereas Mbembe claims that, within a
necropolitical world, the oppressed still has the power to turn death into freedom,
Morrison’s text illustrates how the geographic constraints of the slum denies the poor
even this form of resistance. According to Mbembe, resistance through death follows a
logic of martyrdom that stands in contrast with what he sees as “the ultimate expression
of sovereignty”: the biopolitical power to decide who lives and who dies (161).
Mbembe’s paradigmatic martyr, the suicide bomber, destabilizes this power by fusing
“the will to die … with the willingness to take the enemy with you” (183). Rather than
surrender to death, this figure takes death into his or her hands so as to interrupt the life
of those whom the sovereign values. This interruption depends on the suicide bomber
inflicting damage on the other, a capacity that the slum’s restrictive boundaries prevent.

As mentioned earlier, the Jagos pride themselves on their neighborhood’s
isolation; the only people found in the Jago are those deemed “too vile … too useless,
incapable and corrupt” for other districts (Morrison 11). With their “black inheritance,”
these people are already demarcated for death. Their demise, then, would be no loss and
would even be a welcome reprieve since it would “be better [to be] dead—still better
unborn” than to live in the Jago (133). While some slum dwellers might consider death an
escape, it is also the only future that they can expect. The inevitability of their deaths thus evacuates the suicidal power that Mbembe claims the oppressed can still wield. This evacuation is evident in Dicky’s resignation to his fate, which occurs shortly before his demise. As Dicky admits, “he was a Jago and the world’s enemy; Father Sturt was the only good man in it; as for the rest, he would spoil them when he could” (162). After this admission in which Dicky identifies as an inhabitant of the Jago and the Jago itself—both of which are destined for death—the young man runs headfirst into a street brawl, perhaps seeking the fate that he only recently accepts. Though Dicky, like Jo in *Bleak House*, is doomed to die, Dicky’s death is not the revelatory sacrifice that Jo’s is. Whereas *Bleak House* reveals upon Jo’s passing that there are many like Jo “dying thus around us every day,” thereby imbuing social meaning into Jo’s demise, there is little gravitas to Dicky’s death (Dickens 734). Unlike Jo who recites the Lord’s Prayer with his last breath, Dicky intentionally remains silent, choosing instead to adhere to Jago principles and follow “[t]he lie—the staunch Jago lie—thou shalt not nark” until the end (Morrison 164). With this conclusion, Dicky embodies less the figure of the martyr than that of the tragic hero, for his death upholds rather than disrupts the callous regime that demands it. By leaving the Jago in the only manner he can, Dicky affirms the necropolitical order that Victorian society creates yet disavows.

3.

Through analyses of *The Nether World* and *A Child of the Jago*, this chapter shows how slum fiction elucidates the biopolitical contours of late-century housing reform. As this chapter argues, these texts explain how the failure of housing reform to clear and rebuild impoverished areas signals not only the shortsightedness of most urban
renewal projects but also the presence of a necropolitical system that secures the population by turning certain groups into a disposable human surplus. Most reformers who tried to alleviate poverty and clear the slums continued to follow the liberal economic and political principles that created poverty and the slums in the first place. Reformers perpetuated the very conditions they were trying to eliminate, as their policies further tied impoverished classes to indigent areas and transformed the poor into a redundant demographic that needed to be eliminated for the sake of the population.

Gissing’s and Morrison’s novels use cartographic language in order to mimic and examine this production of redundancy. By depicting how urban space and bodies defy cartographic knowledge, these novels illustrate how this apparent uncontrollability justifies the state’s neglect of the poor and the neighborhoods in which they live. This neglect, moreover, is compounded by the poor’s internalization of their social exclusion. While in *The Nether World* slum dwellers intensify their connection to the slums by submitting to the social and moral depravity expected of those born in these districts, in *A Child of the Jago* these inhabitants equate their survival with the continuance of these spaces, hence ignoring the fact that these spaces are not the answer to but the cause of their desolate circumstances. By explaining why impoverished areas endure as well as how these areas become inextricable from their residents, slum fiction criticizes the necropolitical regime that protects life through an internal division that physically and ontologically separates the rich from the poor—a division that also separates the West Ender from the East Ender, the slum visitor from the slum dweller, and the salvageable from the expendable.
The biopolitical concern that slum novels reveal about controlling and separating bodies echoes the concerns about the spatial and social transgressions that would occur if universal suffrage were achieved. With the passage of the Second Reform Act in 1867, parliament extended the vote to most working-class men. Although many people were still left disenfranchised—notably women, paupers, and poorer sections of the working class—the sense by the midcentury was that democracy was impending; social differences would thus soon cease to matter. While fears about class mixing were prevalent throughout the century, particularly in relation to city centers where people from a variety of social groups lived in close proximity, these fears became overtly political in the late century, as debates about electoral rights became more heated and prominent. Ironically, however, it was not the achievement of total democracy that resulted in the collapse of geographic boundaries but rather the lack of democracy that instigated the working class to leave their neighborhoods. To protest their continued civic and social exclusions despite the extensions provided by the Second Reform Act, members of the working class took to the streets, marching to Trafalgar Square in 1886 and 1887. These rallies, which became respectively known as Black Monday and Bloody Sunday, erupted in violence and echoed the earlier 1866 rally in Hyde Park where supporters of the Reform League famously broke down the railings put up by the government in order to prevent them from organizing. Both the Trafalgar Square and Hyde Park demonstrations challenged socio-geographic boundaries, rebelling against the laws and norms that tried to control where certain bodies were allowed to be. In similarly engaging with this issue about urban bodies and space, slum fiction, one could argue, contributes to late-century debates about electoral rights and fears about working-class
unrest. But rather than showing how the image of the uncontrollable slum suggests the eventual liberation and inclusion of the poor, however frightening this prospect may be, the subgenre demonstrates how this image serves as evidence of the poor’s continued subjugation and confinement. Slum fiction thus questions whether even the legislative change that enfranchisement would require could dismantle the necropolitical system that it reveals and critiques.

