Book Reviews

Lindsay Bremner, *Writing the City into Being: Essays on Johannesburg, 1998–2008*. Johannesburg: Fourthwall Books, 2010. ISBN 978-0-9869850-0-3 (paper).

Martin J. Murray, *City of Extremes: The Spatial Politics of Johannesburg*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010. ISBN 978-0-8223-4747-7 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4768-2 (paper).

For Johannesburg was still busy growing out of a mining camp, like it will to the end of all time still be growing out of a mining camp (Bosman 1986:87).

What kind of city is brought into being though the rapid acquisition of immense, speculative prospects? Johannesburg, whose *raison d'etre* was propelled out of the discovery of gold in 1886 and whose *zeitgeist* was shaped out of a mining imperative, is arguably a city still immersed in the powers and cultures of highly hierarchical, corporatised, and institutionalised accumulations of capital. "Glamour", "danger", "volatility", "exploitation", and, "armed", "migratory", "unbridled", "undisciplined": this is the vocabulary respectively evoked in Murray's and Bremner's books on Johannesburg; its pasts and presents seemingly ever-inscribed in its mining camp origins. While the national imposition of apartheid from 1948 to 1994 was inculcated through an ideological order of white supremacy and minority control, so too were its modes of capitalism sustained by a racialised hierarchy that not only secured a cheap labour force, but a spatial ordering of society through segregation and suburbanisation: dividing and distancing being central to the politics and culture of apartheid. The city, as a space for living and not simply working, was arguably apartheid's nemesis. What, then, are the alternative powers and practices within cities that are able to unsettle and reshape a prevailing hegemony? More specifically, can an economic power base be altered by significant political change, thereby reconstituting the structure and texture of a city?

This is the intellectual exploration that in many ways is at the core of both Lindsay Bremner's book *Writing the City into Being*, and Martin J. Murray's book *City of Extremes*. Framed by the enormous achievements of political democratisation in South Africa from 1994, Murray asks why, with the profound remaking of the political landscape, do overt spatial divisions persist and indeed proliferate in Johannesburg. Murray's focus is the relationship of city-building to power, and he pursues the range of ambitions, both in planning and speculation, that acquire authority and influence in the remaking of the city: "...what are the main driving forces behind revitalisation efforts after apartheid that have sought to reinvent Johannesburg as a world-class African city?" (2010:xiv).

Murray is an outsider, and although he comes to know Johannesburg through protracted periods of participant observation, his methodological focus rests on specific sites that are emblematic of the "showcase urbanism" and "spatial enclosures" that came to synonymise large terrains of Johannesburg and its centres and peripheries. The book is a careful and particular view of the make-up of these emblematic terrains, revealed through Murray's productive combinations of

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architecture, the scales of market forces, property values and square footage. Murray constructs his analysis in three parts: "The making of space" historically locates the reader in the origins of the modern metropolis; "Unravelling space" traces the collapse of the modern vision; and perhaps the most compelling section "Fortifying space", where Murray plays out the extreme consequences of entrepreneurial urban development set within a city of profound disparities. Here, Murray is the detailed interlocutor of Johannesburg's entrepreneurial growth hand-in-hand with its urban decline.

Bremner, however, writes not simply as witness to a process of change but as an architect-writer-teacher-advocate-politician who lives within it. She therefore works neither primarily with particular symbols nor definitive moments, but with an accrual of policy documents, archival material, student projects, pieces of literature and intersections of theory, all gathered in moving within the city. From the base of her collection of essays written over a 10-year period, she articulates the possibilities of recomposing the city through imagination and through provocation, but above all else, through practice. In advancing the uses of practice—of reclaiming the city in the course of everyday engagements with it—it is, perhaps, not so much Bremner's theoretical attachments to the "usual suspects" (Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Guy Debord) that give insight to the possibilities of practice as lived transformation, but her ethnographic eye and ear, which excavate crucial contextual depth and explanatory nuance. Her essay, for example, on "Six ways of being a stranger" in which she reveals the city through the experiences of individuals subjected to the extremities of South African circumstance—"The exile", "The underground operative", "The colonists", "The migrant worker", "The mercenary" and "The expat"—is utterly compelling in ways that penetrate both thought and feeling.

