Distrustful Art: Imagining a Polyphonic Common in Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs*

Phillip Zapkin  
*Pennsylvania State University*

This article argues that Peter Carey’s 1997 novel *Jack Maggs*—an adaptation of Dickens’s *Great Expectations*—deploys self-reflexivity and critical interrogation of authorial coherence for its postmodern, anti-capitalist project. Carey’s heteroglossic play puts his novel in conversation with its predecessor as the metafictional author Tobias Oates writes his novel alongside Maggs’s letter, paralleling Carey’s revisions to Dickens’s portrait of Magwitch (narrated by Pip). However, as Carey’s text destabilizes the narrative’s potential to establish knowledge, it also undermines the authority of Carey’s own writing, prompting readers to question not only Dickens and Oates, but Carey and Maggs as well. This cacophony of voices challenges the ideological underpinnings of late capitalism because the collaborative form of adaptation undermines ownership, particularly intellectual property ownership, at the heart of contemporary capitalism. I claim that adaptation locates readers within a cultural commonwealth, illustrating the productive value of a common (i.e., non-privately owned) culture.

Beginning tentatively in the 1960s and exploding during and after the 1980s, there has been an upsurge in what Jeremy Rosen terms ‘minor character elaboration’ among Anglophone authors keen to critique, question, or challenge the ideological assumptions of canonical Western literature. While the history of elaborating or refocusing on the stories of peripheral characters is at least as old as written literature itself, Rosen argues that the minor character elaboration literature that emerged in the late twentieth century is a distinct and coherent genre marked by specific socio-cultural goals and assumptions.¹ Rosen explains that the genre often begins from a feminist or postcolonial stance of recovering voices for characters who have been silenced or repressed: ‘constructing narratives around the perspectives of socially marginal figures in canonical works, often seeking to critique the ideologies underlying the manner in which those works represent minor characters—or their failure to represent socially marginal figures at all’.² This postmodern genre challenges romantic notions of artistic originality and the coherent Truth (capital T) of a singular work: the presumption that the text has an ontological essence apart from interpretive mechanisms of knowing. Instead, postmodernism emphasizes multiple ways of reading and engaging with cultural artefacts. This play of voices—this competition over Truth/truths between different versions of a story—produces narrative dissonance, which is the struggle of narratives and voices offering different perspectives within the same literary space. Rosen argues that many post-1980 examples of minor character elaboration fail to live up to the genre’s radical postmodern potential ‘both in their lack of self-reflexivity regarding their own

---

² Rosen, p. 139.
constructedness and in their depiction of coherent, autonomous narrating subjects’. However, Peter Carey’s 1997 novel *Jack Maggs*—an adaptation of Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*—puts this kind of self-reflexivity and critical interrogation of authorial coherence at the heart of its postmodern and anti-capitalist project.

Carey’s presentation of the transported convict Abel Magwitch—renamed Jack Maggs in the later novel—reimagines this socially marginalized character to express his own complex history, experiences, and opinions, apart from Pip’s narration. Giving Maggs his own writing voice positions heteroglossic play at the centre of Carey’s adaptation, putting the latter novel in conversation with its nineteenth century predecessor. Mikhail Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as ‘a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized’. In other words, heteroglossia consists of various speech patterns and types of enunciation structured together to create an ostensibly whole text. As we shall see, this heteroglossic approach is expanded as the metafictional author Tobias Oates writes his novel alongside Maggs’s description of his own history, paralleling Carey’s revisions to Dickens’s original portrait of Magwitch. However, by destabilizing the narrative’s potential to establish knowledge, Carey undermines the authority of his own writing, prompting the reader to question not only Dickens and Oates but Carey and Maggs as well. This cacophony of voices challenges the ideological underpinnings of neoliberalism because the collaborative form of adaptation undermines the notion of ownership, particularly intellectual property ownership, at the heart of contemporary capitalism. Lewis Hyde characterizes contemporary US copyright law thus:

any work ‘fixed in any tangible medium of expression, now known or later developed,’ and these works include not only the obvious—novels, songs, motion pictures—but any “fixed” thing, whether formally registered with the Copyright Office or not, be it a grocery list, a ransom note, or a child’s drawing of the sun. The term for individuals is now ‘lifetime plus 70 years’ and for corporations or work made for hire it is ninety-five years.

