

FICTION AS METHOD/METHOD AS FICTION:

Stories and Storytelling in the Social Sciences

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ABSTRACT

We present an alternative approach to world politics and the study of it: Worldism. It begins with the premise that we are all heirs to and products of multiple worlds. Multiple worlds refer to the various legacies and ways of relating that account for who and what we are, and why. From this Worldist perspective, we critique a mainstream manual of method for training social scientists, *Designing Social Inquiry* by King, Keohane, and Verba (KKV). We uncover the Hobbesian subjectivity that informs KKV, as well as the social relations that make it possible. We propose alternative, exploratory methods such as fiction and poetry to highlight the gaps between multiple worlds, as represented by contending sources and types of knowledge, and the structural interests behind their asymmetry. From this process, we begin a process of redressing these gaps.

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INTRODUCTION

Conventional approaches and their methods in international relations (IR) tend to obscure power even as they seek to explain it. When an approach or method fails to account for the social relations that produced it in the first place, as well as the social relations that allow it to pass as “valid,” “legitimate,” and/or “scientific,” the method removes itself from the kind of interrogation that it advocates – indeed, demands – for others, thereby privileging itself with unquestioned authority. As an example, we focus on a widely-accepted manual of methodological training for social scientists, in general, and IR scholars, in particular: *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (1994) by Gary King, Robert Keohane, and Sidney Verba (hereafter KKV).¹ It offers guidelines for “good quantitative and good qualitative research designs” to find a “unified logic of inference [that] applies equally” to all forms of scholarship and inquiry, regardless of question or subject-matter (Preface).

This paper contextualizes KKV within the structural relations of knowledge production.² We do so by first accounting for KKV’s location within the social sciences and the politics of their production. At the heart of KKV social science, we argue, is a theory of the sovereign subject that is supposedly free, independent, and enterprising but actually exploitative, violent, and hegemonic. Subsequently, we demonstrate why a radically different ontology and epistemology – that is, Worldism and relational materialism – **are** needed to reframe this understanding of the world and one’s location in it. Worldism helps us identify fiction, generally, and poetry, specifically, as exploratory methods for an emancipatory and culturally-resonant social science. We also consider the possibility that method itself is a form of fiction – one with direct political consequences.

To frame our critique of and alternative to KKV, we begin with a brief introduction of our analytical approach: Worldism.

¹ For example, KKV is taught in countries as far (geographically, culturally, and historically) from North America as Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, KKV remains the standard of “scientific” merit, particularly for international and comparative studies, in the US academic establishment. Robert Keohane, for example, regularly reviews proposals for the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), a government organization for funding in the social sciences.

² For mainstream critiques of KKV, see Laitin (1995), Caparaso (2005), Collier (2005), Rogowski (2005), Tarrow (2005) and the response of King, Keohane, and Verba (2005). None, though, raises issues of the politics of knowledge production or the ontology of race, gender, class, or culture as manifested in social science methods.

IN AND OF MULTIPLE WORLDS

Worldism regards all of us as products of and heirs to multiple worlds. These refer to the multiple legacies and ways of relating that make us into who and what we are today, and why. Worldism recognizes complexity and nuance in subjectivity, particularly through historically-constituted locations of race, gender, sexuality, class, and culture. Worldism posits that we relate to and imagine one another trans-subjectively; that is, multiple selves and others *co-produce* our world within a context of global asymmetries. Operating as though we live in and reflect only one, “objective” world, we argue, perpetrates a profound violence by denying the existence, histories, and legacies of a vast majority of the world. In examining *how* subjects and their subjectivities are produced and normalized, Worldism returns both the “world” (structures, materiality) and “politics” (contestations, interpretations) to world politics.

Worldism as a concept draws from constructivism and postmodernism but also differs from them. Worldism shares constructivism’s emphasis on intersubjectivity and postmodernism’s insights on the social relations of power. These refer to the norms, institutions, practices, and behaviors that set up certain subjects and subjectivities as more valued, privileged, and protected than others. As such, power cannot be reduced to an objectified, reified condition of who’s “on top” or who “has more” but results from agents admitting, accepting, contributing to, and possibly transforming macro-political structures like ideology, organization, and/or capital. Power, in short, stems from an intersubjective consensus within a context of material conditions and relations. The crux here lies in the *framing*. But it’s never complete; accordingly, instability and transformation constantly inhere within.³

Worldism also departs from constructivism by asking: What *kinds* of intersubjectivity are constructed by whom and for what purpose, and how do theories of subjectivity restructure the world “otherwise” (Agathangelou, 2002)? And is this how we want the world to be (Agathangelou and Killian, 2005)? Not probing into the social relations of intersubjectivity effectively erases the power politics of meaning, including the political economy behind such constructions. As for postmodernism, Worldism breaks from it by distinguishing power from the resistance it generates. Contra Foucault (1994), we consider the differential legacies of power under colonialism for colonizer and colonized.⁴ Neglecting the role of resistance in the formation and consolidation of hegemony implicitly reinforces the imperialist assertion that “this is the way the world is”: that is, it is not open to alternative discourses or concepts. These gaps in constructivism and postmodernism return us to the conventional treatment of power as domination, pure and simple. Wendt’s “naturalist” version of constructivism, for example, has been critiqued for smuggling in a conservative Realist position (Palan, 2000); indeed, Wendt himself admits as much (Wendt, 2005). For similar reasons, Samir

³ Once the Soviet Union could no longer maintain its fiction as a superpower, for example, it had to resort to another story to recuperate itself. Gorbachev called it “perestroika” and “glasnost” (cf. Duffy, Frederking, and Tucker, 1998).

⁴ For critiques of Foucault along these lines, see Stoler (2002) and Ling (2002).

