

No, We Can't: Racial Tensions and the Great Recession in Benjamin Markovits' "Obama-Era Novel" *You Don't Have to Live Like This*

Ewa Kowal

Jagiellonian University in Kraków

Abstract: The aims of the paper are twofold. Firstly, it analyses Benjamin Markovits' 2015 novel *You Don't Have to Live Like This* as an example of the nascent genre of the "Obama-era novel." Set in Detroit during Obama's supposedly post-racial presidency, Markovits' work offers a critical assessment of its legacy and addresses the problem of growing racial tensions reflecting both the beginnings of the Black Lives Matter movement and the most recent crisis of white masculinity. Secondly, the novel is read as a literary response to the economic aftermath of the Great Recession following the 2008 global financial crisis. The novel's depiction of a fictitious corporate-run scheme attempting Detroit's urban revitalisation is interpreted as a critique of the "Yes, we can" culture about to be replaced by the "Trump-era," which the novel anticipates. Finally, the novel is compared to other examples of "crash fiction"; it is argued that Markovits' work is a rare example of literature's deeper and direct engagement with the recent economic crisis.

Keywords: Barack Obama, Detroit, the Great Recession, Black Lives Matter, precarity

Introduction

Ever since the election of Donald Trump to the highest office in the United States, and especially since the controversial ending of his presidency (but not the "Trump-era"), many commentators in America and across the world have been wondering how this supposedly sudden and unexpected shift could have happened in the previously (predominantly) uncontested progress of the beacon of democracy. This scrutiny has reached beyond Trump himself and increasingly critical questions have been raised also about Barack Obama's presidency and its legacy. Gradually, also novelists have joined and will no doubt continue to contribute to the discussion.

So far the best known literary commentary on Obama found in a novel appears in *Homeland Elegies* by the American writer Ayad Akhtar. The novel, looking back to Obama's last year in office (as well as the 1980s in America and Akhtar's family's more distant past), has been made famous by Obama himself, who listed it among "his favorite books of 2020" (Aklilu 2020). In the novel, Akhtar (as a first-person narrator repeating a friend's views) writes about America in the run-up to the 2016 election as

a country where people were poorer, where they were lied to, where their lives felt meaner, where they had no idea how to change any of it. They'd taken the unprecedented step of putting a black intellectual into the highest office in the land, a man who promised change but offered little, whose admittedly genuine concern was marred by his superciliousness, who gloried in his pop-culture celebrity while bemoaning a system whose political dysfunctions prevented him from leading. Obama's victory had turned out to be little more than symbolic, only hastening our nation's long collapse into corporate autocracy, and his failures had raised the stakes immeasurably. Most Americans couldn't cobble together a week's expenses in case of an emergency. They had good reason to be scared and angry. They felt betrayed and wanted to destroy something. The national mood was Hobbesian: nasty, brutish, nihilistic – and no one embodied all this better than Donald Trump. Trump was no aberration or idiosyncrasy, ... but a reflection, a human mirror in which to see all we'd allowed ourselves to become. (2021, 242)

In his autobiographical novel, with the benefit of hindsight, Akhtar recognises that the process that led to Trump's rise to power had been long in the making. Those less inclined to idealise American history see an unbroken continuum between the current state of growing inequality leading to an existential threat to the democracy and its actual beginnings, not in theory but in practice (*Amend* 2021). In fact, such a voice (Akhtar's university teacher's) is included on the very first pages of *Homeland Elegies*: "America had begun as a colony and ... a colony it remained, that is, a place still defined by its plunder, where enrichment was paramount and civil order always an afterthought" (2021, xi).

However, Akhtar’s novel is not the first to reflect on Obama, America’s myths, and its ongoing problems. It will be the aim of this paper to examine an earlier, 2015 novel *You Don’t Have to Live Like This* by the US-born and British-based writer Benjamin Markovits, which can even be called an “Obama-era novel,” since it is set during Obama’s first term, was published during his second term, and concerns itself with Obama’s legacy. Trump is, perforce, not mentioned, but the novel conveys disappointment with the future author of *A Promised Land*,¹³ disillusionment with the American Dream, and thus anticipates the “Trump-era.” It does so by addressing two problems on which I will concentrate in my analysis: firstly, the book’s biggest issue, i.e. the growing racial tensions in the supposedly “post-racial” America under Obama, reflecting the beginnings of the Black Lives Matter movement, and, secondly, the broader economic aftermath of the 2008 global financial crash, the ensuing Great Recession, and their impact on American white masculinity.

The novel’s reception and premise

You Don’t Have to Live Like This is Benjamin Markovits’ seventh novel. It received positive reviews¹⁴ from most critics stressing above all its timeliness (McElroy Ansa 2015, Wade 2015, Looby 2016) and appreciating its very attempt at tackling a subject which is all too rarely addressed by fiction. In one critic’s words, “[s]o few fiction writers deal directly with street-level economic and cultural conflict in the present day that you’re grateful that *You Don’t Have to Live Like This* exists at all” (Seymour 2015). Another critic complains, however, that, inevitably for a novel about Detroit, “[r]ace and class seem to be everywhere but nowhere *new* in this novel” (McElroy Ansa 2015; added emphasis). One more reviewer remarks that the novel “asks extremely awkward questions about class and race in contemporary America, and provides precisely zero answers” (Kelly 2015). It is true, inventing novel ways of addressing problems which are so difficult to solve exactly because they are so old and unchanging does not appear to be the writer’s goal – and one may

13 Obama’s memoir published in 2020.

14 Out of the ten reviews I have read, only one was lukewarm (see McElroy Ansa 2015). Max Liu called the book a “profound ... meditation on contemporary America,” and wondered: “Is Benjamin Markovits contemporary fiction’s best-kept secret?” (2015). The novel received the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction in 2016.

wonder why it should be one. Markovits does not dispense solutions to the problems, but he does offer us a warning.