What might we learn from these books, assuming we had no specific interest in Johannesburg? What do they have to say about cities elsewhere, places in which you or I might live, imagine, plan for, or design? I suggest, paradoxically, that it is the specifics of these two books that offer so much more than their factual and meticulously referenced details. While both books are undoubtedly of great value to those with interest in the peculiar combination of economics, politics and urbanisation particular to Johannesburg, they are assertive in addressing the influence of architecture and authorship in the composition of city. In neither book is there concession granted for the current pervasion of "normative values" in city planning, most often accompanied by the de-contextualised rhetoric of vision statements that have ushered in banal or wholly inappropriate forms of urban development in the name of economic growth and job creation. In Murray's portrayal is an urgency to make apparent the power of built form and its complicit role in providing a benign or even "glitzy" façade to the project of ongoing segregation. Murray's analysis of the spatial and managerial typologies of retreat evident in office complexes, gated residential estates and theme parks presents us with the profoundly divisive consequences of the mildly amusing, if out-of-place image of a Tuscan villa transposed to a security development in Johannesburg. By aligning "citadel formation" to "siege architecture" Murray insistently relates the deeply complicit relationships between urban image, form and structure.

Bremner focuses less on consequence and more on engagement. She draws on an "insurgent urbanism" offered in the notion of a proactive citizenship as suggested by James Holston: "What kinds of interventions in the city could construct a sense of emergence without imposing a teleology that disembodies the present in favour of a utopian future?" (quoted in Bremner 2010:40). In exploring ways of making the city that subvert more conventional and authorised notions of authorship ("the architect", "the planner", "the developer"), Bremner turns to her own experiments in architecture that in many ways are akin to a curatorial rather than singular mode of authorship. But it is, crucially, with her students in the academy that we get the sense of the power of emerging architectural modes of practice. Bremner gives politics to students of architecture, by taking them out into the city beyond their own enclaves and zones of familiarity. She gives imagination to these same students by immersing them in literature and modes of communication and expression outside of their own strictures. By aligning culture and politics, Bremner insistently relates the necessary relationships in city building between seeing and learning, walking and writing.

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Alison Mountz, *Seeking Asylum: Human Smuggling and Bureaucracy at the Border*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. ISBN: 978–0-8166–6537-2 (cloth), 978–0-8166–6538-9 (paper).

Alison Mountz undertakes an admirable project in *Seeking Asylum* in order to understand why and how "[t]he securitization of migration renders those persons in search of protection more vulnerable". She details a complex terrain of issues that show how "[t]he very border enforcement regimes developed to curb human smuggling also stop asylum seekers from reaching sovereign territory" (167). Mountz explores this problematic by providing a detailed accounting and analysis of a humanitarian and media spectacle that gripped Canada in 1999, when several boatloads of Chinese migrants (approximately 600 in number) attempted to land on the remote coastal shoreline of British Columbia. Canadian Coast Guard vessels intercepted the migrants, most of whom subsequently claimed political asylum citing fear of persecution or undue hardship should they be returned to China. Given the large influx of migrants and the high drama of interceptions, the Canadian government found itself in crisis: forced to adapt to a situation it was not prepared for, in the process allowing concerned agencies to create "policy on the fly" (20). One such policy decision was the housing of the migrants in detention facilities

well in the far interior of British Columbia, away from immigration and asylum lawyers who could help mount successful asylum claims. These facilities were considered part of the "long tunnel" Canadian authorities wanted asylum seekers to experience, similar to the tunnels in international airports that connect aircraft gates to immigration/passport control (xiv–xv). Documenting this "long tunnel effect" is part of Mountz's "ethnography of the state", an integral feature of how she illustrates the development of techniques of population management within the "performative state".