Amin (2004) has called postmodernism an “ideological accessory” to elite, bourgeois interests. Put differently, critical theories like postmodernism and constructivism open up spaces to think about shifting power politics but they fail to challenge the very asymmetries of power relations that they critique. In contrast to their avowed intention of social and intellectual emancipation, both are defanged by their inattention to either material interest or their integration of the Other *analytically*, not just substantively.

Worldism owes deep intellectual debts to postcolonial theory and these should be duly acknowledged. In particular, postcolonial theory teaches that race, gender, sexuality, class, and culture can serve as both analytics and substance in our examination of power relations. Nonetheless, Worldism departs from postcolonial theory by articulating the ontology and epistemology that must prevail for postcolonial insights to cohere. Ontologically, Worldism makes explicit the multiple worlds that postcolonial theory draws on to analyze relations between colonizer and colonized, and the mixed legacies we inherit. Epistemologically, Worldism focuses on the *processes* that produce these supposedly disparate formations, their interactions with and relations to one another, and the larger context that sustains them (Agathangelou 2004b). For example, Worldism asks: what’s the connection, if any, between “desire industries” and “national security” and what do these imply for our world political economy (cf. Agathangelou and Ling, 2003)? This primary question leads to a series of secondary ones: e.g., how do ruling elites define “desire industries” and “national security” and why do they rely on such definitions? Relatedly, how do these characterizations differ from or resemble what ordinary people experience daily, and what do the disparities or similarities reveal about power practices in the world political economy? Simply asking these questions would foreground the relevant structures (capitalist), institutions (Neoliberal), practices (hypermasculine, hyperfeminine), and social categories (legacies of race, gender, sexuality, class, culture) that bind “desire industries” with “national security.” From this interrogation, we return both “world” (structures, materiality) and “politics” (contestations, interpretations) to world politics.

We draw on the Greek concept of *poisies* to characterize Worldism. In *poisies*, worlds emerge from constant interplays, both interpretive and material, between selves and others. They create ceaseless, multiple constructions of being and becoming that transform familiar boundaries – material, geographical, cultural, spiritual – into unfamiliar reconstructions of We. *Poisies* resembles other ancient epistemologies like the Confucian concept of *ren* (humaneness, sociality),⁵ Buddhism’s *pratitya samutpada* (co-dependent arising),⁶ and the circular cosmology and multinaturalism of the Pueblo of Santa Clara.⁷ These all emphasize the necessarily mutual nature of subjectivity and its dependent construction. Two subjectivities reverberate with one another to transform into entirely new entities; indeed, one cannot *be* without the other. What these dialectical traditions convey is a different story of the world. They enable us to think alternatively about transforming the world we find ourselves in and its prevailing social relations.

⁵ See, for example, Jung (1969).

⁶ CITE

⁷ CITE

Epistemologically, Worldism is embodied through relational materialism. Like its Marxist precedent of historical materialism, relational materialism grounds history-making in the materiality of human struggles for survival at both micro-personal levels (e.g., “worker” and “capitalist”) and macro-structural ones (e.g., “desire industries”). Our reference to relational materialism, though, is not restricted to what Marx called the “relations of production” – that is, those social formations that emerge from structures of capitalist production. Rather, relational materialism emphasizes that *all* history-making, whether capitalist or pre-, micro-personal or macro-structural, derive from a socially-constructed material base. Put differently, economic structures are themselves instantiations of social relations just as social relations come into being and are perpetuated by material structures. One cannot operate in isolation from the other.

In accordance with *poisies*, Worldism articulates four epistemological commitments: (1) *trans-subjectivities*, which are institutionalized social structures of struggle and labor among interacting agents that result in configurations of abstraction (e.g., notions of Self), materiality (e.g., the body), and social relations of production (e.g., capitalism); (2) *agency*, the process of creating, building, and articulating selves in reverberations with others, (3) *critical syncretic engagement*, interstitial compromises compelled by conflict and contestation across multiple worlds, and (4) *accountability*, that is grounded in the Self’s inescapability from the Other.

With relational materialism as grounding, fiction, generally, and poetry, specifically, offers a site of critique *and* reconstruction. Fiction and poetry, as we theorize both here, expose the contradictions and disjunctures of asymmetrical power relations, thereby enabling strategies of dismantling. From the conceptual fortresses of the familiar and the entrenched, we begin to envision the new and the transformational. Fiction and poetry also connect the macro with the micro by *politicizing* the supposedly self-centered, fictive, and narcissistic Self. In the process, we begin to see the multiple worlds that inform our present and its transformative, prismatic possibilities.

To understand how Worldism can bring about another way of being/thinking/doing, particularly in social science, let us first turn to KKV world and its production of “scientific” knowledge and research.

KKV SCIENTIFIC MAN: A Hobbesian Subjectivity

In emphasizing the “*science* in social science” (p. 4), KKV reveal the *social*. An illuminating correspondence connects KKV to Hobbes, not only in terms of the kind of world KKV-social science purports to tell us about but also the kind of world that grants authority and legitimacy to KKV-social science. It begins with a presumption about the nature of the world.

As with Hobbes' State of Nature, KKV posit the world as external to the self. It is governed by irrefutable "facts" that reflect one set of universal principles, thereby requiring a unified approach. To do well – conducting "good" research for KKV, survival for Hobbes – one must submit to a Leviathan of Science to adjudicate errors or disputes in knowledge production:

[R]ules are relevant to all research where the goal is to learn *facts* about *the real world*. Indeed, the distinctive characteristic that sets social science apart from casual observation is that social science seeks to arrive at *valid inferences* by the systematic use of *well-established procedures of inquiry* (emphases added, p. 6)

Science, then, presupposes one world. It reflects patterns of behavior, comprised of "particulars," that are produced by rules revealed over time through systematic *observations*. "[H]ow do we know if we cannot see?" KKV ask (p. 41). These rules reflect an internal logic that allows us to "generalize" about the particulars that we observe rather than mire us in their "blooming, buzzing" randomness. A community of scientists, through conventions set down by precedent (i.e., "well-established procedures of inquiry"), judges what constitutes "good" science (i.e., "valid inferences"). Only in this way, KKV underscore, could we come close to understanding the world. And this entails a life, in Hobbes' famous words, that is "nasty, brutish, lonely, poore, and short."