This copyright limits who is legally allowed to reproduce or distribute a text, thereby establishing access to ideas as a financial privilege. I claim that adaptation locates readers within a cultural commonwealth, illustrating the productive value of a common (i.e., non-privately owned) culture.

In conceptualizing adaptation as a shared or common mode of writing resistant to late capitalism, I pick up primarily from the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, who theorize the common as an alternative social organization to capitalism’s individualist and consumerist ethos. For Hardt and Negri, the commons centres on shared cultural performances, artefacts, codes, languages, ideas, and so on which are

---

3 Rosen, p. 150.
held as the collective cultural heritage of particular peoples, and by extension of a global commons. Many commons scholars begin from the premise that—despite restrictive modern copyright laws intended largely to protect corporate ownership—artistic and intellectual production is and should be seen principally as public creation. These scholars see creation as a service rendered by the individual artist, thinker, or inventor to the world at large, rather than as a private good from which the individual (or corporation) should profit exclusively. David Bollier puts it in no uncertain terms:

From time immemorial, human beings have freely shared their creativity with each other. Culture has always been about imitating, extending and transferring earlier creative works. Art has always been a communal, intergenerational act of borrowing... Culture cannot thrive without a commons of shared creativity.

Hyde points out that cultural, artistic, and scientific ideas are—unlike tangible products—non-rivalrous and non-excludable: meaning, first, that immaterial products can be consumed by multiple people simultaneously without any individual’s consumption diminishing the value or utility of any other individuals’ consumption, and second, that once an immaterial artefact has been made public, it is virtually impossible to prevent others from seeing or knowing about it. The commons ethic problematizes private ownership of intellectual/cultural property, which Hardt and Negri believe is fundamentally tied to a capitalistic ethic of ownership more generally. Instead, they envision a radical openness founded on the collective development of ideas, language, aesthetics, and norms. They ground the production of this commons in felicitous encounters, writing that this shared culture ‘requires, first, an openness to alterity and the capacity to form relationships with others, to generate joyful encounters and thus create social bodies with ever greater capacities’. In other words, willingness to be open to the delightful possibilities offered by encountering others becomes the basis for a common culture where shared norms, ideas, ideals, and views facilitate connection. As they put it,

the felicitous encounter results in a new production of the common—when, for instance, people communicate their different knowledges, different capacities to form cooperatively something new. The felicitous encounter, in effect, produces a new social body that is more capable than either of the single bodies was alone.

As we shall learn, these encounters are not always pleasant and are often marked by unequal power dynamics. In Carey’s novel the polyphonic nature of adaptation facilitates such encounters. Through his postmodern destabilization of narrative voice,

---

8 Hyde, Common As Air, p. 46-47
9 Hardt and Negri, Commonwealth, p. 381.
10 Hardt and Negri, p. 255.
11 Hardt and Negri, pp. 254-255.
Carey enters into playful conversation with Dickens and with the characters of both novels: *Great Expectations* and *Jack Maggs*.

**Competing Voices in *Great Expectations* and *Jack Maggs***

Through the multi-vocal narrative technique, Carey exposes *Great Expectations* as a text thoroughly grounded within its own cultural precepts, particularly imperialism. Carey takes a relatively minor character from a canonical work—in this case Abel Magwitch—and develops him as a new character capable of and interested in telling his own story. The plots are very different, and the characters Carey creates do differ from those in Dickens—Magwitch becomes Maggs, and Pip becomes Henry Phipps, for instance. Despite these changes, Carey’s novel clearly takes its cue from Dickens’s earlier work and in the process of adaptation comes into contact—and dissonance—with *Great Expectations*. This contact between the two novels/authors highlights the heteroglossic nature of both works. Bakhtin argues that this is fundamental to the novel as a literary form, and I argue that in drawing our attention to the particularly heteroglossic function of adaptation, Carey makes this play of voices thematically central to *Jack Maggs*, whereas it remains merely implicit in *Great Expectations*.