Mountz uses Judith Butler to theorize the performative state; namely, the state not as given but instead an entity that produces itself through the everyday actions of its numerous functionaries. Unlike theories of the state that naturalize it and give it a unitary and a priori power over subjects, Mountz claims that "[t]he state becomes a series of performances and practices that involve negotiations and power plays" (58), and that the state's response to human smuggling and migration are especially fruitful areas in which we can see the state perform its sovereignty. This view of the state inverts the way we traditionally think about policy as expressive of a state's interests. Instead, "[p]olicy makes sense of procedures honed over time, and is more coherent in its final iteration" (38). Mountz provides compelling ethnographic evidence for such "policy on the fly" (73–75) within the context of the contemporary, neoliberal state that is starved for resources—both financial and human—and therefore, often unprepared for crisis events. Mountz shows how detention became the primary technique for dealing with covert migration and asylum claimants in Canada post 1999. Under intense pressure to "do something" (75), Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) officers chose the more expensive but highly visible option of detention. The contradiction between a state starved for resources and the "do something" attitude that leads to the expensive decision to detain migrants is commensurate with the intense focus on personal security under regimes of neoliberalism. Therefore, because the spontaneous arrival of non-sanctioned migrants is perceived as a dire threat to state sovereignty, Mountz points out that "the response is to exercise border enforcement as an expression of sovereignty" (78).

The "performative state" is an advance in empirically grounded geographic inquiry of state power for two reasons: first, as Mountz carefully documents, the state is not a thing-in-itself that acts, but is instead an entity made up of the day-to-day actions of state actors (from elected officials to beat cops to the desk-ridden bureaucrat); second, it moves thinking about the state away from discussions of the irrational actions of states (as in when it cedes territory) and towards an understanding that there is a novel set of complex yet contradictory rationalities at work. This is how we can understand the neoliberal state: it has no *necessary* relations to blood, soil, territory, government, or community; instead the neoliberal state is reduced to the micropolitics of cost/benefit and risk analyses. What the asylum/refugee policing process detailed by Mountz illustrates is a limit case in the way Western states incorporate "risky populations" through the logic of the *inclusive exclusion* [other limit cases being, among others, Guantanamo Bay and the 287(g) immigration policing program in the United States].

If Mountz's first major contribution comes in her careful documentation of the performative state, her second major contribution is her detailing of how states manipulate their territory in order to render some individuals stateless and prevent others from claiming asylum. She proposes that states manipulate territory to make some people "stateless by geographical design", which signifies the "extraterritorial locations that are neither entirely inside nor outside of sovereign territory, but that subject migrants to graduated degrees of statelessness by introducing ambiguity into their legal status" (121). This is significant because Mountz is clearly pointing to a phenomenon with two facets: first, the overlap between geographical, sovereign territory and the law, and second, the operative mode of power as one of "inclusive exclusion", or what I generally refer to as *precarity*.

To concretize how migrants can become stateless by geographical design, Mountz offers a four-part typology of sites: remote detention centers within a state's territory; offshore detention facilities; short-term transit zones; and dynamic interdiction sites (124). Remote detention centers, such as the Esquimalt military base in Canada or prisons in the United States that are also designated as immigration holding facilities are both located within a state's territory but paradoxically do not allow their "residents" to fully access their rights under national or international law. Offshore detention facilities need little explanation, given the unresolved fate of detainees at Guantanamo Bay or Bagram Airforce Base, Afghanistan. Places like airports or seaports function as short-term transit zones: they are technically on sovereign soil but are designated international zones until a (literal) line is crossed after identification checks. Finally, dynamic interdiction sites are shifting areas over which states respond in varied ways to try to intercept covert migration. To name but two examples: first, the United States dispatching immigration officials to foreign airports to screen passengers boarding inbound flights to try and head off potential asylum seekers, and second, offshore interceptions of human smuggling, as in Canada in 1999. Such tactics—though operating through different technologies, mobilizing different enforcement agents—involve the strategic manipulation of sovereign territory, and combine to produce migrant populations that are in a state of constant precarity.

The most valuable aspect of *Seeking Asylum* is its contribution to a growing literature within geography, international relations, and political theory on the phenomenon of "precarious life" (Butler 2004). This new trend in the scholarship on immigration and refugee policing, which underscores the shifting constellations enforcement practices, popular and policy narratives, and technological innovations that are employed to alter the geography of the state in order to produce "inclusive exclusions", is best characterized by the works of Didier Bigo (2002), Wendy Brown (2009), Mathew Coleman (with A. Kocher 2011), Jef Huysmans (2006), Jennifer Hyndman (1999), Peter Nyers (2006), and others (witness the wave of graduate students presenting on the subject at recent AAG meetings).