NOTES

1 See, for example, Gilbert’s analysis of the relationship between the parishes of St. Giles and St. James (Mapping 83–107).
2 See Joyce 11–2 on the relationship between the modern city as a space of visibility, linearity, and order and the modern liberal individual who emerges from such a space.
3 See Wise 248–64 for the demolition of the Old Nichol slum.
4 See, for example, Gill ix–xiii on the similarities and differences between social problem and slum novels.
5 See, for example, Tillotson and Williams 87–109 for early and influential examples of this kind of critique.
6 See Joyce 35–61 for more on cartography and the standardization of space.
7 See Warhol on narrative refusals in Victorian novels.
8 See, for example, McLaughlin who reads the Victorian trope of the slums as an abyss in terms of its imperial connotations.
9 See Koven for more on the practice of slumming in which upper-class men and women visited the slums, explicitly, for philanthropic purposes and, implicitly, in pursuit of forbidden pleasures.
10 See Rendall and McClelland, respectively, for more on how the 1867 Reform Act continued to leave women and poorer men disenfranchised.
11 See Keller 109–32 for more on Black Monday and Bloody Sunday and McClelland 72–4 for more on the 1866 Hyde Park demonstrations.
At first glance, Walter Besant’s *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* (1882) might appear to be a slum novel resembling those by George Gissing and Arthur Morrison as discussed in chapter 3. Like *The Nether World* and *A Child of the Jago*, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* focuses on the slums of East London, in this case Stepney Green, and details the isolation and despair of East End life. As Besant’s narrator explains, despite the “[t]wo millions of people, or thereabouts, [who] live in the East End,” the East End is “an utterly unknown town” (42). The text thus similarly comments on the social and political neglect that leaves slum residents exposed to death and starvation via their squalid environments. In Besant’s novel, East London is so “neglected” and “forgotten” that “[i]t is even neglected by its own citizens, who have never yet perceived their abandoned condition” (42–3). Analogous to Gissing’s Clerkenwell and Morrison’s Jago, both of which evade the panoptic gaze of cartography and the police, Besant’s Stepney evades literary, historical, and communal knowledge. There is nothing about the place that is worth seeing or knowing. “Books on London pass it over,” the narrator states, “it has little or no history; great men are not buried in its churchyards, which are not even ancient, and crowded by citizens as obscure as those who now breathe the upper airs about them. If anything happens in the east, people at the other end have to stop and think before they can remember where the place may be” (43). This disregard of the East End is, according to Besant’s novel, a consequence of the capitalist system that abuses the “forced labour” of men, “each driven by the invisible scourge of necessity which makes slaves of all mankind” (97). Like the slum fiction published at the same time, *All Sorts of
Conditions of Men remarks on the social exclusion of the slums—an exclusion, as the previous chapter demonstrates, is the result of a necropolitical strategy that sacrifices the poor for the safety of the rest of the population.

This concern with the abandonment of the East End, however, is where the similarities between Gissing’s and Morrison’s texts, on the one hand, and Besant’s novel, on the other hand, end. All Sorts and Conditions of Men does not give into the “fatalistic philosophy of stoical acceptance” that P. J. Keating finds in The Nether World and that, I maintain, is also found in A Child of the Jago (83). Resigned in tone, both Gissing’s and Morrison’s works are unable to imagine a world where capitalist exploitation does not exist and slum dwellers can transcend their decrepit social and geographic circumstances. All Sorts and Conditions of Men, in contrast, imagines this very transcendence through what I identify as a socialist utopian aesthetics that rejects the pessimistic realism of most late-century slum novels. Just before describing the East End as a neglected and desolate place, the narrator points out that this conception of East London is not an accurate reflection but a representational tendency: “It is the fashion to believe that [East Enders] are all paupers, which is a foolish and mischievous belief, as we shall presently see” (42). By indicating that the usual depiction of East Londoners as “paupers” is “the fashion,” the narrator reveals how this qualitative assessment is an aesthetic choice, a choice that may be fashionable now but, as trends go, may fall out of fashion in the near future. The trendiness of the current “fashion” to portray East Enders as “paupers” begs the question: what new fashion or literary technique will replace the type of realism currently used to narrate the East End and the working-class population that resides there? If All Sorts and Conditions of Men and William Morris’s News from Nowhere (1890), the other novel
analyzed in this chapter, have any say, then the new fashion would be an aesthetics that rejects realist verisimilitude for utopian fantasy.

Through this alternative aesthetics, socialist utopian novels not only expose the artificiality of realist representations but also make room for a different literary and social vision. In this vision, the working-class population exists as a happy, united, and self-governed community of individuals rather than a disorderly, undifferentiated mass in need of governmental supervision. This chapter takes Besant’s *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* and Morris’s *News from Nowhere* as examples of the genre in order to show how socialist utopian fiction disrupts and destabilizes the capitalist state power that realist novels tend to represent as inexorable. As many critics contend, nineteenth-century realism was immersed in capitalist ideology. Linda Hughes and Michael Lund, for instance, illustrate how Victorian realism in its serialized novelistic form imitated capitalism in requiring readers to invest time and money over a number of installments and to speculate about future outcomes (4). Fredric Jameson asserts that nineteenth-century realism operated within the “bourgeois cultural revolution” to inculcate its readers in the “the whole new life world” of industrial capitalism’s homogenous space and time (373–4). And while Georg Lukács believes in the possibility of realism to expose capitalism for the exploitative system that it is, he argues that literature that “take[s] reality as it manifests itself to the writer … remain[s] frozen in [its] own immediacy” and “fail[s] to pierce the surface to discover the underlying essence, i.e. the real factors that relate … experiences to the hidden social forces that produce them” (“Realism” 36–7).
Like these twentieth-century critics, late Victorian socialist thinkers distrusted texts that only depicted the “surface” of reality—texts that refused to interrogate extant social conditions and, by doing so, supported them whether explicitly or not. As such, there was a “suspicion of novel writing,” as Elizabeth Carolyn Miller explains, among Victorian radicals due to their “sense of the genre as capitalistic, individualistic, and middle class” (91). By the late Victorian era, realist novels, in terms of their content and materiality, had come to be associated with the capitalist regime that socialists were so determined to tear down. Such novels not only “threatened to constrain the imagination of what was possible” because of their commitment to verisimilitude but also were products of a mainstream print culture, which was linked to commercialism and mass production (104). Whereas some radicals continued to write traditional realist novels and simply substituted middle-class characters for socialist ones, others adapted the novelistic form to fit socialism’s economic, political, and ethical vision (83). Through the socialist utopian genre, radical writers were free to imagine reality not “as it truly is,” according to Lukács, or as capitalism needs it to be, according to Jameson, but as it might be if socialist principles prevailed. Texts like Besant’s and Morris’s, therefore, disrupt the seeming inescapability of capitalism, including the necropolitical production of an excess population that capitalism supports, by presenting a glimpse of a utopian life where socialist fellowship rather than capitalist competition or state regulation reigns.

The idea of utopia was a critical driving force in British socialism in the 1880s and 1890s. During these decades, there was an explosion of socialist activity that had been unseen since the Owenites who, under the guidance of Robert Owen, failed in their attempts to establish utopian communities in the 1820s and 1830s. In the late-century
revival, three major approaches to socialism emerged: the reformist parliamentary approach, the revolutionary Marxist approach, and the ethical socialist approach. While a sense of idealism marked all of these strands, it was central for the ethical socialists who viewed their brand of socialism in a more holistic manner. Rather than focusing on only reforming the existing political structure or uprooting the capitalist economy, the ethical socialists believed that leading a socialist way of life was the best way to serve the socialist mission. Robert Blatchford elucidated this variant of socialism further in the radical periodical *The Labour Prophet*. In the April 1897 issue, he wrote that ethical socialism or what came to be known as the religion of socialism concerned itself both with “economic truth” and with “the ethical and spiritual implications of these desires and efforts for a juster social order” (qtd. in Yeo 5). Blatchford continued: “Socialism is a step—a long step indeed, but still only a step—to the realization of a new social ideal. The labor movement is but one sign of a new spirit at work in many directions throughout human affairs. A new conception of life is taking shape, to which it is affectation, if not folly, to refuse the name of Religion” (qtd. in Yeo 6). To spread the word of this religion, ethical socialists converted new believers, in part, by turning to art. As Ruth Livesey explains, “[t]he category of the aesthetic provided late nineteenth-century socialists … with a means of imagining a world without the capitalist system of commodification, whilst the use of aesthetic form ensured that readers themselves engaged with this process of imagining” (9). Utopian literature, in other words, was particularly important for making new socialists since it provided an avenue through which socialist writers could envisage life after the revolution and readers could become drawn into the socialist way of being. For socialist writers and artists, images of utopia “stimulated hope and
desire within the individual subject and these transitive qualities formed a bridge between the aesthetic ideal and the material world: wanting socialism was one means of making it so” (9). Deeply political, aesthetic renderings of utopia became the engine for social upheaval by stirring up feelings of pleasure, optimism, and desire that would lead to tangible, real-world results.