*Jack Maggs* is a multi-authored text. I mean this in the sense that Carey introduces a number of metafictional authors who write portions of the novel. The most prominent of these is Maggs himself, whose autobiography is presented in a letter over multiple chapters. *Jack Maggs* also features Tobias Oates, who writes a biographical novel of Maggs (taking extensive liberties). We will turn in more detail to these two metatheatrical authors’ works later on. Although both of these authors are Carey’s creations, they write with their own voices and present their own views of the world. Maggs and Oates are authors in their own right. However, they exist in dynamic tension against both Carey and Dickens (or Pip, who narrates *Great Expectations*, an important distinction which will be discussed more below), because, as we shall see, the nature of Carey’s heteroglossic play makes it nearly impossible to establish discreet boundaries between authorial voices. This narrative/authorial uncertainty stands in sharp contrast to the more simplistic liberatory ideology Rosen traces in much minor character elaboration literature.

Rosen points to a pervasive rhetoric of giving repressed or silenced characters their own voice and allowing them to tell the Truth (capital T), usually against patriarchal, imperialist, racist, and/or capitalist power structures. However, he argues that many authors and critics of minor character elaborations obscure the fact

---

12 Magwitch personally plays a minor role in the novel, though he is the ultimate driver of the action from behind the scenes. Because his wealth enables Pip’s ‘great expectations’, Magwitch is a crucial character, even if he occupies relatively little page space.

13 The shift from Magwitch to Maggs show Carey’s thorough familiarity with Dickens’s canon, as Dickens had considered the last name ‘Maggs’ before settling on David Copperfield as the main character in that eponymous novel.


that to represent a repressed voice is not the same as actually allowing that voice to speak:

the depiction of a voice has been constructed by a contemporary author manifestly in possession of the cultural capital of the traditional canon who is writing on behalf of the formerly minor character.\textsuperscript{17}

The irony is that despite pointing to the role of authorial ideology and bias in creating (or erasing) characters and their voices, much minor character literature represses the ideology and bias of contemporary authors. The genre often obscures the difference between a repressed Truth (capital T) and a repressed truth (lower case T), or between ontology and epistemology. The upshot of this, Rosen claims, is that many of these texts ‘thus perpetuate the epistemological problem that they endeavour to solve, contesting previous fictional narratives while posing accounts that are equally subjective and thus open to contestation from another side’.\textsuperscript{18} However, with his continual focus on authorship, story-telling, story-ownership, and the politics of writing, Carey’s minor character elaboration is deeply imbued with epistemological scepticism and postmodern self-reflexivity.

Every time the story of Maggs/Magwitch is told—whether by Dickens, Carey, Pip, Maggs, or Oates—the distinct telling renders (or re-renders) the character through the author’s cultural lens. This epistemological contest highlights the limit of any attempt to tell the/an objective Truth (capital T). Pip’s presentation of Magwitch is coloured by his ideological positioning in an imperial and classist society, which included distinct impressions of Australians as inherently criminal. In a book re-thinking the history of settler colonialism, James Belich describes the attitude toward those transported to New South Wales: ‘Convict crimes may not seem very terrible today, but Britons at the time tended to see them as evidence of ineradicable depravity, possibly hereditary’.\textsuperscript{19} Pip writes of Magwitch that

To my thinking there was something in him that made it hopeless to attempt to disguise him. The more I dressed him, the better I dressed him, the more he looked like the slouching fugitive on the marshes.\textsuperscript{20}

Pip understands Magwitch as inherently criminal—a core of Magwitch refuses to allow his criminality to be covered over. As Coral Lansbury observes,

Superficially, Magwitch had been reformed in New South Wales—he was at least a man of property on his return to England—but Magwitch dies in prison, a convict to the last… Arcady may have intervened like a

\textsuperscript{17} Rosen, p. 141.
\textsuperscript{18} Rosen, p. 162.
\textsuperscript{20} C. Dickens, \textit{Great Expectations}, New York, Bantam, 2003, p. 357.

Magwitch’s impression of criminality is matched by external signs of foreignness; he ‘had in his own mind sketched a dress for himself that would have made him something between a dean and a dentist’.\footnote{Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 354.} In addition to being recognizably criminal, Magwitch parodically attempts to dress in what he imagines to be the clothing of an aristocratic London culture. The absurdity of Magwitch’s costume highlights, rather than diminishes, the impression that he does not belong in London; his clothes mark him as the Other.