The novel is set around 2011 in Detroit. The city is as obvious a choice for any text of culture addressing the Great Recession¹⁵ as it is challenging. Anyone taking on this challenge runs a risk of adding to the by now considerable sum of already existing forms of (pseudo-) artistic exploitation, often resulting in “ruin porn.” Markovits escapes this threat by adopting an overall “reportorial” tone (Scholes 2015, Seymour 2015, Wade 2015), and taking his chosen topic “seriously” (Kelly 2015, Liu 2015). An illustration of this take can be seen in what one of the novel’s characters says about Detroit:

This city ... lies at the center of so much of what America is talking about and worrying about today: the death of the middle class and the rise of social inequality, the collapse of the real estate market and the decline of manufacturing, the failure of the American labor movement and the entrenchment, almost fifty years after Martin Luther King led the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, of a black underclass. (Markovits 2015, 56)

All these issues, as well as the crisis of American white masculinity, on which I will concentrate in the last part of the paper, are presented in this novel, whose main premise is an attempt at Detroit’s urban revitalisation through a corporate-run socio-economic experiment.

The story is told by a first-person narrator, Greg Marnier, known as Marny. A white man in his mid-thirties, Marny is “an Ivy League loser” (Lorentzen 2015): a Yale graduate with a PhD in history from Oxford, who is nonetheless stuck in a dead-end academic job in Wales. He decides to return home, and is forced to stay with his parents in Baton Rouge. As he says, “The fact is, I don’t know where I felt more at home. Nowhere” (Markovits 2015, 13). He is, thus, existentially homeless, “in a transitional state” (90), in search for his own place and role.

15 Admittedly, this one is only the latest among the many crises the city has suffered. As we learn from Richard Florida, “[a] large sea of disadvantage and despair surrounds a small island of urban revival in the city’s center. Decimated by deindustrialization and white flight, the city has lost more than half of its population since the 1950s, and large areas are now virtually abandoned. In 2009, at the height of the recent economic crisis, the city’s official unemployment rate neared 30 percent. In the summer of 2013 the city declared bankruptcy” (2018, 141–142).

An opportunity to find it comes at a ten-year reunion with his college friends. His own idea evolves into a project which his now multi-millionaire friend Robert James wants to develop in Detroit. Marny moves there and finds his “first grown-up apartment” (87). The rest of the novel is a test: of the narrator’s own maturity, as well as of Robert James’ experiment in urban regeneration.

As one critic has pointed out, the novel’s premise is “based on reality: the population of Detroit fell by 25 per cent in the first decade of this century, and one regeneration scheme offered cash incentives to those willing to live in the derelict properties” (Wade 2015). The novel joins the debate on how to solve the economic and social problems exemplified by Detroit by envisaging its own answer to the question: how to make a bankrupt city afflicted by high unemployment, poverty and violence prosper again? And at the same time: how *not* to do it?

The scale of the problem that needs solving is immense. Already on his way to Detroit, Marny wonders, “Where are the cars? Where is everybody?” (Markovits 2015, 27). This disconcerting sense of unreality – “Everything felt like a computer game” (24) – is going to stay with him for most of his stay in the city. Its Gothic-looking cityscape has a strongly defamiliarising, uncanny effect. Some of the realistic and factual descriptions of urban decay would not be out of place in a dystopia:

There wasn’t any traffic on the road to force me along. Mostly what I saw was empty lots, not falling houses – block after block of grassland. Trees grew out of the roofs of abandoned buildings. There were abandoned cars, too, and tires, shopping carts and heaps of trash sitting where houses used to stand. The effect was rural, not suburban. (30)

... the houses were standing empty, nature was taking over. It’s kind of terrifying ... how quickly weeds grow; certain trees as well. All of this architecture, which seems like such a permanent feature of the landscape, needs constant updating, home improvement, middle-class pride and ambition, or the landscape swallows it up. After a few years. (317)

Because of the initial conditions in Marny’s designated new house (“There was no running water, and the toilets started out bone dry.... Instead of grass the garden grew mattresses, tires and broken bricks” [48]), he first stays in Rob-

ert's house in Detroit. The physical distance between their houses hyperbolically mirrors the financial and class status difference between the two former college friends:

You could see the neighborhood shifting from street to street. Burned-down houses were replaced by boarded-up houses were replaced by empty houses with FOR SALE signs in the window. By the time I got to Robert's house I had climbed about two-thirds of the way up the class ladder. (48)

Since on Manry's street nearly half the buildings had burned down, it took him over two months "to build up the nerve to move out ... not ten blocks away" (47). Still at his parent's house, his mother had warned him that "Detroit [was] the number one most violent city in America" (21), but Marny dismissed the comment by saying: "The news and entertainment industries in this country *sell* fear, it's what they do, because people like you want to buy it" (21; original emphasis). Nonetheless, one of the first things he did already on his way to Detroit was to buy a gun, followed by another gun.

Also Robert describes Detroit as "basically a war zone," "like driving through London after the Blitz" (17).¹⁶ Since he believed his undertaking in this context could be of historic proportions, he wanted a historian on hand, in case the project took off. Marny is to write about the regeneration scheme, as he studied American colonial history (53), and, according to Robert, what they were doing in Detroit belonged to the same tradition as that of the Pilgrims'. As a colonial historian Marny would be well equipped to understand "what people forget about the early settlers," and what Robert stresses, namely that "they were shipped over by private companies; it was a business venture" (53).