Mountz is putting her finger on a contemporary phenomenon in which state power is performative, its ends neither disciplinary, biopolitical, nor conventionally sovereign (the consolidation of territory); rather, this new mode of power seeks the production of precarity. In Mountz's telling precarious population management,

at least in the USA and the EU, is not about keeping people in or out of territorial space; instead, it is about "civic stratification" (Coleman and Kocher). Specifically, what we are now seeing in multiple contexts is the formal disassociation of territorial presence from legal presence through formal legal exclusion. The latter involves heterogeneous processes: the devolution of punitive functions from federal to local authorities, removal of deportation proceedings from judicial oversight, and administration of immigration policing through professionalized police and bureaucracy. The net effect is the production of a precarious shadow population that can be exploited economically and politically but lacks legal/constitutional protections.

Seeking Asylum is a provocative and insightful book. But it has one conspicuous weakness: the assumption that the best protection for precarious populations lies in securing their right to asylum, which has the effect of valorizing the state once again as ultimate guarantor of rights. Thus, Mountz ends the book with an emphatic statement: "People traveling on boats, held in detention, and being processed in airports have distinct identities, histories, and desires that need to be heard. *They have a right to seek asylum*" (175, emphasis mine). These are noble sentiments, but have the effect of positioning the book on a trajectory that leads away from its potential opening onto a radical space of thinking beyond borders, nations, and states. This is unfortunate, because Mountz seems to want to point in another direction, toward imagining and struggling for "alternative geographies that protect and include, rather than endanger and exclude" (169). It is indicative, to an extent, of the aporia that confronts discussions of refugees and migrants: where does one turn if the basic problem is located at both the national and international levels and protection is lacking in both?

It is ironic yet understandable, then, that even after spending most of the book empirically demonstrating the loose coupling of rights at both national and international scales Mountz, who mentions rights infrequently and usually in passing in much of the book, should end by reaffirming without much ado that migrants have a *right*, by principle, to seek asylum. Based in an *international* order that nonetheless is entirely reliant upon *national* compliance and enforcement, as Hannah Arendt forcefully noted several decades ago, the claim of the right to asylum is vacated by the very work undertaken in *Seeking Asylum*. This is not done intentionally, and as discussed earlier it may also be unavoidable; and readers should take note before passing judgment. They should also take note of what Mountz accomplishes: problematizing the knotty issues of asylum, migration, territory, and state power through the exploration of an event, the 1999 interception of Chinese boat migrants by Citizenship and Immigration Canada officials, which lies at their intersection. My point here is that Mountz's notion of the performative state sits uneasily with her concluding defense of human rights that must rely on state beneficence to be effective and meaningful.

That said, *Seeking Asylum* is an excellent work of scholarship. Readers of *Antipode* will benefit greatly from engaging with Mountz's book; indeed, *Seeking Asylum* should be read by anyone interested in questions of asylum, human smuggling, the state, and territory.

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Allan Sekula and Noël Burch, *The Forgotten Space*. Amsterdam: Doc.Eye Film and Vienna: WILDart FILM, 2010

The old port has disappeared. In its place sit spectacular beachside condominiums, while the remains of the now gentrified harbor pose ossified for the pleasure of tourists. Somewhere else, maybe even nearby, concrete container terminals break the air of the modern working port into an automated rhythm of hums and clanks, sending stacks of rainbow-colored cargo boxes into the nautical horizon, like "a child's game of blocks, or a gangster's suitcase, full of dollars". Such is the postmodern scene of maritime space.

If you have forgotten the ocean, you are not alone. According to filmmakers Allan Sekula and Noël Burch, it might even be that the sea ("and its ancient terribleness") is the forgotten space *par excellence* of our age; that space with which it is no longer possible to relate, except by a few as yet another commodified vista during annual seaside vacations, or for even fewer, traded on as value-added to beachside luxury real estate. Even then, still remote is the maritime movement of commodity capitalism; the ocean's role in the concrete movement of goods and the abstracted circulation of capital, displaced in our imagination of the ocean by an intractable, cognitive blankness. Incarnated in the image of the cargo container, this displacement is the subject of Sekula and Burch's remarkable essay-film, *The Forgotten Space*, itself a resurrection of a realist aesthetic as much as an attempted excavation of the social relations buried within these containers, or "coffins of dead labor power".