As shorthand, I’ve claimed that ‘Pip writes’ these things, but the narrator is a complicating voice in Dickens’s novel. Along with the authorial pairings of Oates-and-Maggs (meta-fictional) and Dickens-and-Carey (‘real’), any analysis of voices here must also account for the Dickens-and-Pip dichotomy. This is the initial heteroglossic instability of *Great Expectations*. There is an incongruity of voices in any text with a narrative persona: a gap between writer and narrator. Especially in the light of *Jack Maggs*—which draws attention to the role of ideology in providing a framework for narratives—we must wonder who authors *Great Expectations*: whose ideologies and prejudices shape the presentation of Magwitch. To what extent does Dickens write, and to what extent does Pip write?\footnote{The autobiographic links between Dickens and Pip, as well as between Dickens and Magwitch are well documented. See, for instance, Pellow, ‘Re-Doing Dickens’; A. Mukherjee, ‘Missed Encounters: Repetition, Rewriting, and Contemporary Returns to Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2005, pp. 108-133. Available from JSTOR, (accessed 22 June 2017); or L.E. Savu, ‘The “Crooked Business” of Storytelling: Authorship and Cultural Revisionism in Peter Carey’s *Jack Maggs*, *ARIEL*, vol. 36, no. 3-4, 2005, pp. 127-163.} Pip largely voices Victorian anxieties about criminality, the colonial experience, and contamination—as we’ll see more below—but Dickens seems to take a kinder view of Magwitch, allowing him to grow rich and protect Pip financially with wealth garnered through hard work in New South Wales.

The uncertainty around voice in *Great Expectations* is amplified by Pip’s admitted uncertainty. Before the narrative properly begins Pip refers to his ‘first fancies… unreasonably derived… [and] childish conclusion[s]’.\footnote{Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 1.} The novel is riddled with inconsistencies and contradictions, indicative of Pip’s faulty memory. However, if we take Dickens as the principle narrative voice, these unreasonable fantasies may take on a different light. What compromises Pip’s narrative authority actually strengthens Dickens’s artistry in representing his narrator’s voice. For the purpose of this argument, however, let it suffice that the unstable binary of Pip and Dickens as distinct and yet simultaneous writers of *Great Expectations* is reproduced in the more complicated forms of the Carey-as-Maggs and Carey-as-Oates dichotomies in *Jack Maggs*.

Maggs asserts his own authorial autonomy—again, ironically, via Carey’s pen—both through his command of language, particularly written language, and through his attempts to prevent Oates from ‘stealing’ his story. In contrast to the
(apparently) ill-educated Magwitch, Maggs writes his own story, and he writes that story in the fluid manner characteristic of an educated and experienced author. Over several chapters, Maggs composes a lengthy letter presenting his history to Henry Phipps in a writing style much more sophisticated and polished than that of Tobias Oates, the author representing Dickens. Not only the style of writing, but the technique of Maggs’s writing demonstrates his skillfulness. Maggs writes from right to left in disappearing ink. Carey notes that Maggs ‘wrote fluidly, as if long accustomed to that distrustful art’. The fluidity of Maggs’s backward, disappearing writing suggests the level of skill he brings to his own story. By contrast Magwitch, whose history in Great Expectations is narrated principally through Pip’s reflective first person, never fully escapes being merely the slouching fugitive—even as a more sympathetic picture of the convict emerges toward the end of the novel. However, the backward, disappearing writing also suggests a secrecy belied by the act of writing itself. A secrecy undermined by Maggs’s committing his story to the relative solidity of paper, as well as by Carey’s and Mercy Larkin’s twin publication of Maggs’s letters. Carey publishes the letters in his novel and Mercy, who becomes Maggs’s wife in Australia, donates the collected letters to the Mitchell Library in Sydney along with numerous copies of Oates’s novel (as we find out in the last pages of Carey’s novel).

The most common narrative persona in Jack Maggs—other than the third person—is that of Maggs himself. Maggs’s writing style mirrors the best of Dickens’s prose, with flowing descriptions of places and evocative images of an impoverished London underclass, even borrowing Dickensian tropes. His imagery evokes Dickens’s novels beyond just Great Expectations, capitalizing on their cultural currency. Ankhi Mukherjee—among others—has catalogued the Dickensian intertextual references in Jack Maggs, finding echoes not only of Great Expectations but also of Oliver Twist, Our Mutual Friend, Bleak House, and David Copperfield, as well as numerous Dickensian tropes, images, and general character and setting types. Because of Maggs’s writing skill—both his sophisticated prose style and the complex mechanics of his backward writing—our initial impulse is to believe that his autobiographical letter is trustworthy. However, because Maggs’s letter reproduces/adapts specific cultural tropes found throughout Dickens’s canon, the texture of his story calls into question the very possibility of authentic narratives. This difficulty becomes more pronounced as Tobias Oates begins writing his novel about Maggs, and the narrative dissonance of the Carey-Dickens dichotomy is reproduced in the narrative dissonance of the Maggs-Oates dichotomy.