This reminds us of the already quoted observation from Akhtar's *Homeland Elegies*: "America had begun as a colony and ... a colony it remained, that is, a place still defined by its plunder, where enrichment was paramount and civil order always an afterthought" (2021, xi). Similarly, Robert's main drive was not

16 This may sound like an exaggeration, until we consider the observation made by Chris Hedges, the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who has covered wars all over the world in the last twenty years: "The destruction of poverty can replicate almost exactly the destruction of war" (*The Agenda...* 2012). For more on this topic and what Hedges calls "sacrifice zones of America" see Hedges and Sacco (2014).

humanitarian, it was the profit motive. In his opinion, “Detroit could be useful as a model for urban regeneration only if it made money. Somebody had to get rich off it, and it was his job to persuade investors that they would” (Markovits 2015, 48). Soon enough Robert and a group of investors were buying up a hefty piece of the city with two thousand houses, empty plots and some derelict industrial sites (56–57).

The plan behind the landgrab was to rent out everything very cheaply to individuals, but also to groups of people who would organise themselves over the Internet (57). Because of the conditions described above, moving there on one’s own was too intimidating. Still, Robert believed that the property allowed one to “set up any kind of society.... But you need a critical mass of people to make it work” (17). As Robert hoped, the scheme would “add ten thousand economically active residents to a city that had lost almost a million in the last forty years” (57).

Clearly, Robert’s ambition was to engage in nothing short of social engineering. The kind of “economically reliable” society Robert was interested in was middle-class, mainly white, but he also “insisted on keeping up a black *presence* in the neighborhood, partly for the PR” (125; added emphasis). In the end, among the newcomers are many mixed-race couples (126). The consequence of this corporate plan in this novel about Detroit is that a vast majority of its characters are white, with only two black characters standing out from the geographically close, yet otherwise distant “blackground.”

As we can see, the proposed solution to the Detroit problem is “a kind of Groupon model of gentrification” (17): affordable real estate made available online for a sufficient number of mainly young (but not only) professionally active people creating a partly racially diverse “political mix” (127). The desirable proportions within this “mix” could only be achieved through careful selection. The tool serving this purpose was a website called “Starting-from-scratch-in-America” (57). Marny belonged to the informal “committee” hand-picking his own future neighbours on the basis of their online profiles: “we sat around all day looking at Facebook, deciding who would get into our village. Like a bunch of assholes” (57).

Marny is only mildly self-critical about his power in toying with real people, in a campaign orchestrated by his Mark Zuckerberg-type dotcom multi-millionaire friend. The unreliable narrator’s opinions aside, the novel invites far more criticism. Its reviewers have recognised that in devising the scheme described

above, and especially in the creation of the character of Robert James, complete with his typical “Silicon Valley’s hubristic patter of total transformation” (Miller 2015), Markovits “deftly satirises this quick-fix brand of Silicon Valley solutionism, the shallow attempts to solve deep-seated problems with technology, buzzwords and blue-sky thinking” (Wade 2015). In this way “the limitations of Silicon Valley’s can-do culture” (Wade 2015) are effectively exposed.

Obama and racial tensions in the novel

Moreover, *You Don’t Have to Live Like This* can also be read as a disappointed response to the much broader “Yes We Can” culture. As an “Obama Novel,” it is “very much a novel of Obama’s first term, when the idea of a post-racial America still had some dreamlike currency, written early in his second, when racial conflict became one of the central stories of his presidency” (Lorentzen 2015).

In fact, Barack Obama makes a cameo appearance in the novel, taking part in a political fundraiser organised by Robert James for what is already being called “New Jamestown” (Markovits 2015, 226). Robert is very eager to attract the president’s attention, and the function is carefully designed: it plays on the story of the Pilgrims’ feast (168). In his own speech, anticipating the president’s speech later on, Robert makes knowing use of nostalgia operating on two temporal planes – the early stage in the development of the country and the early stage in the development of an average metropolitan and moneyed member of the middle class:

one thing that worried me, is how *big* to make these neighborhoods.... And in the end what I decided was, they should roughly add up to a midsize college campus. There’s a reason people have such nostalgic feelings in this country about their four years of college.... It’s because college is really the only time in our lives that most of us get to live in the kind of small-town community that we still associate with the founding of this country. And by the way, the Pilgrims on the whole were young, they were a young group of people, some of them were starting out in life for the first time, ... and some of them ... starting over from scratch. (169)

Obama’s speech, barring his typical linguistic mannerisms, could seamlessly follow:

the American Experiment ain’t over yet.... The people rebuilding Detroit, and some of you are in this room right now, are still tinkering with it, still adapting it, still moving forward. You have come here ... because there was a voice in your head saying, *You don’t have to live like this. There’s a better way to live.* This voice has called people to America for over four hundred years. It calls to us now... (179)

Thus Obama’s fictitious but pitch-perfect speech plays a central part in the novel—it gives it its title. In addition, the speech also plays a pivotal role in the story. While up to the day of the president’s visit Robert’s project was progressing according to plan, from this day onwards things take a sudden turn for the worse. This is symbolically suggested when, after the party, during a friendly game of basketball with the president, Marny is accidentally elbowed by someone (perhaps by Obama himself) and suffers from a nosebleed. Such placing of Obama, and the outcome of his visit, in the novel’s structure may symbolically represent Obama’s own presidency. Before he arrives, and at the beginning of his stay, there is optimism, and even a sense of celebration. However, before long the enthusiasm for his positive words, energy and hope wanes, as they fail to materialise. The situation begins to deteriorate, and eventually dissolves into chaos—prefiguring the 2016 election campaign and Donald Trump’s presidency.