"Why would anyone be foolish enough to argue today that world economy might be intelligently viewed from the deck of the ship?" This is Sekula's query, posed early on in his percussive 1995 book of photography and essays, *Fish Story*, itself a remarkable study of the globalized economy through its harbors and port cities. The question is not so much rhetorical as it is provocative, and its problematic similarly haunts the assembly of scenes, places, and people that make up *The Forgotten Space.* On the one hand, the answer is obvious, as there is good argument enough in the

very geoeconomics of contemporary global surplus production. As Deb Cowen reminds us, "Without the rapid and reliable movement of stuff through space—from factories in China to US big box stores, for instance—cheap labor in the global South cannot be 'efficiently' exploited, and globalized production systems become as inefficient economically as they are environmentally" (2010:601). Hence the contemporary significance of the ocean-carried cargo container and related revolution in logistics, given the degree to which "the speed of cargo movements across supply chains and through the critical nodes of ports has allowed for the reorganization of production at a global scale" (2010:601).

But both the content and form of *The Forgotten Space* suggest that a more complicated rejoinder might be at stake in the working out of the question's challenge. Moving between four port cities – Rotterdam, Los Angeles, Hong Kong and Bilbao—the film's trajectory is one of seemingly endless detours, from a graveyard burying black and brown gang members from central Los Angeles, to a training school for Hong Kong boys preparing for the maritime hospitality industry, to Polish apple pickers at rest in the receding fields of a Dutch orchard. Within (and sometimes despite) the dense narration, vivid cinematography, and unfortunately abrasive score, unfolds a remarkable portrait of a global productivist economy and the liminal spaces at both the center and the edges of its bounty.

To that effect, the film spends surprisingly little time on actual water. Perhaps telling is that one of the longest scenes in *The Forgotten Space* takes place not on or near the sea at all, even though the ship and its seafarers figure as the film's ostensibly restituted protagonists. In a tent city for the homeless at the margins of somewhere called Ontario, California—sandwiched, we are told, between two rail lines and the perennial hum of passing cargo freight—the camera holds still for the testimonials of three of its inhabitants, their stories singularly arresting without succumbing to maudlin cliché. One man describes the lack of employment or support programs for "what most of us here are—middle aged men" and how instead "they" pass out bread and toilet paper and raffle tickets for a one-time chance to spend a night in a motel room. Involuntary human idleness set against a backdrop of itinerant freight trains.

But what does this have to do with the sea, or the port, or mutiny? Why such extended interviews with the abandoned inhabitants of Californian tent city, or to take but another quite amazing but seemingly digressive scene, a weekly makeshift gathering of Filipino caretakers at the base of a high-rise bank in Shenzhen, China? Given the film's explicit bias toward mutinous class struggle, the conspicuous absence of any dockers' unions or other organizations of maritime labor, gives pause. But for the conservative European regimes of early twentieth century port cities, Sekula notes in *Fish Story*, "mutiny was an intrusion into the public sphere by those unqualified to speak, much as slave revolts had violated the fixed-subject-object relations of chattel servitude, or suffragism had violated those of domestic servitude" (Sekula 2002 [1995]:125). Perhaps herein lies an apt characterization of those subjects visited throughout *The Forgotten Space*: those disqualified by the structured exclusions of global capitalism to speak; the inhabitants of both uneven space and nonsynchronous time, in the sense Ernst Bloch had in mind when he noted of Weimar Germany that "not all people exist in the same now" (quoted in

Sekula 2002 [1995]:130). Modernity's relentless "synchronicity" would leave some of Germany's social classes destabilized and anachronistic, and it was their pent-up anger that would become, according to Bloch, the subjective precondition to fascism. Suddenly the forgotten space is, necessarily, an inhabited one.