Scientific life, KKV warn, can play rough, especially where deviance is concerned. "Those who do not share the assumptions of partial and imperfect knowability and the aspiration for descriptive and causal understanding will have to look elsewhere for inspiration or for paradigmatic battles in which to engage" (p. 7). KKV-social science requires such an uncompromising attitude given Nature's hard-driving mechanistic nature. After all, causality is predicated on rule-based behavior or patterns that cannot be argued away. And inference is valid only when it is able to capture such causality.

It is not description versus explanation that distinguishes scientific research from other research; it is whether systematic inference is conducted according to valid procedures. Inference, whether descriptive or causal, quantitative or qualitative, is the ultimate goal of all good social science (p. 34).

As such, scientific inquiry necessitates a lonely sovereignty. Standing on the shoulders of giants notwithstanding, the KKV social scientist, like his cousin in natural science, remains a solitary, albeit "independent" and "autonomous," figure. (The male pronoun is used deliberately here. We will explain below.) Indeed, the KKV subjectivity presumes that the more independent and autonomous the social scientist, the more enterprising he is. Marx, however, would call it alienation. Indeed, not only is the meticulous, demanding rigor of good research an isolating profession but the profession itself cares not for the individual or the personal in scientific research. Only results matter.

From the perspective of a potential contribution to social science, personal reasons are neither necessary nor sufficient justifications for the choice of a topic.

In most cases, they should not appear in our scholarly writings. To put it most directly but quite indelicately, no one cares what we think – the scholarly community only cares what we can demonstrate (p. 15).

Furthermore, the KKV social scientist is isolated from himself. Skepticism trumps all. “When told A causes B,” KKV write, “someone who ‘thinks like a social scientist’ asks whether that connection is a true causal one” (p. 30). Indeed, the KKV social scientist should always take on a distanced, calculative yet playful attitude. For this reason, gambling serves as an apt metaphor.

[A] useful method of encouraging policymakers...[is] to judge the uncertainty of their conclusions. They ask “how much of your own money would you wager on it?” This makes sense as long as we also ask, “At what odds?” (p. 32).

More profoundly, the individual is not involved in theorizing the subject under study or why we study or question it the way we do. In KKV-world, neither rules nor patterns in social life have anything to do with the agents of that social life: i.e., human beings or their collective self-understandings as communities, societies, or traditions. Data help to cumulate this externally-objective, never really-knowable reality only by giving us its general tendencies: “[W]e should use data to generate inferences that are ‘unbiased,’ that is, correct on average” [p. 27]). There is no role for meaning as a process of identification: e.g., how it comes about, who gives it, who accepts it, and why it persists over time. KKV allow for interpretation only when it narrates the “causal effects” of the “real world.” And such approximation is possible only through the rigors of falsification. “Without a reasonable estimate of uncertainty,” they caution, “a description of the real world or an inference about a causal effect in the real world is uninterpretable” (p. 9).

Echoing Hobbes on scarcity, KKV emphasize frugality in scientific pursuit through “efficiency” and “parsimony.” The KKV social scientist must distill only that which is essential to arrive at a causal inference. In “*explaining as much as possible with as little as possible*” (original emphases, p. 28), the KKV social scientist achieves order and control: “If we can accurately explain what at first appears to be a complicated effect with a single causal variable or a few variables, the *leverage* we have over a problem is very high” (original emphasis, p. 29). Indeed, “maximizing leverage is so important and so general,” KKV stress, that “*we strongly recommend that researchers routinely list all possible observable implications of their hypothesis that might be observed in their data or in other data*” (original emphasis, p. 30). Put differently, the KKV social scientist places his observations and interpretations above those of all others, especially if they are affected by the subject at hand, because the latter’s interpretations were not formulated “objectively,” “rationally,” or “scientifically.”

Life for the KKV social scientist is also painfully short. And so it should be, note KKV. One does not necessarily lose one’s physical life given the rigors of scientific pursuit (though loss of livelihood is another matter altogether) but, rather, one’s intellectual life is always subject to the strict judgment of the scientific Leviathan.

Though KKV characterize the pursuit of scientific knowledge as lonely, they claim that the scientific enterprise is a “social” one given its constant exposure to scrutiny and evaluation.

[S]cience at its best is a *social enterprise*. ...[U]nderstanding the social character of science can be liberating since it means that our work need not be beyond criticism to make an important contribution... (original emphasis, p. 9).

Like Hobbes, KKV resort to a Leviathan to govern the chaos, confusion, and competitiveness of science. KKV unambiguously state that only sanctioned research qualifies as good research. The Leviathan of Science determines what to research, how to do it, and why we should care.

Ideally, all research projects in the social sciences should satisfy two criteria. First, *a research project should pose a question that is “important” in the real world*... Second, *a research project should make a specific contribution to an identifiable scholarly literature by increasing our collective ability to construct verified scientific explanations of some aspect of the world* (original emphases, p. 15).

“[M]aking a contribution,” means explicitly locating a research design within the framework of the existing social scientific literature. This ensures that the investigator understand the “state of the art” and minimizes the chance of duplicating what has already been done. It also guarantees that the work done will be important to others, thus improving the success of the community of scholars taken as a whole (p. 16).

In sum, KKV list these four characteristics of “good research” (pp. 7-9):

1. **“The goal is inference...**[T]he key distinguishing mark of scientific research is the goal of making inferences that go beyond the particular observations collected.”
2. **“The procedures are public...**This process allows research results to be compared across separate researchers and research projects studies to be replicated, and scholars to learn.”
3. **“The conclusions are uncertain...**A researcher who fails to face the issue of uncertainty directly is either asserting that he or she knows everything perfectly or that he or she has no idea how certain or uncertain the results are. Either way, inferences without uncertainty estimates are not science as we define it.”
4. **“The content is the method...**The content of ‘science’ is primarily the methods and rules, not the subject matter, since we can use these methods to study virtually anything.”