In the novel, this does not refer to Marny’s mild injury; a far more serious incident takes place later the same day. It involves a black teenager, Dwayne Meacher, who steals a “new settler’s” iPhone and, while escaping on his bicycle, is hit by a car. It is unclear if the (white) driver, also a member of the New James-town community, hit the boy accidentally or was in fact trying to deliberately stop him, and thus to stop the theft (and punish the thief). The boy finds himself in hospital, in a coma. Consequently, the racial and class tensions that from the beginning lay latent in the revitalised neighbourhoods now come to the fore.

The crisis escalates after Nolan Smith, the local artist who takes the car driver to court, becomes a suspected kidnapper of a child. It appears that he initially believed the boy, who was left unattended and wandered away from home, to be James’ son, whom Nolan wanted to use for “political pressure” (296) in his unspecified negotiations with James. However, the boy turned out to be the son

of a white Detroiter, Tony Carnesecca, a memoir writer, who is openly racist. He was the one who warned Marny early on: "The reason our neighborhood works is that everyone is white.... I want you to realize what you're getting into. Detroit is a black city. They don't want you living there" (63). Later, Carnesecca published an op-ed in *The New York Times*, where he wrote about the white driver hitting Meacher with his car:

Could this constitute a justifiable *arrest* under Michigan law? ... In a city like Detroit, whose tax base has been decimated by population flight, *taking the law into your own hands* is ... a necessary feature of a citizen's obligations, to himself and his neighbours. (280–281; original emphasis)

This striking far-right proposition is one of a few places where the unpopular question of taxation reappears in the novel. On the one hand, taxes are seen as an unnecessary evil; on the other hand, as we can infer from Carnesecca's words, the scarcity of tax money is presented as both an evil (in the inevitable vicious circle: the less tax money, the worse the situation; the worse the situation, the less tax money...), as well as a good excuse that necessitates and justifies vigilantism masquerading as law and order.

Inevitably, there is a confrontation between Nolan and Tony, and it turns violent. Tony knocks Nolan unconscious in Marny's house. They leave Nolan on the floor – without calling for medical assistance – to collect Tony's son, who is safe in Nolan's house nearby, looked after by Nolan's mother, and happily playing with Nolan's son. Ironically, Mrs. Smith, unaware of the circumstances, looks at the superficially symbolic scene and remarks: "These two just found each other, it's a beautiful thing" (300).

Of course, the reality is the opposite of beautiful. A protracted legal process follows: Nolan is accused of kidnapping, and, predictably, found guilty. In addition, the trial attracts the attention of the media, who uncover inconvenient truths about New Jamestown. Some criticised it even earlier as "the 'Communist-style society of this Detroit development'" (229) populated by "[l]aw school droupouts, shady businessmen, porn pushers; rich kids who couldn't make it on Daddy's dime. Life's unattractive failures" (228). Even more damningly, an article in the *Time* magazine entitled "Utopian Vision Faces Real-world Politics and Problems," discusses the project as a front for a commodities scam,

where large amounts of aluminium are stored in Detroit’s empty industrial spaces to enable speculation on its prices (336).

However, the most serious consequence of the trial and its verdict is the ensuing violence. “Riots” last three days (384). Large sections of New Jamestown are set on fire: Nolan’s house burns down; Marny’s house loses its roof in the fire. Furthermore, “[t]here were more than a hundred arrests. Seven people died, one of them shot by the police, which came in for a lot of criticism afterwards” (385). No details are given, but it can be inferred from analogous real-life events, such as the protests following the acquittal of the man who killed the black teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012, which led to the founding of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013 (Black Lives Matter), that the person who was shot was black, as very likely were the other casualties similarly not specified.

In *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Judith Butler writes about real-life events such as the public demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri, in the summer of 2014 in response to the police killing of an unarmed black man, Michael Brown (2015: 26), events which may well have served as a source of inspiration for Markovits. Butler points out “how quickly forms of public forms of political opposition” are “renamed as ‘unrest’ or ‘riots’,” “even when they do not engage in violent acts” (26). No consensus will be found between the conflicted sides about what happened in Ferguson, but the protests’ organisers insist, as in a number of later such cases, that they started as largely peaceful demonstrations that turned violent due to police aggression (Lopez 2016).

Perhaps Markovits’ fictitious events developed similarly. The author includes echoes of the early Black Lives Matter movement in his novel, but its first-person narrator has no access to the events and this story is not his to tell. Certainly, Butler’s “performative theory of assembly” is applicable to the riots in the novel, since the protesters exist in the condition of precarity, and gather no doubt “to express their indignation and to enact their plural existence in public space ... demanding to be recognized, to be valued, ... exercising the right to appear, to exercise freedom, as they are demanding a livable life” (Butler 2015, 26). “Precarity,”¹⁷ writes Butler,

designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support

17 For more see Standing 2016 and Desmond 2017.

more than others,¹⁸ and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.... Precarity also characterizes that politically induced condition of maximized vulnerability and exposure for populations exposed to arbitrary state violence, to street or domestic violence, or other forms not enacted by *states* but for which the judicial instruments of *states* fail to provide sufficient protection or redress. (Butler 2015, 33–34; original emphasis)