Oates is a metafictional stand-in for Dickens through which Carey creates a fictional portrait of his literary predecessor, distorting his image just as Carey implies Dickens distorted his image of the Australian transport. If Maggs’s writing reproduces the best elements of Dickens’s prose, Oates’s novel reproduces the worst of Dickens’s style—excessive devotion to detail and environmental description.

---

26 Carey, p. 356-357.
28 The parallels between Dickens and Oates are well documented, as is Carey’s premise that Dickens presented an unfair portrait of Australians in writing Magwitch. See, for example, Pellow, ‘Re-Doing Dickens’ or Savu, “Crooked Business” of Storytelling.”
coupled with vague philosophical or metaphysical pretensions. The (metafictional) first chapter of Oates’s novel, ‘The Death of Maggs’—Carey’s chapter 74—gives us a sense of Oates’s style. He devotes these paragraphs to detail about the interaction of ‘the yellow fog’ and the ‘Welsh blue stone’ of Newgate prison. Unlike Maggs, whose description flows smoothly into the action of his characters, Oates tries to create settings that do their own metaphysical work. C. Kenneth Pellow argues that the openings of ‘The Death of Maggs’ parallel the openings of Great Expectations in Oates’s overblown first draft, and Jack Maggs in the revised version: Oates’s original draft is

an opening similar to several of Dickens’s, especially in the specific details: fog, rock and stone, a shroud, and Newgate. A few pages later we watch Oates replace it... This bears less resemblance to Oates original choice than it does to Carey’s opening of the novel we are reading.

Also emulating Dickens, Oates’s writing is character driven:

Toby had always had a great affection for Characters [sic]... dustmen, jugglers, costers, pick-pockets. He thought nothing of engaging the most gruesome types in Shepherd Market and writing down their histories in his chap book.

Like Maggs’s letter, Oates’s writing is shaped by Dickens’s style and content, further blurring the lines between various writers. Additionally, because Carey actually wrote the words of both Oates and Maggs, it becomes challenging to distinguish Carey’s writing from the other three authors.

This instability of authorship produces dissonance as it becomes progressively more difficult to isolate narrative voices. Voices blend together, losing their distinctiveness, and we as readers are asked to interrogate the very potential of the author as such. It may seem that we have four narrators all describing the same character—Maggs/Magwitch—in distinctly different ways, but each version is structured by the same set of cultural tropes, obscuring which voice belongs to which author. The role of cultural tropes in shaping competing narratives of Maggs/Magwitch undermines the illusion of a unified character, which a single voice’s description allows us to imagine. When a character is described as a consistent whole by a single narrator, readers can more easily sustain the comfortable illusion that we know—that we can know—the truth of a character. However, heteroglossic descriptions of the character from multiple perspectives destabilize this illusory unity and call into question our ability to understand any character apart from the specific perspective through which that character is presented.

Adaptation as a form encourages us to abandon the illusion of a singular stable meaning by reworking, representing, and rethinking existing texts. The notion of originality is central both to a romantic notion of literature and to fidelity criticism in

\[\text{References}\]

29 Carey, Jack Maggs, p. 298.
31 Carey, Jack Maggs, p. 90.
adaptation studies, a critical stance valorising the accurate transfer of details from one genre to another. Shifting from thinking about texts as artefacts with their own discreet boundaries to thinking about textual flux compromises this faith in originality, however. Even before its first adaptation by another author, *Great Expectations* was adaptive because Dickens rewrote the ending. Dickens originally wrote a bleak conclusion in which Pip and Estella are separated, but under pressure from his publisher, he replaced it with a happier ending where they could be together. As Julie Sanders reminds us, ‘*Great Expectations* is invariably published in modern editions with its own alternative endings’.32 The ‘happy’ ending replaced an end that was more consistent with the characters Dickens had developed throughout the novel. However, it is not clear that either ending is the *true* ending of *Great Expectations*. In their own ways each of these endings is a lie, and when read side-by-side they disrupt the illusion of narrative unity implicit in the traditional novel form. The co-existence of the two endings already points to the epistemological limit of the novel as a form, because

the narratable is never quite used up in the inexorable movement of plot toward expedient endings. Rewritings pit the narrated against traces of the narratable, brushing aside an immanent and linear production of meaning for one that is contingent and retroactively thrust upon the text.33