OUR CRITIQUE

The KKV social scientist declares, in effect: there is one world and it happens to be mine! From a Worldist perspective, the four characteristics of “good” research translate into the following propositions: (1) the goal of inference is realized only when we assume that everyone agrees on the *meaning* of the particulars, if not *which* particulars, and *how* to generalize them, if at all, (2) transparency in methods allows for greater surveillance by an institution or community of power over “deviant” others, (3) uncertainty applies to methods only and not to other aspects of inquiry only when the question itself is already determined, and (4) collapsing “content” with “method” is possible, again, only when we assume universality in conception and approach thus silencing the epistemological framework that informs both. Additionally, KKV do not question who constitutes this scientific community. They do not ask: “Who is in and who is out? What is the political economy behind this intellectual club? And does the price of admission differ for different agents?”

More pointedly, who is the “I” in KKV social science? Who can afford to be “nasty and brutish” to others, especially when they disagree; claim to be engaged in an (individualized) “lonely” pursuit of knowledge – that is, independent of and uninvolved with the making of the world around him – even while working from a framework, including type of questions asked and methods used, already established by the Leviathan of Science; insist on being “poore” through frugality (“efficiency,” “parsimony”) in face of complexity and abundance (“blooming, buzzing” reality) in order to gain “leverage” over a problem yet still take a “gambling” attitude on life; and declare scientific life to be rightly “short” given its subjection to the supposed transparency of scientific methods and scrutiny?

The answer to each of the above seems obvious. Only those who enjoy certain social and material privileges can disdain building consensus or collaboration with others, whoever they may be. Their dependence on others is not acknowledged even when the latter’s labor and resources are exploited daily to sustain the myth and status of “independence” and “uninvolvement.” KKV man is able to take his membership within this infrastructure of support for granted such that only the individual, and not the infrastructure, becomes visible. Similarly, those not in want are most likely to rationalize their competitive accumulation of goods, whether emotional, spiritual, or material, as virtuous frugality to safeguard against wild and passionate Nature, now passed on to cultural Others such as the “inscrutable” Oriental (Mehta, 1997). And those who laud a limited longevity do so only when nothing is at stake. In the case of the KKV social scientist, why should he worry? The Leviathan of Science could truncate his scientific life for methodological “inadequacies” but the infrastructure of support that gives his work legitimacy and normalcy will live on forever. It is, after all, the only “objective,” “rational,” and “scientific” way of being.

Substantively, the KKV social scientist must be elite and androcentric, if not patriarchal. He can claim independence while enjoying the surplus labor and resources extracted from his household through his wife, children, and servants precisely because of the infrastructure of support granted to him by his membership in and adherence to it.⁸ Similarly, the KKV social scientist draws on the labor of others from marginalized sites (e.g., informants) to complete his project or what comes to be identified as scientific “high theory” (Agathangelou, 1997). Furthermore, he can abstain from recognizing any involvement or complicity in constructing this environment of advantage so as to justify that whatever advantages he does enjoy, he has earned through the product of his own labor, and not membership in an exclusive club. This is underscored by the KKV social scientist’s avowed claim of skepticism that excuses for a lack of criticality and curiosity, about himself as well as others. Despite a perpetual fixation with self-centered knowledge and its production (“how do we know if we cannot see?”), the KKV social scientist seems not interested in who he is, what he is, how he came into being, and why he is the way he is. Specifically, he cares not to locate himself as a theorist from North America whose social, political, and material privileges accord his approach the status of Science. Nor does he inquire into the kind of community his Science ends up supporting. Instead, this privilege is feigned as creativity and rigor in knowledge. When faced with the statement “A causes B,” the KKV social scientist ponders only whether it is true rather than ask: “Why do you *think* A causes B or how does A come to be *seen* as relating to B?” Nor does the KKV social scientist conceive of learning from others (“why is it that I do not see, *or do not want to see*, what you see?”). The same principle applies to his call for parsimony in face of plenty. Like Locke’s good bourgeois, the KKV social scientist’s preference for frugality covers for greedy hegemony.⁹ “My possessiveness is virtuous,” KKV imply, “whereas yours (whatever that may be) is foolish.” Lastly, the KKV social scientist rests easy in knowing that though his scientific life may be cut short by Occam’s Razor or some other instrument of efficiency and parsimony, at least his efforts are recognized as legitimate whereas others may not even reach the light of day but wallow in “superstition,” “magic,” or “voodoo.”

The KKV social scientist is also Eurocentric.¹⁰ Almost five centuries of colonialism and imperialism have allowed KKV man his presumptions of social status and material privileges. His infrastructure of support comes not only from social arrangements of gender (i.e., patriarchal) and class (i.e., bourgeois) but also assignments of race and culture. Postcolonial theorists have demonstrated amply how the project of constructing the Other as black/brown, Native, poor, and weak is necessarily predicated on a simultaneous definition of the Self as white, European, wealthy, and powerful.¹¹ It is

⁸ This does not mean that the wife, the child, or the servant cannot aspire to and sometimes achieve similar, albeit lesser, relations of privilege and exploitation vis-à-vis identities defined by this system as even more subordinate. Herein lies its perpetual seductiveness (cf. Agathangelou and Ling, forthcoming).

⁹ To C.B. Macpherson and Leo Strauss, Locke’s Hobbesian authoritarianism ultimately condoned a “rapacious capitalism” despite his Christian asceticism (Dienstag, 1996: 499).

¹⁰ Eurocentrism is not a biological determinant but rather an ideology with a set of practices, even though Eurocentrism is associated with specific racial (white) and gender (male) attributes.