Indeed, the film's social preferentiality is a central part of its argument, one upon which, we realize, the conjunction of aesthetics and politics is ultimately hung. *The Forgotten Space* began as a collaborative effort to cinematically elaborate the central essay in Sekula's *Fish Story*, "Dismal science", a term itself originally coined by Thomas Carlyle as a cynical and satirical rephrasing of political economy; the "dismal science" of wealth and scarcity implicitly contrasted with the "gay science" of poetry (Sekula 2002 [1995]:133). When Noël Burch, the noted film theorist and Allan Sekula, a well received Marxist photographer and writer based out of California, joined forces on this project they had in mind a documentary film in the non-linear essayist tradition of Dziga Vertov and Chris Marker, fully aware that the essay-film form had today fallen out of fashion. "An essay film was about getting across ideas", writes Burch, who may by his own admission have been the first film theorist to introduce the concept some 40 years ago. Under the law of ratings, he writes in the film's notes, "audiences are meant to be too dumb to follow anything the least bit complex" (Burch 2010). And yet the end result of their efforts—a smart assemblage of heterogeneous characters and discontinuous landscapes—stands as an explicit and powerful attempt at returning us from the "postmodern hyperspace" (Jameson 1984) of abstraction and reification to a kind of Sartrean "commonplace" of recognition and comprehension (Buchloh 2002 [1995]:196). It is also a return to that deeply contested aesthetic method known as realism, a form dismissed by some as irrevocably outmoded due to its early nineteenth century association with socialist orthodoxy. But realism is a method as well as an *attitude*, according to Raymond Williams (1985), towards what we understand as "reality". It thus consists of a conscious commitment to understanding and describing the causal complexes of society, or the underlying social or political forces structuring the appearance of reality in everyday life. It is this realism, that which "mak[es] possible the concrete, and mak[es] possible abstraction from it" (Brecht in Adorno et al 2007:81) that becomes a definitive condition of the realist work as a whole.

A seasoned photographer and critic whose work has long focused on the social fallout of late capitalism, Sekula makes no bones about his commitment to the *material* of historical materialism. "Growing up in a harbor", writes Sekula, "predisposes one to retain quaint ideas about matter and thought . . . a certain stubborn and pessimistic insistence on the primacy of material forces is part of a common culture of harbor residents" (Sekula 2002 [1995]:12). This "crude materialism" as he puts it playfully, is not only underwritten by disaster but offers a necessary corrective to a popular narrative which instead supposes that the world economy cannot be seen at all—its "activity" (post-industrial and postmodern) seemingly dissolved into the ether of speculative finance, information technology, and the ephemera economies of service, credit and communications.

Recalled in Sekula's discontent is Frederic Jameson's seminal indictment of postmodern aesthetics and culture, anchoring postmodernism as he did in the very modalities and imperatives of late capitalism itself—in particular the further

abstraction of already fictitious commodity forms in the activity of financial markets, the knowledge economy, and the "global assembly line". It is in particular those popular postmodern cultural and aesthetic tropes which Jameson reads as evidence that culture has become coextensive with the capitalist economy, toward the complete obfuscation of any alternative value-worlds, against which *The Forgotten Space* offers itself as rejoinder. The film is, in this sense, a vindication of both Lukacs and Brecht in its embrace of the realist (albeit critical and innovative) form. Against the popularity of an aesthetics of abstraction, irony, and pastiche, *The Forgotten Space* is a study in social institutions, experiences, and relationships; its curious digressions now recognized as realism's partiality for those on the outer margins or left behind, the potency of their "mutinous longings" recalled and historicized.

The stakes, thus, are high. For by now we have come to a new insight, one which might in fact be the film's more operative conceit: *if we have forgotten the ocean, then we are alone.* The violence and degradation of contemporary maritime capitalism, so unflinchingly impugned by Sekula and Burch in their journey across the sea, holds alongside the more dangerous consequence of its forgetting: *disconnection*. So while the filmmakers attempt to map them into this global maritime economy, what the film's subjects testify to as their real shared experience is a feeling of *aloneness*—structured, variably, as impotence, alienation, disorientation, exhaustion, despair and self blame.

Observes a nice British clergyman, himself an elderly embodiment of anachronism, cheerfully passing out newspapers to the young Asian cruiseboat croupiers pecking away at their personal laptops in one scene:

They are seafarers, but not in that sort of true sense. But they are floating from A to B—well, not to B, but just floating out on sea, really, and coming back for the night. But it's nice to give them somewhere to gather, otherwise they'd just be drifting from internet café to café.

They are, as the film's last lines firmly attest, a "lonely crew" indeed. What else to do, then, but seize the helm.

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