(Western) readers generally comprehend stories teleologically through the arc of beginning, middle, and end, but the two very different endings of this novel disrupt the seemingly smooth flow of cause-and-effect through which plots move from one event to another. The uncertainty created by two different potential endings, neither of which seems to fully ring true, is another source of narrative dissonance at work in *Great Expectations*.

Although *Jack Maggs* has only one ending, its conclusion is equally dissonant because it doesn’t follow from the events of the novel. Sanders notes that ‘Many critics at the time of *Jack Maggs*’s publication declared themselves unsatisfied with the novel’s “happy ending”’.34 Critics were unhappy with the improbable conclusion—which skips from Phipps trying to shoot Maggs at Percy Buckle’s hysterical insistence, to Maggs and Mercy Larkin in Australia living in prosperous, hard-working, domestic bliss until Maggs dies of natural causes years later. In the *New York Times*, for instance, Caryn James wrote, ‘the novel’s attempt to depict [Maggs] as a founding father of the modern Australian character develops late and is not especially convincing’.35 In New South Wales, he sets up a number of businesses—selling his brickworks to build a saw mill, a hardware store, and finally a pub—and Carey notes that ‘He was twice president of the shire and was…the president of the Cricket Club’.36 This prosperous and civically engaged Jack Maggs hardly seems consistent with the transported

33 Mukherjee, ‘Missed Encounters’, p. 130.
34 Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, p. 132.
convict that slit a man’s throat for trying to steal a picture.\textsuperscript{37} The ending of Carey’s novel seems like fantasy-wish fulfillment. According to Mukherjee, this is characteristic of re-writing or adapting, because the retroactive process involves looking backward to find new meaning in a text. She writes,

we can read literary rewriting as an \textit{intentional} act of wish fulfillment that emphasizes the retroactivity of meaning... The forms and content literary rewritings seek to find, or refind, are often phantasmatic in nature. They look back in anger or longing for objects always already lost.\textsuperscript{38}

In this case, Carey looks back for Maggs’s Australian happy end, an end denied to the transported convict by both Dickens—who has Magwitch die in prison—and by Oates—who has Maggs die in a fire.\textsuperscript{39} At the same time, the ending of \textit{Jack Maggs} echoes the imagined Australian prosperity of Mr. Peggotty and company in Dickens’s \textit{David Copperfield}.\textsuperscript{40} Despite this Dickensian allusion, Maggs and Mercy’s phantasmatic ending is one of Carey’s most overt, and clumsy, postcolonial gestures, as we shall see more below. Maggs grows disillusioned with an England that now represents nothing but disappointment and oppression, and finds happiness by embracing the hard-working wholesomeness of life in Australia. As Pellow puts it,

In like fashion to Dickens’s treatment of Magwitch, England insulted Australia, so Carey evens that score as well. Jack resists his “Aussie-ness” throughout the novel, then is happily reconciled to it at the end.\textsuperscript{41}

Carey’s novel ends, in other words, with the overt postcolonial fantasy that the true source of happiness is not in the purity or grandeur of the mother country’s imperial/metropolitan centre, but in fact in an Australia no longer figured as a penal extension of the British Empire.

Indeed, Carey overtly signals the fictional quality of Maggs’s life through Oates; Carey writes that

It was now, on the seventh of May, in the darkest night of his life, that Jack Maggs began to take the form the world would later know. This Jack Maggs was, of course, a fiction.\textsuperscript{42}

Announcing to the reader that the Maggs imagined in Oates’s future novel is a fiction simultaneously emphasizes and undermines the reality of Maggs as a character in Carey’s novel. On the one hand, Carey sets up his Maggs as more real than Oates’s