¹¹ See, for example, <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/poldiscourse/theosubaltern.html>.

because this relationship between Self and Other is so asymmetrical yet binding that strains of desire and mimicry inflame both (cf. Ling, 2002; Agathangelou, 2004a). More pointedly, this construction of the Other is rationalized through Science such that the Self is able to crow: “I rule over you because I *know* better than you!”

This rendition of the world, at the very least, flattens it. KKV-world operates on one level not just spatially, temporally, and socially but also ontologically and epistemologically. For instance, KKV social science erases from consideration three possibilities:

1. that patterns and rules in social behavior (e.g., “war”), unlike their counterparts in physics (e.g., “gravity”), could differ across time and space (e.g., wars of conquest vs. wars of ritual) as well as understanding (e.g., war as “natural” vs. war as “a sign from God”), or
2. that the same patterns (e.g., war as an outbreak of collective violence) could stem from different rules (e.g., “rivalry” between Athens and Sparta in the Peloponnesian War, “imperialist mimicry” for the Sino-Japanese War of 1895), or
3. that the same rules (e.g., “rivalry”) could produce highly divergent patterns of interaction (e.g., European scramble for colonies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America vs. imperial China’s *huairou* policy toward peripheral peoples¹² vs. exercise of “shared” and “multiple” sovereignty in pre-colonial Southeast Asia),¹³ or
4. that multiple understandings of patterns and rules could overlay and interact with one another (e.g., US Manifest Destiny contending with the Iroquois Federation), producing prismatic consequences in worldviews (e.g., “double consciousness”) and practical politics (e.g., native “sovereignty” within US “sovereignty”) (cf. Crawford, 1994).

Addressing these conditions in social science, especially the last, is where fiction and poetry play an especially useful role. In the next section, we will show how. **Indeed, we conclude** with a fictional story of our own, to demonstrate in concrete form the abstract arguments made above.

A caveat: we are not denigrating the Enlightenment tradition of scientific inquiry that KKV aims to represent. Nor are we upholding fiction as the “one” and “right”

¹² China historically utilized a policy of “cherishing men from afar” (*huairou yuanren*) to convert (*xiang hua*) peripheral tribes into the Confucian world-order. Nonetheless, the Chinese did not assign an “absolute outside” status to any group or society; non-Confucians were identified only in terms of their “relative degrees of proximity to a center” (Hevia quoted in Ling, 2003: 88).

¹³ As Thongchai Winnichakul (1994: 88) demonstrates, politics in pre-colonial southeast Asia cast relations with one another that were neither “single nor exclusive. [Sovereignty] was multiple and capable of being shared – one for its own ruler, another for its overlord – not in terms of a divided sovereignty but rather a sovereign of hierarchical layers.”

method. Rather, we highlight the critical gaps left open by KKV social science that counter its own purpose of emancipatory knowledge production. Fiction/poetry, we suggest, serves as an appropriate means of redressing these gaps. Fiction/poetry does not spectacularize experience or perspective but, rather, allows us to see how experience organizes our world in ways that produce disjunctures. From such, we may find alternatives to the same, the conventional, the hegemonic. This approach politicizes knowledge and its production. That is, it demonstrates how we understand ourselves and our world(s), thereby compelling us to examine the underlying social relations to and contingent struggles that prevail under conditions of asymmetry. It also makes explicit the reasons that render particular worlds possible and not others. In following our ontological commitment to *poisies*, we juxtapose these alternative ways of understanding life to show how they enable our social relations, even as each constantly contests the other.

THE ROLE OF FICTION AND POETRY

Worldism's relational materialism holds a critical realist ontology. It posits that reality exists apart from, but not outside of, the observer (history). This perspective differs from a positivist ontology that claims that we can fully know reality if only we had the "right" scientific methods, and also from a social constructivist ontology (along with certain strains of postmodernism) that claims reality as inseparable from the observer. Epistemologically, relational materialism presupposes that people interact with what they know and seek to know, thus they actively participate in (re)producing it. The values of the inquirer, then, are connected to the process of the phenomenon under examination. Similar to a constructivist epistemology, we argue that a relational-materialist inquirer cannot stand apart from what is observed. However, s/he differs from a "pure constructivist" by not collapsing the definition of knowledge and its production into one process. Rather, relational materialism recognizes, indeed depends on, spaces of dissonance or contradiction between what is socially produced and what is envisioned. From these spaces of disjuncture emerge critique as well strategies for transformation. Their aim: to expose the politics of current structures and their differential effects on different populations and their communities. These include the exploitation of as well as the need for particular historical knowledges, their globalization and contingent institutions, practices, and ideologies. In highlighting these possibilities, relational materialism provides an epistemology that inquires into the invisible, the unsaid, and the silenced to expose the "concealed operations of power and the socio-economic relations connecting the myriad details and representations of our lives" (Ebert, 1996: 7).

Herein lies a role for fiction and poetry. Fiction, like poetry, allows us to see the cracks and fissures and dissent of difference, especially in social relations under conditions of asymmetry. Fiction also enacts a critical double-move: in a micro-personal story, it instantiates macro-structures like historical constructions and their economic underpinnings while, simultaneously, demonstrating the micro-personal responses to and receptions of these macro-structures. Jean Rhys' *The Wild Sargasso Sea*, for example, retells the tale of *Jane Eyre* from the perspective of Rochester's "mad," Jamaican wife. It

shows her nonchalance toward Rochester when he desired her “in the colonies” and her rejection of him, hence her “madness,” after he took her “back home” to England and found her “unsuitable” to and for Victorian society. Along the same lines, when we realize that “science” is but one among many narratives of knowledge, we open up conceptual and discursive space to consider alternative ways and states of being, thinking, and doing.