The one character in the novel who embodies both precarity and active protest against it is Nolan Smith. He is a secondary figure, but at the same time the most complex and interesting character creation in the novel. The only thing said about his background is that his older brother was killed in a gang shooting when Nolan was in high school (Markovits 2015, 141), and that he is most likely gay, although this is never stated clearly, only guessed (66, 269). We never get to know more about his perspective, informed by the double jeopardy of being a gay African American. Even though this limits the scope of the novel, it is understandable that, just as in his reticence about the riots, Markovits refrained from creating a direct access to this character's point of view, as this would have resulted in charges of "blackface." Consequently, we only learn about Nolan's views from Marny's several conversations with him. As an artist, Nolan

wanted to push realism further, he wanted to make art that changed reality, that had an effect on it, and one of the forms he was looking at was legal art.... Lawsuits, he said. He wanted to sue people, where the art was just the legal act, the court papers and documentation, the judge's ruling. But it cost money. A lot of what he did was apply for grants. (143)

It is remarkable that Nolan chooses this particular — prohibitively expensive — art form. But again, we could draw upon Butler's theory and infer his intention to both consciously engage in and point to the (usually not con-

18 According to a survey reported by Florida, in 2014 "[b]lack Americans were five times more likely than whites to live in extremely poor neighborhoods" (2018, 98); "[t]oday, economic segregation remains closely associated with race, even as levels of racial segregation have declined" (115).

scious) institutional performativity in the theatre-like setting in the abstract and arbitrary context of the law, which nonetheless has very tangible and material consequences. We can also infer Nolan’s intention to reappropriate this context, which is typically unfavourable to people like him in the US (13th 2016). Thus, not turning it into an empowering platform, Nolan can draw attention to this example of frequent systemic injustice. According to Hannah Arendt, quoted by Butler, “all political action requires the ‘space of appearance’” (2015, 72), and such a space opens very publically when one appears in court. Even though Nolan would be acting (including the other meaning of “acting,” i.e. performing) by himself, as Butler says, one is not only “a collection of identities,” but also “an assembly already” (68). Whether as part of a collective, or in their name, “[s]howing up, standing, breathing, moving..., speech, and silence are all aspects of a sudden assembly, an unforeseen form of political performativity that puts livable life at the forefront of politics” (18).

Consequently, Nolan becomes part of his art, his own tool and material. But as a result, his own life becomes even less “livable.” He is offered an opportunity to settle the case out of court, but he decides to pursue it, even though he is certain to lose, and he does lose (this happens after he has already lost custody of his son). His prison sentence may become the logical conclusion to his “legal art.” Whether it is likely to “change reality” and “have an effect on it” is very doubtful, however. Rather, it serves as a passive reflection of reality, which instead has had an effect on him, and the “type” he represents, identified by Tony Carnesecca a long time before their altercation as “a violent angry Negro” (Markovits 2015, 151).

Nolan often has to repeat (with pained patience) that he is not angry. The problem (to those who consider him angry) is that he uses strong language in a confident manner, and he is who he is, which intimidates white men. As Marny observes, “Nolan’s a big guy,” “he had big hands.... He wasn’t just stronger than me but maybe two or three or four times stronger” (297). “I wanted to know what made him so angry,” Marny said, “*I didn’t get it. These places were scary places before people like me came along*” (317; added emphasis). From Marny’s perspective, thanks to people like him, the regenerated part of Detroit, where Nolan also lives, is not scary *any more*: according to him the solution to scariness – for everyone – turned out to be real estate renovation and gentrification. Some took this simple reasoning even further:

There was a general feeling in the neighborhood, which I didn't totally share, that the old Detroit blacks should be grateful to us, for pushing up their property prices and giving some of them domestic employment, mowing lawns, painting walls,... and bringing in stores and bars and restaurants where before there were boarded-up shops. (151)

However, as Marny immediately adds: "But the stores weren't cheap and the truth is, you didn't see many black faces at Joe Silver's coffeehouse, for example. Most of the old residents kept to themselves" (151).

This is exactly the point Nolan makes in response to Marny's observation that "[t]his city wasn't always a black city" (317):

When the white people made enough money, they moved out.... How much money have you people brought to this city that you didn't spend on yourselves? On your schools and your houses and your neighborhoods? ... If this thing works out, how many people from Detroit will be able to afford a house in one of your neighborhoods? (317-318).

In this way Nolan provides his answer to the expected gratitude for the new residents' "pushing up [the] property prices." He is equally ungrateful for the selection of menial jobs in and around richer (white) people's houses. Nolan is the one character who spells out the other side of the early American settlers' myth which the "new settlers" and the investors behind the scheme like to evoke so much. As we saw in Robert James' "Thanksgiving-themed" speech earlier, they use it highly selectively: omitting the fact that the celebrated early settlers took away land already belonging to someone else and, not long after, brought slaves to it. In no uncertain terms, Nolan calls the new settlers "Goddamn colonizers" (266), the "urban renewal" – "Negro removal" (143), and about New Jamestown, in an echo of the Occupy Movement, says "I consider this occupied territory" (139) – as if a foreign state had invaded his home country.

In fact, such perception of the racial and, at the same time, economic divide that exists in Detroit – in the novel synecdochically representing America as a whole – is not Nolan's alone. Marny's experiences, as well as those of Gloria Lambert, his black girlfriend he briefly lives with, cast the United States as disu-

nited parallel states with people belonging to one’s own race living on one side of a curiously both invisible and visible border, with foreigners on the other side. When entering the Detroit high school where for a time Gloria and Marny both teach, Marny passes through a security check and a metal detector, and notices that everyone is black: “I shouldn’t have been surprised, in fact, I wasn’t surprised, which didn’t stop me feeling like I’d entered another country, after an airplane flight” (115). About his upbringing Marny says that, although his high school in Baton Rouge was sixty-five percent black, he did not have one black friend; instead he had “a sense of some world that was everywhere around me, which I couldn’t get into” (221).