In this chapter, I contend that Besant’s and Morris’s novels deploy the relationship between socialist utopia and aesthetics in two ways: 1) by depicting an alternative socialist community where the people have seized the means of production and are finding pleasure and self-fulfillment in their daily lives through artistic creation and 2) by narrating this community through an antirealistic aesthetic that performs a version of the aesthetic revolution that late-century socialism promoted. Socialist utopian novels demonstrate how the population—working-class or not—can speak back to the forms of power-knowledge that have been used to regulate it. These forms include statistics and demography, as discussed in chapter 1; the census and the idea of the household, as discussed in chapter 2; and cartography and geography, as discussed in chapter 3. As I have illustrated, the state uses these various epistemologies and technologies in order to imagine—or, one can even say, to aestheticize—the population in a manner that justifies the state’s biopolitical endeavors. The population, from the perspective of the state, is either in crisis and lacking governmental intervention or is controlled and contained because of the state’s implementation of these knowledges and practices. While Victorian novels expose how the state conceptualizes the population by enacting and critiquing the government’s biopolitical techniques, these novels also provide a space, as this chapter will show, through which the population—or rather the
individual writers who belong to the population—can counter the state’s biopolitical imagination and generate alternative ways to arrange, sustain, and reproduce the demographic mass. Even as the populations within the utopian communities portrayed in *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* and *News from Nowhere* are small and local, these texts gesture toward a massive reorganization of the global population that indicates the ambition of these texts to visualize and effect large-scale change. By reconceiving the population in a style that opposes how the state conceives of it, socialist utopian novels offer a new aesthetic lens through which to envision mass existence. This chapter hence shows how art can serve as the means through which the population can wrest biopolitical discourse away from the state and use it to direct itself in a way that corresponds with what the people want instead of what the state imagines they are and should be.

In the following pages, I will demonstrate how socialist utopian fiction depicts the biopolitical resonances of art and aesthetic engagement by reading *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* and *News from Nowhere* in the context of late-century debates about socialist aesthetics and the cultural education of the poor. Starting with *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, I will examine how this text rejects deterministic or what we could call realist understandings of the working class as grim, despairing, and monotonous in favor of a utopian understanding of this population as happy, pleasurable, and life affirming. Then, I will explain how Besant’s novel, in presenting this alternative conception of the poor, rethinks the relationship between aesthetic production and consumption in order to empower the poor not only to redirect their labor for the pursuit of artistic pleasure but also to demand a new social order that bypasses and disrupts
capitalist state power. Subsequently, I will turn to News from Nowhere as a text that portrays the socialist world that All Sorts and Conditions of Men insinuates can be the future that emerges out of the latter’s utopian hopes. In this final section, I will show how the socialist mission of making and converting new socialists through art—a mission that Besant’s and Morris’s novels both endorse—expands into the biopolitical mission of cultivating and reproducing a socialist race.

1.

As I note above, even as Besant’s All Sorts and Conditions of Men briefly engages with realism, the text’s dominant narrative mode is utopian. The novel tells the story of heiress Angela Messenger who disguises herself as a common dressmaker in order to live among the people and teach them the pleasure of enjoying and making art. She does so by building two utopian enclaves: the Dressmakers’ Association, which she heads under the alias of Angela Kennedy, and the Palace of Delight, which she secretly constructs with her inheritance. Similar to Father Sturt’s, albeit failed, urban renewal project in A Child of the Jago, these two places serve as socialist retreats for the people of Stepney Green. In the Dressmakers’ Association, Angela refines the young women of the slum by providing them with food, shelter, and culture under the pretense of hiring them for her dressmaking business. During working hours, the dressmakers regularly take breaks for exercise and relaxation; they learn to sing, dance, play, and read; and they share the profits of the business. As Angela remarks, “we are a body of workwomen governing ourselves and working for ourselves” (Besant 120). The Association is a socialist utopian experiment that Angela more fully develops later in the Palace of Delight. A working-class cultural center, the Palace, as Angela envisions it, will hold
lectures, performances, and exhibitions where the poor can first learn how to create art and then enjoy the art that they create. The Palace is intended to be “the property of the people, to be administered and governed by them and them alone, in trust for each other” (428). Like the Association, the Palace embodies socialist principles in its emphasis on communal ownership, direct democracy, and pleasurable and fulfilling aesthetic work. Besant’s Palace of Delight was so inspiring that it led to the construction of the real People’s Palace, which was built on Mile End Road in the heart of the East End in 1887. Although the People’s Palace did not realize Besant’s ambition of culturally educating the poor in order to rouse them to demand social change—it became a vocational school by the mid 1890s—the novel suggests that the Palace of Delight would do just that. The text ends by comparing the grand opening of the Palace to the reopening of “the gates of the earthly Paradise” (432). The Association and the Palace thus both operate as socialist utopian communities within the capitalist society of late Victorian London.

While critics have recognized All Sorts and Conditions of Men’s utopianism, they tend to disparage it, seeing it as a failure of realism rather than a meaningful aesthetic and political choice. Keating, for example, calls Besant “one of the worst” novelists of the nineteenth century because of his “strikingly simplified image of the East End” (103). Comparing Besant to Gissing, who Keating praises as “one of the best working-class novelists” due to his “devotion to objective truth,” Keating claims that Besant’s “refusal to struggle with the problems of realism … would have mattered less if he had openly acknowledged the utopian nature of his propaganda” (103, 54, 95). Wim Neetens similarly critiques Besant’s novel for its unsuccessful realism, which he claims is a consequence of the novel’s attempt to balance realist and utopian elements. For Neetens,
the novel does not fully commit to utopianism because it tries to “convince readers of the feasibility, or at least desirability of the project it proposes”; however, the text’s realist engagement with “existing developments in the social and political sphere” undercuts the utopian cause of advancing working-class self-governance (251). To some extent, I agree with these critics: *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* certainly does not portray Angela’s utopian projects with any fidelity to the material world outside of the text. But these critics, I argue, overlook the novel’s critical capacity by evaluating it based on a realist paradigm rather than engaging with the text’s utopianism on its own terms. Whereas Keating and Neetens view this lack of verisimilitude as an aesthetic shortcoming that reveals the novel’s ideological contradictions, I contend that the novel purposely departs from a realist mode when narrating Angela’s projects in order to highlight the aesthetic freedom that utopianism allows. This freedom enables the text to imagine an alternative present where unrealistic projects like the Dressmakers’ Association and the Palace of Delight can manifest and prosper.