Specifically, both fiction and poetry critique and reconstruct. From the conceptual fortresses of the familiar and entrenched, fiction and poetry help us to envision the new and the unexpected. Equally significant, fiction and poetry can be radically democratic. Contrary to popular misimpressions of either as an elitist pastime, both can voice the *demos*. Whether in the form of folktales or songs or simple ditties, fiction and poetry have always expressed deep human needs, goals, aspirations, and desires from ancient to present times.¹⁴ And the purpose of using fiction/poetry as method is not to reach a common end-goal – i.e., a common or unified interpretation – but a process of public deliberation where we identify spaces of contestation – such as differential power relations and why these exist – to forge solidarities and connections. From this process of speaking and listening to others, we begin to appreciate the multiple worlds that people come from, live by, and die for.

Social Emancipation through Fiction and Poetry

Fiction is a site and an invitation for all of us to think who we are, how others relate to us, how they treat us, and how we relate to them. It is a *techne* (skill) that makes us think and not a way of escaping (Interview of Nadine Gordimer, *BHMagazino* 2 October 2005: 34).

Gordimer’s emphasis is important but static. It treats creativity as a skill and talent that people bring with them rather than a political site that explains life and the social relations that make it possible. We emphasize, instead, that fiction and poetry offer more general and democratic possibilities for change, emancipation, and transformation.

Poetry’s “imprudence,” wrote Gaston Bachelard, breaks into “‘the dead formula of a system’ with its ‘dictatorship of the mind’” (Gaudin, 1987). In this way, poetry jars the imagination, producing new images, relationships, and possibilities for action. Bachelard emphasized that language *acts* by bearing a world within: “Truly, words dream” (Bachelard in Gaudin, 1987). Poetry intrudes upon perception (the status quo) to “reverse the real and the figurative poles” of meaning to open new vistas of thought and vision (Gaudin, 1987: xlii). Thus past connects with present, solitude with communication, “reconciling the world and the subject” (Gaudin, 1987: xxxv). But reverie comes not easily. It is earned through disciplined reading, writing, and thinking; there can be no “lazy dreamer” (Gaudin, 1987: xxviii). Imagination reinforced with thought, then, frees us of ourselves and the known into an experimental, exploratory trip to Otherness (Gaudin, 1987: 16).

¹⁴ See, for example, Purna (2003). We thank Ashok Gurung for bringing this collection to our attention.

We invert Bachelard's formulation. From finding the material in the poetic, we discover the poetic in materiality, particularly divisions of labor configured by race, gender, sexuality, class, nation-state, and culture. For example, the Neoliberal world economy does not just structure the world according to certain interests, products, and markets. It also *imagines* the world in a particular way. Marx first theorized it as "commodity fetishism" and "alienation." We highlight capitalism's overall worldview, particularly its latest Neoliberal variant (Cameron and Palan, 2004). In exposing Neoliberalism's nightmare scenario of excess built on fear, greed, and violence, we realize that we don't have to accept, share, or participate in this vision. There's a choice. Through poetic practice, different ways of living and being within different structures emerge.

Still, we need more than an "aesthetic turn" in world politics (Bleiker, 2001). Poetry serves only as a *method* or site of labor for transforming and reconstructing our worlds. We need to address *why* our collective imagination is robbed of other visions of encountering the Other besides reciting those standard rights and freedoms centered on the Western Self. To sustain itself politically, fiction/poetry as method must derive from an epistemology that explicitly recognizes the concrete legacies of race, gender, class, and culture that have shaped and structured world politics from its very beginnings (Darby, 2003). This history must include not just the differential impact of Self on Other but also the multi-varied *receptions* of Self by Other.

The following excerpts demonstrate how. We emphasize, though, that these renditions do not simply underscore the postmodern point of polyvalence. Rather, what we aim to show is that poetry, specifically, and fiction, generally, can help us *politicize* social relations, and by extension their power implications, not just for the Other but also the Self. Telling stories through narrative or poetic form not only provides voice but it also demonstrates the variety and scope of voices, thereby curbing the hegemony of one. Showing the spaces where gaps exist between voices does not signal an end to understanding but a beginning to negotiations across these gaps in a location that is suspended, if only for the moment, between locations of power.

Of Palindromes, Parodies, and Politics

Palindromes especially suit ideographic languages like Chinese. More so than alphabetic letters, ideographs allow a reading of the characters that free them from a grammatical structure and yet still make sense. This form of linguistic play – i.e., inverting words or lines in a poem – has long figured prominently in Chinese literature. One iconic example demonstrates their cleverness, playfulness, and, what's more relevant for us, their political subversiveness.

Su Hui, a learned woman from the Jin Dynasty (265-420), sent a palindromic poem to her estranged husband when he left for a remote outpost. The poem was said to have so delighted the husband that she won back his affections. It is apparent why:

“Consisting of 841 characters which are so arranged that they form a square pattern (sometimes the reproduction has the rows and columns printed in different colors) the master ‘composition’ is reported to have yielded more than three thousand ‘poems’ with various procedures of reading” (Kao, 1997: 79). Hence, multiple mini-poems swirl within the larger, master one, each one different from the other depending on how one reads it: from left to right, right to left, top to bottom, bottom to top. Or, one could read it in circular fashion from any point in the text. “Sometimes, the reading of such a *huiwenshi* [palindromic poem] may begin at some point other than either the first or the last character of the poem, thus a set string of characters could be read in a circular manner to produce many poems by varying the point of inception” (Kao, 1997: 79).

The playfulness of this palindromic genre veils its political subversiveness which, nonetheless, is still there. Dislodging language from its usual context puts into question what is usually taken for granted. Reality is not what it seems, palindromes suggest. “[E]ncoding...two messages with opposite meanings in the same text [also] makes conspicuous the free-floating capacity of the signifier and the arbitrariness of its relationship with referential meanings” (Kao, 1997: 82). Su Hui may have been seeking to regain her husband’s patriarchal love and protection, but in so doing so, she was also demonstrating her agency and ability to turn the system on its head and in her favor. The palindromic text thumbs its nose, so to speak, at the imperial order and all other orthodoxies that would claim a naturalized right to hegemony.