In turn, Gloria recounts to Marny the traumatising circumstances of the death of her father, who suddenly collapsed while they were cycling in a white neighbourhood in Detroit. Gloria was seven and “didn’t know any white people to talk to” (193). She sat on the grass by her father for almost an hour: no one reacted, even when the little black girl was initially crying. The reason why she did not knock on anyone’s door was that “she was scared they weren’t supposed to be there and she didn’t want to get her daddy in trouble” (193). She obsessed about it in her adult life: “If I hadn’t a been scared, I’d have knocked on somebody’s door and got help. It’s all about race” (230).

The great recession and white masculinity

Thus, in the novel’s racial conflict, Marny is put in the middle, between Gloria and Nolan on the one side, and Tony Carnesecca on the other. Quite obviously, the man who called Nolan “a violent angry Negro” (151) is an “angry white male” himself. Carnesecca represents a problem which in his 2013 book *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*, Michael Kimmel calls “aggrieved entitlement”: “that sense that those benefits to which you believed yourself entitled have been snatched away from you” (2017, 18). Kimmel refers to the titular hitherto most privileged group’s sense of victimisation due to their increasing loss of privilege in general, as a result of which white masculinity is experiencing a severe crisis.

But this phenomenon is not new: as Susan Faludi wrote in her first book *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, first published in 1999, the same crisis drove the political decade of the 1990s (2000, 407). Already then a white man told her: “Basically, the white male is the most discriminated-against minority, the largest

minority in the country" (416). Faludi shows that the roots of "the Trump-era" fuelled by the crisis lie in the dismantling of the American industry and American social safety network since Ronald Reagan's replacement of welfare capitalism with neoliberal capitalism,¹⁹ and far predate Obama's presidency. Obama, however, if only symbolically, did mark progress for African Americans, which thus reinforced the "aggrieved entitlement" of some white male Americans.

The crisis of white masculinity is central to most of the hitherto produced "crash fiction" set in America. Such literature has been analysed in two collections of essays: *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film and Television: Twenty-First Century Bust Culture*, edited by Kirk Boyle and Daniel Mrozowski (2013) and *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*, edited by Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker (2014). Both volumes focus on what Boyle and Mrozowski call "bust culture" – "a concept employ[ed] to refer to post-crash cultural artifacts inflected by diminishment, influenced by scarcity, and infused with anxiety" (2013, xi).

The first collection offers three essays about print literature: two about popular fiction and one about "American literary novels." In the latter, David Mattingly (2013) examines two post-crash novels about two white American men affected by the recession: Jess Walter's *The Financial Lives of the Poets* (2009) and Joseph G. Peterson's *Wanted: Elevator Man* (2012). Both novels end on a positive note of "acceptance of diminished living conditions with potential for self-discovery and ethical renewal" (Mattingly 2013, 104).

In the second collection, one essay, by Hamilton Carroll, analyses two novels about "crisis masculinity" and masculinity crisis: again, *The Financial Lives of the Poets* and Sam Lipsyte's *The Ask* (2010). Both are "first-person narratives of masculine disempowerment, domestic upheaval, and social failure" with "the men who stand at their centers – and who tell their own stories – reclaim[ing] agency" and "depicted as heroic" (Carroll 2014, 219). Both "[d]eeply ironic, and richly satirical works" (217), nonetheless end with "a return to masculine pride" (219). In both, "[f]inancial downturn is represented as an opportunity to reassess lives and recalibrate expectations" (218).

In Mattingly's conclusion, which would be equally suitable for Carroll's essay, the abovementioned early "crash fiction's" protagonists are diagnosed with "contemporary apathy": "[a] reluctance to protest and engage politically sees [them] putting themselves and their families first ... and not engaging in a wid-

19 Ironically, "Make America Great Again" is a slogan Trump copied from Reagan.

er political or ideological struggle” (2013, 104–105). Today, this can be seen as a foreshadowing of Trump’s “America first” policy. Mattingly adds that “[p]alatable expressions of discontent are largely absent” in the discussed books (105). Moreover, these works represent only a single (privileged) point of view:

the overwhelmingly white middle/professional class-centric fiction thus far ignores narratives from other social groups, notably African Americans, Latinos, rural Americans, blue-collar workers, and newly radicalized activists involved in protests through such groups as Occupy Movement.... more expansive narratives may yet emerge that contextualize America’s travails in a suitably global context. Based on evidence thus far, however,... there does not appear to be an appetite among writers or audiences for directly or overtly political work. As of April 2013, there appear to be no twenty-first century Upton Sinclairs or Norman Mailers about to publish muckraking accounts of aspects of the crisis. (109)

Two years later, this state of affairs began to be remedied by Markovits’ novel. *You Don’t Have to Live Like This*, admittedly, also concentrates on the challenges faced during the Great Recession by a white middle/professional class male. However, as we have seen, it concentrates on racial tensions, and includes strongly critical views of African American characters. In addition, it does not comfortably end with the white male protagonist’s “ethical renewal” and “acceptance.” It ends with a sense of failure and shame. After the riots, Marny’s living conditions are diminished, he reassesses his life, but there is no “return to masculine pride.” Firstly, from the beginning Marny’s infantilising lack of money is frequently highlighted. Secondly, in the crucial scene of the fight between Nolan and Tony, after Tony urges Marny to get his gun, Marny freezes, unable to decide what to do.²⁰ Thirdly, also as a witness in Nolan’s trial, Marny feels undecided, impotent, and guilty himself. In the words of one critic, “Marny is an unwitting archetype for his generation, a childish man”²¹ (Kelly 2015).