Self-consciously antirealist, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* takes advantage of utopianism’s artistic license in order to make room for a socialist utopia even within the late-century moment of the novel’s publication. The story is set only “last year” in 1881 (Besant 19). Unlike most late Victorian utopian novels, which are usually set in the medieval past or in the far-flung future like Morris’s *News from Nowhere*, Besant’s work takes place in the present capitalist age. This setting, in some ways, makes Keating’s and Neetens’s disbelief at the novel’s utopian hopes understandable. Some Victorian readers also found the novel to be implausible. As Besant writes in the preface, after being told by “certain friendly advisers that this story is impossible,” he decided to “state[] the fact
on the title-page, so that no one may complain of being taken in or deceived” (18). The novel, therefore, registers its antirealism immediately in its subtitle, “An Impossible Story.” We see this self-awareness in the narrative as well. For instance, when Angela writes about her experiences in Stepney Green to a friend back home, she deliberately “did not convey the whole truth” because she knows her friend would not approve of the liberties she has taken (151). As Angela privately admits, it “would be too disgraceful to narrate” how, with the Dressmakers’ Association, “she violated all principles of social economy, giving clothes, secretly lending money, visiting mothers, paying rent, and all without any regard to supply and demand, marketable value, price current, worth of labour, wages rate, averages, percentages, interest, capital, commercial rules, theory of trade, encouragement of over-population” (155). As a former student of political economy, Angela should know better than to give into her humanitarian side and treat her employees with compassion instead of running her business according to the impersonal rules of the market. But the freedom to comprehend the working class as individuals made of “flesh and blood” rather than as “theories, facts, statistics” is the precise reason that she journeys to the East End in the first place (27). Angela seeks a more realistic understanding of the slum population than abstract figures can provide. Similar to what I argue in chapter 1, Angela implies with her preference for “flesh and blood” that “theories, facts, statistics” are not as objectively truthful as statisticians and political economists would like them to be. In electing to know the poor through “flesh and blood,” then, Angela, like the novel, elects a different aesthetic with which to see and depict the mass.
Although Angela chooses the round, robust narration of “flesh and blood” over the flat, anemic description of numbers and economic theory, the novel chooses neither option, selecting instead the “impossible” antirealist mode of utopianism so as to expose the artificiality of both “flesh and blood” and scientific objectivity. The novel strikes down the abstract political economic perspective of numbers and figures for a humanist point of view in order to disrupt the exploitative capitalist economy that the scientific perspective represents. And while the humanist point of view might appear to align with Angela’s penchant for “flesh and blood” encounters, the novel demonstrates that the thick, grounded portrayals that she seeks are actually associated with the pessimistic and deterministic realism that Besant’s text ultimately rejects. In preferring “flesh and blood,” Angela claims that she “want[s] to feel [her]self a part of this striving, eager, anxious humanity” (27). In other words, she initially believes that the depiction of the poor as a mindless mass is an accurate one—a depiction that realist slum novels like The Nether World and A Child of the Jago present. Yet what Angela discovers when she arrives in the East End is not a swarm of faceless inhabitants but a community of sympathetic individuals each with their own personalities, backstories, and potentials.

For Angela, seeing the poor as individuals and not as an undifferentiated mass is an aesthetic decision that requires a conscious rejection of the original view she held. When Harry Goslett, the novel’s other protagonist, comments on the fatalistic monotony of slum life in order to justify his social inaction, Angela counters by arguing that “[i]t does not make it any better for a man who has to work all the days of his life, and gets no enjoyment out of it, and lives ignobly and dies obscurely, that the same thing happens to most people” (99). In Angela’s view, just because all working-class people might share a
common experience, the commonness of that experience does not negate the fact that individual people suffer. She hence recognizes the working class as a collection of individuals instead of what for Harry is an interchangeable and unfeeling crowd. For him, the East End is made up of “people living the same mean and monotonous lives, all after the same model” (56). This conception of the East End corresponds with the realism of Gissing’s “stream[ing]” masses and Morrison’s “swarm[ing]” population (Gissing 10, Morrison 11). Yet rather than affirming this realism, Besant’s narrator claims that Harry’s “ignorance” prevents him from “knowing how rich and full any life may be made” (57).

Harry’s understanding of the working class as “mean and monotonous” is an aesthetic choice that Angela and the novel do not make. Choosing instead an antirealist mode through which to represent the working class as “rich and full,” the novel selects an utopian aesthetic to present an alternate version of what reality can be.

This alternate reality is one where working-class individuals have the opportunity to fulfill their potentials and become happy, pleasure-seeking people. While happiness and pleasure are not feelings usually linked with radicalism, they become politically charged in the novel given the typical portrayal of the poor as despondent and angry. This portrayal is a difficult one for the poor to evade. According to the narrator, there are those in the upper classes who associate poverty with moral weakness and thus believe that “people ‘below them’ have no right to the enjoyment of anything. They do not mean to be cruel, but they have always associated poverty with dirt, discomfort, disagreeable companions, and the absence of pleasantness; for a poor person to be happy is either to them an impossibility, or it is a flying in the face of Providence” (152). Poverty, in this sense, is a punishment for moral depravity rather than an effect of inequitable social
conditions. The poor cannot be allowed to enjoy their lives since doing so would upset what some Victorians considered to be a natural moral and social hierarchy. As Sara Ahmed articulates, “Ideas of happiness involve social as well as moral distinctions insofar as they rest on ideas of who is worthy as well as capable of being happy ‘in the right way’” (13). Since slum dwellers, by virtue of their destitution, are thought to be literally and morally insolvent, they are not “worthy” or even “capable of being happy” in the way that the well-to-do believe that happiness should be experienced.

This idea of social and moral worth corresponds with my argument in the previous chapter, where I demonstrate how the seeming inescapability of the poor’s social and geographic environments leads slum residents to internalize their oppression. This internalization also affects the working-class characters of All Sorts and Conditions of Men. For example, when describing Tom Coppin, Harry’s slum-dwelling cousin, the narrator explains that “[h]appiness is not a word in the dictionary of men like Tom” (289). The narrator continues: “[such men] know misery, because it is all round them; the misery of hunger, of disease, of intemperance, of dirt, of evil temper, of violence ... But they know not happiness … Happiness, calm, peace, content, the sweet enjoyment of innocent recreation—these things [Tom] knew nothing of” (289). For Tom, happiness is a foreign concept because, as one born to poverty, the only life narrative available to him is ostensibly the necropolitical one of capitulating to the “misery” of the East End. Yet even for Tom who resists that narrative, the “alternative for misery” is not happiness but “Glory” via the asceticism of the Salvation Army (289). Happiness is never an option for Tom. While he disrupts the belief that the poor can only be miserable by seeking glory, his conception of glory specifically excludes pleasure. Limited in his affective
experiences, Tom affirms the upper-class notion that “for a poor person to be happy is … an impossibility.”