Su Hi’s palindromic text also makes a more contemporary point. That is, the reigning assumption underlying KKV social science – that there is a singular, universal, fixed “reality” that is knowable in the same sense always – does not hold. To insist that it does, then, is an act of power on both Self and Other.

Ioannis Tsiolis theorizes about explicitly politicizing the Self through poetry.

Politicizing the Self

For Tsiolis (1997), the political poem offers a way out of the injustices and inequities that produce the “pained self” (“I did X” or “I thought Y”) by generating a transformative vision of what to strive for in the world (“the world is like Z”). He cites Kiki Dimoulas’ poem, “Unexpectedness.”¹⁵ In it, she sees a picture of a soldier, long dead. Yet she infuses new life into the bereaved by challenging boundaries of all sorts – physical, emotional, national, cultural, religious. The bereaved thus finds a larger, more embracing community than the isolating sovereignty of grief.

*Love me as long as you don’t live.
Yes yes the impossible’s enough for me.
Once I was loved by that.
Love me as long as you don’t live.*

¹⁵ Dimoulas neither intended nor inspired our political and methodological interpretations. Rather, we use her poetry for illustrative purposes.

*For I've no news of you.
And heaven forbid that the absurd
should show no signs of life.*

For Vrasidas Karalis, Dimoulas' poetry "transubstantiates": "the universe becomes world once again, agony becomes longing, absence appears as time redemption" (<http://greece.poetryinternational.org/cwolk/view/17918>). Unlike postmodernists who only deconstruct, Dimoulas *reconstructs* with language. Her world has experienced the dissolution of postwar humanity and finds itself, literally, at a dead end. She intervenes in this insecure and homeless landscape with a creative, dynamic re-envisioning of a "new" world: "through astonishment and surprise...her lines suggest the stability of a world that eyes can't see, but which becomes whole through its imaginary reconstruction within the poem as an organic whole" (*Ibid.*). Neither time nor love nor the dead soldier is lost. Rather, all maintain "a continuous and active presence. Through her lines, personal time is born anew and is accomplished forever as collective experience and prismatic image" (*Ibid.*). In this way, Dimoulas shows us a "social ontology" that fuses politics with aesthetics (Agathangelou, 2004b).

In recuperating words and memories and whispered dreams, poetry returns to our collective consciousness the possibility of change. We can perceive worlds other than the one espoused by KKV scientific man. The pain of death and absence mobilizes connections previously thought not possible. Stories of the everyday and ordinary challenge master fables and mirages, opening another window through which to contemplate ourselves as well as others (Darby, 2004). Realization of pain, injustice, and terror may motivate this way of being but it reminds us, also, of humanity's ability to heal and rebuild amidst chaos, disorder, and insecurity. Such ordinary living may not promise the perfect dream but rather recognizes the urgency of being present here, now, in this world, collectively and critically.

Contesting Borders

Dimoulas **also** shows how we can see social relations in a new light. She compels us to face honestly the material structures that lead to unequal social relations. In her poem, "A Minute's Licence," she recalls a burglary at a neighbor's house. She proffers another response to the sense of threat, fear, and violation that burglaries typically induce:

*It's been years since any thief
Set foot in my house
Even for coffee.
I deliberately leave the pot unlocked.*

With the door/pot unlocked, Dimoulas re-positions Self (homeowner) and Other (thief). The thief-Other becomes a guest, not an intruder. The terror of boundary violation transforms, instead, into a social exchange ("*for coffee*"). Relatedly, Dimoulas urges us to

find out about the thief-Other – why he robs – as well as about the homeowner-Self – why can we afford the luxury of not jeopardizing our lives so explicitly? Even if we do rob, say, through “innovative” accounting practices, why are we rarely caught, sentenced, and imprisoned by law and order?¹⁶ These questions highlight the Self’s complicity with the Other not only in marginalizing the Other but also narrowly-punctuating the Self.

We now turn to a story. It disrupts the mainstream narrative of science and questions the knowability of the Other; that is, whether the Other can ever be known without politics.

A FICTION OF FICTIONS...

There once was a young man from the Punjab. He worked and studied hard, eventually becoming an agricultural field officer for his county. He inspected crops and irrigation and such, often chatting with local farmers about their problems and helping them solve these problems. He proved such a hard-working and enterprising young man, dealing with farmers’ problems by day and studying late into the night, even after his mother prepares his favorite dinner, that his county put him up for a much-prized scholarship to study for a higher degree in economics in a First-World metropole. One fine Spring day, our young man saw the letter from the Ministry, sitting neatly on his desk. He opened the crisp, white envelope with trembling hands – and jumped up and down with joy. Hurrah! He got the scholarship!! He’s on his way to Accomplishment!

Soon after arriving at the metropole, however, he began to feel inadequate. “I am not well-prepared,” he admitted sadly. His professors expounded in a language that he understood but could not *comprehend*. What they talked about seemed unconnected to his experiences in the fields of the Punjab. He seemed to be constantly scratching his head. They talked about “valid inferences” and “real facts” when he knew the farmers of the Punjab didn’t reason that way nor would they ever no matter how many training sessions the Ministry held. And how could he ever conduct a random sample survey when Punjabis don’t talk to strangers, especially about the most intimate aspects of their lives? Yet both he and his professors were supposedly interested in the same thing, Development.

Especially disconcerting was one professor originally from Delhi. This professor spoke the language of Development fluently and elegantly, just like the others. Unfortunately, he wasn’t much help to our young man. “Study harder,” was all the advice the professor from Delhi told him. Apparently, this was how the professor from Delhi made it.