20 Faludi writes about handling a gun, a key symbol in America, as “a caricature of a patriarchal image ... The guns were the props in what was essentially a performance of masculinity” (2000, 444).

21 Again, Faludi wrote about this phenomenon, “a childish man,” already in *Stiffed*: “By the mid-1990s, the media was full of quizzical and grumpy commentary about the proliferation of ‘permanent adolescent’ men” (2000, 531).

Finally, after Gloria leaves him because of his indecisiveness, and still during but especially after the trial, Marny becomes depressed, isolated, and develops a porn addiction (Markovits 2015, 349). He can no longer live in his rented house and stays with various friends. His situation is even worse than where he started, two years earlier, but his emotions are similar:

the old confused feelings returned.... I haven't got a job, though I do some day labor, fruit picking, furniture removal, leafleting, yard work. As little as I can get away with.... I sold my car Basically, I'm treading water My point of view is undergoing an alteration, and when your point of view changes you see things you couldn't see before, different aspects of reality become available. (389)

A few paragraphs later, in a metatextual moment, Marny reflects on his own story, the text that the reader has almost finished reading. Thinking about a friend who wrote an autobiographical novel, he wonders: "If she can make six figures by writing some novel about me, what should I get for writing this?" (391). The "periphery guy" (26), the "outsider" (58), the Nick Carraway to Robert James's Jay Gatsby (Miller 2015, Wade 2015), was meant to be Robert's chronicler, and he is one, although not of his multimillionaire friend's success. Instead, he writes about New Jamestown now and how it became this way: "It's a different place these days.... there's also a lot of petty theft" (Markovits 2015, 389), there's "the not-for-profit crime. The senseless destruction.... burning cars" (276). It turns out not everything has to be for profit. When your point of view changes you do see things you couldn't see before.

Conclusion

The most recent American literature so far shows little interest in a direct, politically critical engagement with the Great Recession (see Kowal 2019a). Perhaps it is too soon for such literary responses to the crash and the resultant crisis – or rather overlapping crises; perhaps the subject matter is too daunting. There are a number of novels which use the Great Recession merely as a background, while concentrating only on an individual character and his (predominantly his) financial troubles, never directly venturing into broader concerns about the American economic system, not to mention its relation to the rest of the world.

Against this background, Benjamin Markovits’ *You Don’t Have to Live Like This* stands out as an exception,²² additionally because it is an early example of the emerging new genre of the “Obama-era novel.”

As demonstrated in this paper, Markovits’ book conveys a sense of disappointment with the optimism that the first black American President’s election inspired. Change was hoped for, but nothing changed. It is symbolically significant *how* Obama appears in the novel: he meets and shows support not to people like Nolan Smith but to Robert James, who represents the rich white elites and the financial sector, which had caused the 2008 crash in the first place. Thus the words Obama utters, “You don’t have to live like this. There’s a better way to live” (Markovits 2015, 179), which are about the American Dream, ring hollow in Detroit—Markovits’ small-scale model of America. The dream is out of reach for many, as the Black Lives Matter movement proves by struggling not for a better life, but, in Butler’s words, for a *livable* life. At the same time, the dream feels increasingly out of reach even for those who consider themselves exclusively entitled to it: those white men who by now are angrier than ever, and—as we know now—brought Trump to power.

Markovits’ novel does not offer an easy recipe for a better way to live in America, but it does warn “You don’t have to live like this” by pointing to an anti-example. The feelings of shame and defeat with which the novel ends go beyond the narrator’s own sense of personal failure. It is not just Marny, but the whole experimental project that fails. As one critic put it, “‘how to live well, that’s the question,’ says Marny; but the subtext is ‘at what cost?’” (Wade 2015). On the one hand, there is an actual financial cost of this particular attempt at “living well” in the novel. On the other hand, there is also another, non-financial cost. Judith Butler expressed it by repeating Theodor W. Adorno’s formulation: “it is not possible to live a good life in a bad life” (2015, 22). In our context this means: the experiment was conducted at somebody else’s expense; someone else is paying the price. While, after the experiment is over, many of the new settlers pack their things and relocate yet again, the old residents remain in either unchanged or even worsened circumstances, some of them having lost a family member killed in the riots, some now homeless, like Nolan’s mother. Nolan himself, like many arrested in the riots, ends up in prison. While none

22 One more such valuable politically engaged literary work is Margaret Atwood’s *The Heart Goes Last* (2015). See Kowal 2019b.

of the “social engineers” could be held directly accountable for the destruction, violence and deaths, they initiated a chain reaction – within a larger, pre-existing chain of events – which led to this outcome. Now they can just leave. There is no doubt that the chief “engineer,” Robert James, has a bright future ahead of him, in business, and very likely in politics.

What could be the novel’s clearest lesson? Lucy Scholes wrote for *The Guardian* that the novel “warn[s] us that communities are delicate ecosystems that shouldn’t be tampered with, even by those with the best of intentions” (2015). As Robert’s political science professor from Harvard, said, inaugurating the scheme that *You Don’t Have to Live Like This* is about:

What we are about to witness is a small experiment in regeneration – an attempt to repopulate these neighborhoods, to rebuild these houses, to revive these communities. It is, by its nature, a very local solution to some of the deeper and broader problems America faces today. But if you can fix it here, you can fix it anywhere. (Markovits 2015, 56)

Markovits’ warning is: no you can’t; not like this.