Another working-class stereotype that apparently supports the idea that slum residents are incapable of happiness is that of the raging radical. Like with the assumption that the poor can only feel misery, the slum population unwittingly gives into the belief that the poor are anarchic and irrationally incensed—characteristics that the novel claims are counterproductive to the socialist agenda. Angela initially thinks that those who belong to the Stepney Advanced Club, a local men’s working club, are “real” and “earnest” in their political opinions and must be seeking happiness given the anger that they express. Harry, however, calls these men and their feelings “sham[s]”: “[these men] are not real … They are quite conventional. The people like to be roused by red-hot, scorching speeches … [but] they have had so many sham grievances told in red-hot words that they have become callous, and don’t know of any real ones” (162). Like Tom, these men are unable to experience happiness or imagine a day when happiness can be theirs. As a result, they indulge in bitterness and frustration, which are “not real” emotions but manufactured ones that prevent the poor from addressing the actual problems plaguing them. Both Tom and the men of the Advanced Club hence yield to the middle-class expectation of the poor as wretched, stoic, and enraged.

While this expectation is, in part, a consequence of the middle-class belief that there are no “joys which can be had without money,” it is also a means of demographic control (152). As Harry reveals, the absence of even the possibility of happiness keeps the poor complacent and prevents them from organizing in any productive manner to instill social change. He derides the Advanced Club’s obsession with parliamentary and
institutional reform as a distraction, exclaiming that “[w]hether the House of Lords, or the Church, or the Land Laws stand or fall, that, my friends, makes not the difference of a penny piece to any single man among us. You who agitate for their destruction are generously giving your time and trouble for things which help no man” (264). Instead of reveling in anger, Harry suggests that the poor focus on “find[ing] out for yourselves what you want … if you spend half the energy in working for yourselves that you have spent in working for things that do you no good, you will be happy indeed” (268). This idea that the poor can seek their own happiness has, up to this point, been unheard of. As the narrator points out, the chairman of the club “had never considered that life might have its delights” (267). The novel’s utopian fantasy of creating a joyful slum population is, therefore, deeply radical, as Besant’s aesthetic decision to depict a happy working class destabilizes the “conventional” or realist image of the desolate, irate, and, by extension, passive and manageable poor.

The production of a happy laboring class becomes possible through Angela’s utopian projects that offer cultural experiences and aesthetic education to the people of Stepney Green. This notion of elevating the people through art has roots in Victorian reformist and philanthropic efforts to regulate popular entertainment. For Diana Maltz, these efforts belong to what she calls “missionary aestheticism,” a form of philanthropy that “employ[ed] both the rhetoric of aestheticism and actual manifestations of aesthetic style as remedies for urban degradation” (2). Inspired by John Ruskin’s theory in “The Nature of Gothic” (1853) that the working man should be uplifted through aesthetic instruction and Matthew Arnold’s belief in Culture and Anarchy (1869) that only a qualified minority could bring culture to the masses, these reformers exposed the poor to
beauty in order to cultivate their aesthetic tastes and moral capacities (Maltz 1–18). Chris Waters connects this late-century philanthropic aesthetic movement to an earlier moment in the 1830s and 1840s when the middle class tried to replace working-class leisure activities with what reformers considered to be “rational recreation” (3). Rather than street football, blood sports, and penny theaters, reformers hoped to provide the poor with temperance cafes, mechanics’ institutes, and public lectures so as to “inculcate a series of values in the working class that were important to the middle class in its own uses of leisure” (3).

While the concepts of missionary aestheticism and rational recreation originated in the upper- and middle-classes’ desires to civilize the poor, socialists also drew from these discourses in order to promote their own beliefs about art and social upheaval. After laborers successfully advocated for a reduced workday, socialists became concerned with how laborers would spend their leisure time. As Waters explains, socialists were “uneasy about the fact that … a decrease in working hours did not appear to be accompanied by a desire to devote leisure to edifying pursuits,” pursuits that could be directed toward advancing the socialist cause (4). Consequently, socialists aimed not only to offer alternative entertainments but also, more importantly, to teach the poor to desire a better, socialist life. One way they achieved this, as this chapter mentions earlier, was through utopian literature since “by reading about the pleasures of utopian life workers would begin to desire more pleasure in their own lives. Once awakened, that desire was supposed to lead them to struggle for a society in which genuine pleasure would be abundant” (Waters 43). Art and its ability to convey the promise of happiness hence
served as the vehicle for socialist activism, even as it was also used in the late century by middle- and upper-class reformers and philanthropists for paternalistic purposes.

*All Sorts and Conditions of Men* conveys this dual nature of art as a paternalistic and socialist tool. While the wealthy Angela funds the Dressmakers’ Association and the Palace of Delight, she does so for the radical goal of empowering the poor and liberating them from capitalist exploitation. Because of the paternalistic element, Neetens reads the novel as ultimately conservative. To Neetens, the novel rejects “a genuine revolutionary politics” in favor of “a less confronting and less oppositional social model, in which classes can be seen as cooperative and sharing the same interests” (255). I, in contrast, assert that the text’s paternalism serves its socialist agenda, for Angela relinquishes oversight over both the Association and Palace in order to allow the poor to govern themselves. As I have noted, Angela’s intention with the Palace is for it “to be administered and governed by [the people] and them alone.” Similarly, Angela describes the Association as “a body of workwomen governing ourselves and working for ourselves.” Angela’s use of the first-person plural here is significant as it indicates how she equates herself with her dressmakers. Though she hires them, the dressmakers participate equally in deciding how the Association will be run and share equally in its profits.

Angela’s commitment to democracy and socialism, moreover, is evident from the beginning of her time in Stepney as well as from her characterization. Realizing that she can only know and help the poor by becoming one of them, Angela renounces her exceptionality as an heiress when she decides to live as one of the people. In her words, by becoming Angela Kennedy, “I efface myself. I vanish. I disappear” (Besant 27). Harry
also forsakes his social privilege when he moves to the slum. Originally born there, Harry was plucked out of the streets from an early age and raised as an aristocrat. Upon discovering his true identity, Harry resolves to “go[] back to my own people” and work as a cabinetmaker (37). The two protagonists, then, socially “efface” themselves in order to become part of the mass—a move that, for Christiane Gannon, evinces the novel’s departure from a traditional bildungsroman to what he identifies as a democratic one. By having Angela and Harry disappear into the population, All Sorts and Conditions of Men “reject[s] the traditional bildungsroman’s path of self-determined development” in favor of “the democratic bildungsroman, in which England’s aesthetic-spiritual development is imagined as a collective endeavor” (Gannon 379). This emphasis on collectivity—a collectivity that respects individual difference even as it flattens social hierarchy—forms the basis of the Association’s and the Palace’s socialist aesthetics. Through the aesthetic cultivation that these places offer, the poor can begin to discover latent moral and political desires that will compel them to band together and dismantle the necropolitical and capitalist regime that has been endangering them.