¹⁶ For example, Enron’s former chief executive officer, Jeff Skilling, and chairman, Ken Lay, have been indicted for fraud, insider trading, and lying about corporate finances but are still awaiting trial four years after the corporation’s collapse (<http://news.ft.com/cms/s/9c8f0ef4-7454-11d9-a769-00000e2511c8.html>).

“I come from the Third World, after all,” our young man rationalized. “Of course I’d have to work hard! How else could I expect to catch up?” With this new insight, our hero redoubled his efforts to speak and think just like his professors.

One day, he attended a lecture given by a compatriot: a woman professor from Mumbai. Her topic was not the usual like “Autoregressive Appromixation in Nonstandard Situations” or “Water Conservation and Irrigation.” Instead, she talked on “The Politics of Race and Gender in Global Trade.”

During the lecture, it was quite clear to our hero that the woman professor did not speak in the same language or use the same concepts as his other professors. Nor did she seem to care. In fact, she violated all sorts of rules for proper thought and behavior in the academy. She opened the lecture with a rhetorical question: “What’s all this buying and selling in the world economy *for*?” She answered with a dramatic flourish: “Desire!” The young man, like the rest of the audience that afternoon, was most shocked.

He went up to her after the lecture.

“Don’t you think you were rather irreverent in your lecture?” he asked her.

“If I were,” she responded unexpectedly, “what’s the problem with that?”

“Well, don’t you think you’re offending your audience?” he offered tentatively. For some reason, he felt uncharacteristically aggressive. He decided to come to the point: “Don’t you think you should be more respectful?”

“Why?” she asked maddeningly.

“Well...” he didn’t know what to say.

“Do you feel you have to be respectful with your professors?” she asked in turn.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“They’re my professors!”

“Don’t you feel you have anything to offer to them?”

“Yes, but...” he hesitated. Suddenly, he felt the need to confess: “I feel as though I don’t have the language to speak.”

“Is it just the language itself?”

“No...” the young man needed to clarify the matter even for himself. “It’s not that I haven’t – or can’t – master their language. It’s that their language doesn’t allow me to express or even get a grasp on the struggles I have in juggling their world here, and mine there, and now my world in theirs here, and their world in mine there.”

“When you bring your experiences into the classroom,” she probed, “how do your professors respond?”

“They generally ignore it,” he had to concede.

“Don’t you think this is a problem,” she stressed, “especially when you’re talking about development in your own country?”

“I guess...”

That night, lying awake in his dormitory bed, the young man tried to forget this conversation but couldn’t.

“What am I *doing*?” he cried.

CONCLUSION

This story expresses the impact of KKV-world on one who does not share it. Despite his own best intentions, our hero still felt the objectification, domination, exploitation, and alienation of KKV-world. His professors, except one, are not explicitly visible yet they hegemonize the young man’s sense of self. In the process, he transforms from an aspiring young man who is full of ambition and energy to one shadowed by doubt and anxiety. He feels he has to work harder just to stay in place. This objectification by his professors’ exclusionary worldview, especially from “one of his own,” provokes a retaliatory reaction to do the same on one supposedly “lesser” than he. When he meets his compatriot, a woman to boot, albeit a professor, he moves first to dominate her by questioning her credibility and legitimacy to flaunt academic convention. She should submit to him, he figures, just as he has submitted to his professors. To sustain this act of domination, he exploits his social relation with her – they come from the same country, after all. Contrary to expectation, she deflects his act of hostility and aggression by questioning his own, debilitating sense of alienation. Thus exposed, he enters into a crisis. How he will deal with this crisis is beyond the scope of our discussion. What matters is the process that heightened the crisis and the larger social relations/context within which this crisis emerged.

Our story dramatizes the need for a Worldist approach: i.e., trans-subjectivity, agency, critical syncretic engagement, and accountability. Showing how subjectivity is formed trans-subjectively between the young man and his professors, and later between him and his female compatriot, contains KKV-world by affirming that it is not the only ontological story in town but, rather, one of many. The mere telling of this tale, indeed,

underscores an alternative, dynamic agency not recognized by KKV. The *lack* of communication felt by the young man from his professors underscores the inability of a hegemonic ontology like KKV's to engage critically and syncretically with alternative understandings. For this reason, the young man may forge an alliance or solidarity with his compatriot that extends beyond coming from the same country or culture. He realizes that the woman professor, normally an object of conquest or desire, may have something to teach him about his own need for emancipation and its strategies. Our hero's moral and intellectual crisis may lead to further alienation but it also forces him to face his own accountability for his alienation, thereby inducing the conditions for a possible transformation out of the crisis sometime in the future.

These same processes pertain in Dimoulas' and Su's poetry. Each highlights the multiplicity of subjectivity depending on its reverberations with others, whether spiritually, materially, or textually. Each also empowers both speaker and listener through the telling of the tale, where the agency of articulation dislodges unidimensional hegemony from its moorings, to crack open possibilities for change and transformation. These narratives critically engage with the Other – e.g., alternative readings of a text, reframing a thief as a guest, vivifying death itself – to produce unanticipated, unexpected results that liberate us from a life that is “nasty, brutish, lonely, poore, and short.” And it is the initial crisis faced by the characters created by Dimoulas and Su that lead to the start of a journey that will lead us and them, eventually, beyond Hobbes and his scary State of Nature as we face, squarely and honestly, the consequences of our actions yet still with hope and joy and irreverence for the future.

Tables A and B compare the identifying principles of KKV and Worldism, along with their respective effects.

TABLE A

KKV

Principles of Good Research	Effect
the goal is inference	objectification
the procedures are public	domination
the conclusions are uncertain	exploitation
the content is the method	alienation

TABLE B

WORLDISM

Ontological Commitments	Effect
trans-subjectivity of identities	politicization of the fictive Self
Agency	containment of hegemony; clearing of space for alternatives
critical syncretic engagement	making connections and solidarities
Accountability	facing crises honestly

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