Works Cited:

- 13th. 2020 [2016]. Dir. Ava DuVernay. Netflix. Accessed August 25, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=krfcq5pF8u8>.
- Akhtar, Ayad. 2021 [2020]. *Homeland Elegies*. London: Tinder Press.
- Aklilu, Simret. 2020. “Barack Obama lists his favorite books of 2020.” CNN, December 18. Accessed August 23, 2021. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/12/18/politics/obama-favorite-books-2020-trnd/index.html>.
- Amend: The Fight for America*. 2021. “Episode 1.” Netflix. YouTube, May 4. Accessed August 26, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-E4TUQ4THIE>.
- Black Lives Matter. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/>. N.d. Accessed August 25, 2021.
- Boyle, Kirk, and Daniel Mrozowski. 2013. “Introduction: Creative Documentation of Creative Destruction.” In *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film and Television: Twenty-First Century Bust Culture*, edited by Kirk Boyle and

- Daniel Mrozowski, ix-xxvi. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books.
- Butler, Judith. 2015. *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Carroll, Hamilton. 2014. “‘Stuck between Meanings.’ Recession-Era Print Fictions of Crisis Masculinity.” In *Gendering the Recession: Media and Culture in an Age of Austerity*, edited by Diane Negra, and Yvonne Tasker, 203–222. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Desmond, Matthew. 2017. *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*. London: Penguin Books.
- Faludi, Susan. 2000. *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*. New York: Perennial.
- Florida, Richard. 2018. *The New Urban Crisis: How Our Cities Are Increasing Inequality, Deepening Segregation, and Failing the Middle Class – and What We Can Do about It*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hedges, Chris, and Joe Sacco. 2014. *Days of Destruction, Days of Revolt*. New York: Nation Books.
- Kelly, Stuart. 2015. “Detroit’s New Colonials.” *The Spectator*, July 4. Accessed August 25, 2021. <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/detroit-s-new-colonials>.
- Kimmel, Michael. 2017 [2013]. *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era*. Revised Edition. New York: Bold Type Books.
- Kowal, Ewa. 2019a. *The Post-Crash Decade of American Cinema: Wall Street, the “Mancession” and the Political Construction of Crisis*. Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press.
- Kowal, Ewa. 2019b. “Nostalgia, Kitsch and the Great Recession in Margaret Atwood’s *The Heart Goes Last* and *Westworld* (Season 1).” In *Brno Studies in English* 45 no. 1: 143–155.
- Liu, Max. 2015. “You Don’t Have to Live Like This, by Benjamin Markovits – Book Review.” *The Independent*, July 11. Accessed August 25, 2021. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/you-don-t-have-to-live-like-this-by-benjamin-markovits-book-review-10378271.html>.
- Looby, Claire. 2016. “You Don’t Have to Live Like This, By Benjamin Markovits: Paperback Review.” *The Irish Times*, January 9. Accessed August 25, 2021. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/you-don-t-have-to-live-like-this-by-benjamin-markovits-1.2489742>.

- Lopez, German, ed. 2016. "The 2014 Ferguson Protests over the Michael Brown Shooting, Explained." Vox.com, January 27. Accessed August 25, 2021. <https://www.vox.com/cards/mike-brown-protests-ferguson-missouri/ferguson-mo-protests-police>.
- Lorentzen, Christian. 2015. "Benjamin Markovits's Obama Novel." Vulture.com, July 7. Accessed August 25, 2021. <http://www.vulture.com/2015/07/benjamin-markovitss-obama-novel.html>.
- McElroy Ansa, Tina. 2015. "'You Don't Have to Live Like This' review: Trouble rebuilding Detroit." *The Washington Post*, August 24. Accessed April 10, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/you-dont-have-to-live-like-this-review-trouble-rebuilding-detroit/2015/08/24/56396652-42c0-11e5-8e7d-9c033e6745d8_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.4c49ad6ada41.
- Mattingly, Daniel. 2013. "Crash Fiction: American Literary Novels of the Global Financial Crisis." In *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film and Television: Twenty-First Century Bust Culture*, edited by Kirk Boyle, and Daniel Mrozowski, 95–112. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books.
- Markovits, Benjamin. 2015. *You Don't Have to Live Like This*. London: Faber & Faber.
- Miller, Laura. 2015. "You Don't Have to Live Like This by Benjamin Markovits Review – Utopianism Meets Racial Distrust in Detroit." *The Guardian*, August 5. Accessed August 25, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/aug/05/you-dont-have-to-live-like-this-benjamin-markovits-review>.
- Scholes, Lucy. 2015. "You Don't Have to Live Like This by Ben Markovits review – a study of tense race relations." *The Guardian*, July 12. Accessed August 25, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/12/you-dont-have-to-live-like-this-review-ben-markovits>.
- Seymour, Gene. 2015. "Novel Explores Tensions in Detroit." Special for USA TODAY, August 2. Accessed August 25, 2021. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/books/2015/07/31/you-dont-have--live-like--novel/30846863/>.
- Standing, Guy. 2016. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

The Agenda with Steve Paikin. 2012. “Chris Hedges: Sacrifice Zones of America.”
TV Ontario. Accessed September 8, 2018. [https://www.youtube.com/
watch?v=IZEdPnSbRjc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZEdPnSbRjc).

Wade, Francesca. 2015. “‘You Don’t Have to Live Like This’,
by Benjamin Markovits – Review.” *The Financial Times*,
July 24. Accessed April 10, 2018. [https://www.ft.com/
content/33d606d0-2be9-11e5-acfb-cbd2e1c81cca](https://www.ft.com/content/33d606d0-2be9-11e5-acfb-cbd2e1c81cca).