Both the Association and the Palace expose the poor to opportunities to enjoy and create art that is usually only available to the rich. Via art, the poor will learn how to become self-reliant and how to desire a new kind of life that can only be achieved through collective action. What the Association and Palace teach the poor is that, unlike the rich who “buy [delights],” the poor can “create them” (Besant 192). As Angela points out, “All these things which make the life of rich people happy shall be yours; and they shall cost you nothing” (192). The poor have the wherewithal to produce pleasures for themselves whereas the rich only know how to enjoy life through capitalist consumption.
In showing the laboring class how to make art, Angela empowers them with the ability to reject the joyless existence that is presumed of them. Through her utopian projects, Angela seeks to “awaken in dull and lethargic brains a new sense, the sense of pleasure; she would give them a craving for things of which as yet they knew nothing” (187). Angela hopes to cultivate in slum dwellers “a noble discontent”; this “discontent” will encourage them to “cease to look on life as a daily uprising and a down-sitting, a daily mechanical toil, a daily rest” (187). By becoming discontented with their “mechanical” lives after realizing the joys that they can experience at the Palace, the people, so Angela believes, will begin to wonder “how the capacity of delight may be widened” and start to demand such joys elsewhere (187). Like the socialists who used utopian literature to arouse socialist desires, Angela uses art to “awaken” the laboring population’s “discontent.” If life can be so wonderful in the Palace, why can’t life be wonderful outside of it too? Although the Palace may appear contained—as a utopian space, it seemingly exists apart from the rest of London—in provoking socialist unrest, the Palace unleashes the poor’s collective power beyond the building’s four walls. Harry calls this power “an irresistible giant who has only to roar in order to get what he wants” (264). The desire for pleasure that the Palace and Association liberate through aesthetic revelation thus surpasses the immediate gratification that these places can provide. By instilling a yearning for more, the Palace and Association initiate a socialist movement that will extend the realm of pleasure from these local enclaves to the wider world.

As a socialist utopian novel, All Sorts and Conditions of Men presents a conception of the slum population as optimistic and life affirming. After declaring the Palace of Delight open and ready for socialist aesthetic conversions, the text ends with a
vision of what the future might look like should the Palace succeed in its mission of empowering the poor. To some extent, this vision resembles Angela’s fantasy of socialist fellowship and working-class self-governance, but it also hints at a surprising collusion between the socialism that the novel advocates and eugenic thought. Throughout the text, the ambition of the Palace and Association is to teach the poor to pursue pleasure as a means of creating radical activists. The improvements that the novel seeks, then, appear to derive solely from the moral, social, and economic realms. However, the racial improvement that the text insinuates in its ending recasts the ethical socialist goal of making socialists into the alternative goal of reproducing socialists through a master race of English working men. As the narrator states,

Now, the world being so small as it is, and Englishmen and Scotchmen being so masterful … it cannot but happen that the world will presently—that is, in two generations, or three at the most—he be overrun with the good old English blood; whereupon until the round earth gets too small, which will not happen for another ten thousand years or so, there will be the purest, most delightful, and most heavenly Millennium. Rich people may come into it if they please, but they will not be wanted: in fact, rich people will die out, and it will soon come to be considered an unhappy thing, as it undoubtedly is, to be born rich. (424)

The narrator implies that British socialism will be so successful that it will turn the entire world into a socialist utopia. This utopia is the result not of dismantling the capitalist global economy, as one might expect, but of procreating a new socialist race. Even more extreme than the British imperial fantasy of colonizing the globe, the socialist fantasy that
closes the novel is a eugenic one where “rich people will die out” and “the purest, most delightful, and most heavenly” of “good old English blood” will populate the world.

The novel’s socialist dream of a classless, stateless society ultimately becomes the racist vision of white English working-class men. Though the various socialist groups at the turn of the century differed in their perspectives on eugenics, some like the Fabians were expressly pro-eugenics. Influenced by social Darwinism, the Fabians believed that society was naturally evolving into a more perfect social organism, and they hoped to accelerate this process through state interventions that would “replace the more random, unmediated operations of Darwinian natural selection” (Linehan 126). While Besant was not a Fabian, his novel’s conclusion implicates the socialist objective of making new socialists through art in the eugenic objective of shaping populations in certain fashions. As the text’s finale implies, creating a politically socialist population is tantamount to creating a socialist race. The novel’s objective of reconceiving the poor via an alternative utopian aesthetics is, therefore, entangled in the biopolitical goal of making populations live and making populations up, as I argue in chapter 1. This time, however, it is the population, armed with the creative power of art, that determines its own image—an image that has literary aesthetic implications, as well as social and racial effects.

2.

A classic example of the socialist utopian genre, Morris’s News from Nowhere picks up where All Sorts and Conditions of Men leaves off. Whereas Besant’s text proposes a way that a socialist future can be created—and briefly fantasizes about what that future might look like—News from Nowhere is set in that future, imagining in detail a utopia where economic class, private property, and money no longer exist and direct
democracy has replaced state institutions and other centralized forms of power. In Morris’s novel, the narrator William Guest falls asleep after returning home from a meeting of the Socialist League, the socialist organization that Morris helped found in 1885. When Guest awakens, he finds himself in Nowhere or what he quickly discovers is twenty-second-century London. In contrast with the industrial squalor of late Victorian England, Nowhere is a pastoral paradise where people live in communistic harmony. Like All Sorts and Conditions of Men, News from Nowhere rejects realist depictions of the masses as desolate, insalubrious, and redundant in favor of a utopian aesthetics that envisions the population as joyful, healthy, and self-regulated. Because News from Nowhere envisions a utopian future where socialist principles prevail rather than a Victorian present with contained socialist utopian zones, the role of aesthetics shifts in Morris’s novel from operating as the medium for instigating socialist activism to serving as the platform through which a new socialist lifestyle is lived and a new socialist race is cultivated and formed.

In News from Nowhere, art is not the means for inspiring a socialist way of life but becomes that socialist way of life, as the simple act of living in utopia is infused with aesthetic pleasure and fulfillment. Similar to Blatchford’s proclamation that socialism signals “[a] new conception of life,” Morris’s text demonstrates that living socialistically means reimagining the quotidian. Everything from economic relations to domestic, moral, and ecological ones are remade and revalued as a result of the socialist revolution. According to News from Nowhere, the success of the revolution is evinced in how delightful everyday life has become, and the main reason for this transformation lies in a redefineition of labor. In Nowhere, labor no longer refers to the hard toil and low wages
that characterized work in industrial capitalism. Instead, labor is synonymous with pleasure and art. As Old Hammond, the resident antiquarian of Nowhere, asserts, this new understanding of work is the “change which makes all the others possible” (W. Morris 123). While in *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* the goal of the Palace of Delight and the Dressmakers’ Association is to teach the poor how to experience pleasure through art, in *News from Nowhere* that goal has been fully achieved, as pleasure and art are found everywhere and in everything. Old Hammond explains:

> all work is now pleasurable; either because of the hope of gain in honour and wealth with which the work is done, which causes pleasurable excitement, even when the actual work is not pleasant; or else because it has grown into a pleasurable *habit*, as in the case with what you may call mechanical work; and lastly (and most of our work is of this kind) because there is conscious sensuous pleasure in the work itself; it is done, that is, by artists. (122–3)

All work in Nowhere is pleasurable because all work is socially respected, personally edifying, and spiritually satisfying. Moreover, all work is art because utopian work transforms individuals into “conscious sensuous … artists” rather than mindless, insensate laborers. This work—or art—includes everything from traditional handiwork, such as pottery making and glass blowing, to what Guest calls “real necessary work,” such as road mending (82). Art in utopia is an expansive concept, including every type of labor as well as the outcomes of that labor. The quotidian pleasure of being alive and the privilege of being able to create—the act of creation is always artistic in Nowhere—are the ultimate “reward[s] of labour” (122). As Hammond indicates, the purpose of socialist
revolution is “to make people happy,” and, for people to continue to be happy, they must have “happy daily work” (123). Everyday life for residents of utopia is a continual process of aesthetic production and consumption. *News from Nowhere* hence intensifies the place of art in socialism by equating art with socialist life rather than offering art as the vehicle through which socialist desires can be activated. Like art, socialist life is an end in itself, innately pleasurable, enriching, and valuable.

This utopian conception of ordinary life opposes how life was understood to be in the nineteenth century, or, at least, how realist novels depicted it. From the view of those from the Victorian period, utopian life might appear unchallenging and trivial; initially, Guest calls utopian labor “a mere part of a summer holiday” (82). This understanding, though, is a consequence of how indoctrinated Victorians have become in realism’s capitalist narratives. Due to their distanced perspectives, most residents of Nowhere find the nineteenth century utterly appalling. As Dick, Guest’s companion in Nowhere, states, “nineteenth-century [people] were hypocrites and pretended to be humane, and yet went on tormenting those whom they dared to treat so by shutting them up in prison” (79). Only the character known as the old grumbler looks upon the Victorian era with nostalgia, believing that people then were “brisker and more alive, because you have not wholly got rid of competition,” (174). He obtains this illusion because of what he reads in Victorian novels, which he similarly claims “are much more alive than those which are written now … There is a spirit of adventure in them, and signs of a capacity to extract good out of evil which our literature quite lacks” (174). For the grumbler, the struggles that realist fiction narrates ironically prove the superiority rather than inferiority of
nineteenth-century life. Like the Victorians, then, the grumbler mistakenly equates
capitalism with value and vitality.

Through this passage, *News from Nowhere* not only critiques Victorian society
but also positions itself against other Victorian texts, ostensibly undercutting its own
worth as a novel. By depicting a future where great literature, or the realist literature that
Victorians considered to be great, no longer exists, the novel seems to imply that it itself
is a terrible piece of fiction since it does not abide by realist standards.\(^5\) However, since
Morris’s text ultimately critiques realism for colluding with capitalism, the novel actually
insinuates its own greatness by virtue of a utopian aesthetics that rejects realism’s
capitalist values.\(^6\) Rebuking the old grumbler’s literary tastes, Ellen, his granddaughter,
asserts that despite the “cleverness and vigour [of realist novels] … there is something
loathsome about them. Some of them, indeed, do here and there show some feeling for
those whom the history-books call ‘poor’ … but presently they give it up and towards the
end of the story we must be contented to see the hero and heroine living happily in an
island of bliss on other people’s troubles” (175–6). While realist characters might seem
more “clever[,]” the realist “hero and heroine” emerge victorious not because they are
more intelligent but because they benefit from capitalist exploitation. The excitement of
realist novels depends on the abuses of capitalist competition. By disparaging realism as a
surrogate for capitalism, *News from Nowhere* demonstrates how literary form is
entangled with social and political values. Even as the novel critiques this entanglement
in realism, the link between aesthetics and politics enables the novel to proffer
utopianism as an alternative aesthetics that destabilizes the capitalist worldview, which
realism advances as natural and unavoidable.
The novel imbues aesthetics with politics in order to reveal that the capitalist system that realist novels promote is fictional and mutable and thus can be subverted by depicting social relations through a different literary mode. Overall, the novel is suspicious of fiction because of its escapist tendencies—an ironic suspicion given that the text provides an escape through Guest’s dream from the material realities of the nineteenth century. The novel expresses its misgivings of literature most obviously through Ellen. As she exclaims, “Books, books! always books, grandfather! When will you understand that after all it is the world we live in which interests us; the world of which we are a part, and which we can never love too much?” (175). In addition to its capitalist leanings, the problem with literature is that it distracts people from engaging with the world around them. Though Ellen concedes that the dismal conditions of nineteenth-century life may have made distractions necessary—“[books] were well enough for times when intelligent people had but little else in which they could take pleasure” (175)—in the utopian future, “life is too pleasurable to need much of the vicarious pleasure provided by literature” (Brantlinger, “News” 40). Realist novels are particularly guilty of diverting people’s attentions away from reality because of their claims to truth. They maintain a semblance of facticity and, therefore, make readers think they are experiencing real life even when they are only experiencing life through a distorted lens. As Old Hammond explains, Victorians believed that “art and imaginative literature ought to deal with contemporary life; but [art and literature] never did so; for, if there was any pretence of it, the author always took care … to disguise, or exaggerate, or idealize, and in some way or another make it strange” (W. Morris 131). Realist works, in other words, are as illusory as other fictional works. By weakening realism’s hold on
reality, the novel suggests that its utopian depictions of the population are as realistic as realism’s pessimistic depictions. The Victorian Guest readily admits that so-called realistic portrayals of the working class as miserable are an aesthetic choice. He confesses: “in those days it was thought poetic and imaginative to look upon life as a thing to be borne, rather than enjoyed” (225). In asserting that bleakness was “poetic and imaginative,” Guest implies that the alleged truth of realism—that life is dismal and unrelenting—is not an ontological issue but a “poetic and imaginative” one. What counts as reality becomes an aesthetic matter in the text, and, given that daily life in utopia is a work of art, changing the aesthetics of reality enables new understandings of life and the population to be imagined and enacted.

The new aesthetics that the novel offers is a socialist utopian one that transforms what was seen as a redundant mass into a well-organized community. As Ellen comprehends it, all lives in the past were “wasted” (223). She surmises that, if she lived in the nineteenth century, she “would have been wasted indeed; for I know enough of that to know that I should have had no choice, no power of will over my life; and that I should never have bought pleasure from the rich … I should have been wrecked and wasted in one way or another, either be penury or by luxury” (223). Ellen alludes here to the necropolitical regime, discussed in the previous chapter, that turned the Victorian poor into a “wasted” excess. She suggests additionally that the rich were likewise “wasted” since “luxury” made them into capitalists instead of artists, as everyone is now. This conception of the social body as “wrecked and wasted” runs counter to the type of social body found in utopia, where everyone is individualized and intrinsically valued, yet they still band together for the good of the social whole. As Hammond explains, “in matters
which are merely personal … everybody does as he pleases. But when the matter is of common interest … the majority must have their way” (118–9). The people of Nowhere make communal decisions democratically since they recognize that all work is “either beneficial or hurtful to every member of society” (121). The continuity between individual and mass makes every member contribute to the wellbeing of the population, and, as such, each person is invested in upholding demographic wellbeing. Unlike the Victorian population, which, because it is imagined as superfluous, needs the state to intervene so as to instill order, the utopian population is imagined as self-regulated and thus responsible for its own preservation. Whereas this new conception of life is a matter of structural change, it is also a matter of aesthetic upheaval. Before the revolution, “the hope of realizing a communal condition of life for all men … seemed a dream” (133–4). But through a utopian aesthetics, this “dream” becomes reality.

*News from Nowhere* performs this aesthetic replacement through literary form. As a socialist utopian novel, the text turns what only “seemed a dream” into what Guest describes as a “new life” that is “so real … it may be called a vision rather than a dream” (228). Rejecting realism in favor of utopianism, the text makes the dream plausible—more plausible, in fact, than history, which Hammond claims is “too ridiculous to be true” (78). Aesthetics hence determines material reality since literary form limits what is possible—socially, politically, and even biologically. In *News from Nowhere*, the creation of a socialist utopia becomes a question of restructuring social relations as well as re-depicting or re-aestheticizing them. But, as the conclusion of *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* suggests, creating utopia is also a matter of altering the race: the utopian imagination
of creating a better community is consistent with the eugenic imagination of producing a better population.

Unlike Besant’s novel, which delays exposing the connection between utopia and eugenics until the narrative’s end, Morris’s novel plays with this connection right away. When Guest awakens in Nowhere, he immediately comments on how attractive and strong its inhabitants are. Upon meeting Dick, Guest describes him as “a handsome young fellow” who is “well-knit and strong, and obviously used to exercising his muscles” (47). Later, Guest observes that the women of Nowhere are “specimens of very much improved types which I had known in other times” (203). Unlike the “healthy and at least comely” women of utopia, Victorian women are “gaunt … lean, flat-breasted, [and] ugly” (95, 169). Indeed, the entire population of Nowhere is an “improved” version of that of nineteenth-century England. As Old Hammond remarks, “the English and Jutish blood … used not to produce much beauty. But I think we have improved it” (96). Hammond’s statement most directly insinuates that a eugenic policy underlies Nowhere’s socialist changes. Throughout the text, this policy is implied in the many descriptions of the inhabitant’s physical strength and beauty. Only in this moment, though, does the novel hint that the population’s biological advances have been intentional. For Patrick Parrinder, the eugenic connotations of utopia are linked to its explicit interest in eudemonics. As he argues, in utopias that seek to maximize happiness and human potential, “life will be taken to its full term, not cut short by avoidable evils such as poor health, poor sanitation, stress, road accidents, murder or warfare … Not only do [people in utopia] live to a greater age, but utopians are usually imagined as being stronger on the average and more beautiful than we are” (68). This is certainly the case in Nowhere
where the superior health of its inhabitants is a consequence of their happiness. As a resident of Nowhere warns Guest, “one ages very quickly if one lives amongst unhappy people” (W. Morris 57). Capitalism and social inequality are degenerative diseases in utopia, while socialism is the regenerative cure. The text’s utopian form, therefore, frees it to imagine not only a better socialist community but also a better socialist race, as portraying the former is impossible without simultaneously portraying the latter.

While the eugenic undercurrent of Nowhere derives from the novel’s utopian imagination, it also results from the relationship between certain strands of socialism and eugenic thought. As mentioned above, the socialists most associated with eugenics were the Fabians, who thought that socialism could be achieved by working with existing governmental institutions (Bevir 301). Morris, however, considered parliamentary approaches to socialism ineffective and even dangerous. To him, state action could, at best, only secure material needs and, at worst, distract or lead socialists away from the goal of revolution (Bevir 99–100). Although Morris’s disapproval of state action ostensibly contrasts with News from Nowhere’s eugenic dynamics—eugenics most often being viewed as state-sponsored racial improvement—Morris’s belief in free love aligns him with a set of sex radicals who justified their encouragement of sexual liberty with eugenic science. As George Robb explains, many Victorians saw Britain’s declining economy, decreased birthrate, and urban poverty in the late century as “obvious manifestations of racial decay” (589). Whereas some Britons offered middle-class values as a solution, others declared that those values were the very problem because they “stifled passion and thus endangered the procreative urge” (590–1). Proponents of free love alleged that unleashing sexual desire would revitalize the population. For Marie
Stopes, intense sexual pleasure increased the quality of one’s offspring; for Havelock Ellis and Olive Schreiner, the economic interests of traditional marriage distorted natural desire by making those with little eugenic value more wanted (Robb 591–2). Whereas Morris based his support of free love on his support of individual liberation, free love in *News from Nowhere* takes a eugenic tinge, as Hammond attributes the “increase of beauty” in the “English and Jutish blood” to Nowhere’s “freedom and good sense in [sexual] matters” (96). Hammond continues: “some people … believe that a child born from the natural and healthy love between a man and a woman … is likely to turn out better in all ways, and especially in bodily beauty, than the birth of the respectable commercial marriage bed” (96). Though Hammond projects this argument onto “some people,” the mere suggestion of this eugenic argument ties utopia and utopian aesthetics to eugenic discourse. This link indicates that the text’s utopian mode—which makes individual freedom, communal wellbeing, and socialist fellowship imaginable and possible—also makes the eugenic dream of racial perfection comprehensible, feasible, and potentially imminent. In *News from Nowhere*, then, aesthetics provides a way not only to visualize and enact a socialist future but also to biologize that future as the fate of a particular type of reproduction, akin to what I argue in chapter 2, and a particular population.

3.

By reading *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* and *News from Nowhere*, this chapter demonstrates how socialist utopian novels challenge the state’s various forms of biopolitical control. As this chapter contends, these works deploy a utopian aesthetics that negates the realism used by other novels and the state to imagine the population as an
entity in need of governmental control. Rather than describing the demographic mass as desolate, superfluous, and dying, these texts depict the population as happy, beautiful, and life affirming. In this regard, these texts provide an image of the population that destabilizes and speaks back to the chaotic image used by the state to justify its biopolitical regulation. Whereas *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* envisions a skilled and creative working class that reconceives itself as a people deserving of pleasure and a socialist way of life, *News from Nowhere* portrays a utopian society that already has built that socialist future by redefining ordinary life as art. In both novels, the act of reconceptualizing the population becomes as much of an aesthetic project as it is a biopolitical one, as the new ways in which the population is organized ultimately leads to a regeneration of the biological stock—a more perfect community is also a more perfect race. By imagining an alternative mode of existence that bypasses and interrupts capitalist state power, the socialist utopian genre serves as an example of how Victorian novels are not only proxies of the biopolitical state even in their critiques of it but also, as creative forms, can redirect biopolitical power for affirmative purposes.

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**NOTES**

1 See also E. Miller 1–6 and 82.
2 See Laybourn 1–64 for a history of the rise of British socialism at this time.
3 See Weiner 180–203 for more on the construction of the People’s Palace.
4 Though Besant was not a eugenicist, his sister-in-law, Annie Besant, was a famous birth-control advocate in the late century, and debates about birth control often took a eugenic turn. Whereas some proponents for birth control believed that the socially unfit could be persuaded to use birth control so as to limit their reproduction, those on the other side sought to dissuade the socially healthy from family planning so as to encourage their numbers. See Kevles 33, 52–3, and 87–90; and Soloway.
5 See Brantlinger who reads the novel as an “anti-novel,” that purposefully rejects traditional realist standards (“News” 40).
6 For a reading of the novel that is similar to mine, see E. Miller 32–81. Like me, Miller analyzes the novel’s utopianism, alongside the utopianism of other texts by Morris, as a
response to the prevailing realist aesthetic and capitalist ideology of the nineteenth century. Miller, however, focuses more on the materiality of Morris’s texts—how they were printed and published—rather than the utopian form and content of his narratives. In their notes on the “Manifesto of the Socialist League,” Morris and Bax explain that “[u]nder a Socialistic system contracts between individuals would be voluntary and unenforced by the community. This would apply to the marriage contract as well as others, and it would become a matter of simple inclination” (12).
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