\textsuperscript{37} Carey, p. 276.
\textsuperscript{38} Mukherjee, ‘Missed Encounters’, p. 122, original emphasis.
\textsuperscript{39} Dickens, \textit{Great Expectations}, p. 490; Carey, \textit{Jack Maggs}, p. 147.
\textsuperscript{41} Pellow, ‘Re-doing Dickens’, pp. 106-107.
\textsuperscript{42} Carey, \textit{Jack Maggs}, p. 355.
Maggs, and on the other hand Carey draws our attention to the fact that both characters are (competing) fictional constructs. There is a similar reference when Oates pleads for Maggs to spare his life. Maggs is incensed that Oates plans to use his history for a novel, and in response to Oates’s protests that his writing is fiction, Maggs informs the author that ‘You are just a character to me too’.\textsuperscript{43} The unstable phantasmatic quality both of the characters and of the novels’ endings undermines the unity and reliability readers like to imagine in a narrative. Indeed, this self-reflexivity builds upon the instability created by multiple narrators—Carey, Maggs, and Oates—co-existing within the novel, and on the dissonance when \textit{Jack Maggs} comes into contact and/or conflict with \textit{Great Expectations}. Ultimately, the false feel of \textit{Jack Maggs}’s happy ending draws attention to the role our cultural imaginary plays in structuring and shaping all narratives, recording conventions rather than an ‘objective’ truth of experience.

\textbf{Adaptation, Property, and Imperialism}

And so, with notions of the author and of the stable narrative compromised, what do we have left? Is it possible to write purely and authentically? to create an original work? Or is all writing merely a recycling of culturally sanctioned images and ideas? As Bruce Woodcock argues, ‘The metafictional strategies of the novel...call attention to the process of fictional invention, not just as lying...but as appropriation, theft’.\textsuperscript{44} The layers of narrative dissonance in conflict throughout Carey’s novel, particularly as it comes into contact with \textit{Great Expectations}, suggest the impossibility of authentic narrative creation. All composition becomes a form of theft. This is, of course, precisely the charge that Maggs makes against Oates. When Maggs and Oates are hiding after the murder of the thief-taker, Maggs reads the first chapter of Oates’ novel and accuses Oates, ‘You are a thief...a damned little thief’.\textsuperscript{45} This accusation could easily be made by Dickens against Carey as well. Carey appropriates the characters and relationships of \textit{Great Expectations} and alters them to fit his new novel. Of course, this accusation of theft requires the presumption of intellectual/cultural property: Maggs’s assumption that he has exclusive rights to his own history (ironically already appropriated by Pip/Dickens), and a cultural assumption that Dickens has exclusive rights to his novel. Dickens’s own history with copyright law is well known, but it bears mentioning because he was such a vocal advocate for a binding international copyright. According to Edward Hudon, Dickens touched on international copyright in almost every major speech he made during the six months he spent visiting every major American city. He dwelt on the subject so much that later he was accused of having made his 1842 trip primarily to agitate for an international copyright law.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} Carey, p. 306.
\textsuperscript{44} B. Woodcock, \textit{Peter Carey}, 2nd edn, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{45} Carey, \textit{Jack Maggs}, p. 305.
As mentioned earlier, it is precisely this presumption of exclusive personal ownership that I suggest adaptation undermines in favour of a cultural commons.

Adaptation also fundamentally remakes a prior text, rewriting it as something other than its familiar form. In his rewriting of Dickens, Carey highlights how this fear of change, this fear of contamination is deeply imbedded in the Victorian colonialist fantasy. Carey’s novel points to the Victorian anxiety about what came back from the colonies, and how different what (or, often, who) returned might be from what/who left England. Victorian anxieties about the contamination of colonial contact heavily mark Dickens’s novel, most notably in the sinister figure of Magwitch, who haunts Pip throughout the last portion of the novel. Indeed, ‘haunts’ is an appropriate verb here, as there is something uncanny about the apparent resurrection of Magwitch in the third portion of Dickens’s novel. In fact, Pip reflects that his comfort is ‘that [Magwitch] had doubtless been transported a long way off, and that he was dead to me, and might be veritably dead into the bargain’.

As we’ve already seen, when Magwitch returns he bears physical and behavioural marks of his time in New South Wales, marks suggesting he is simultaneously a social outsider and somehow less than human. Beyond the outlandish clothing discussed above, Pip reflects that

> The influences of his solitary hut-life were upon him besides and gave him a savage air that no dress could tame... in these ways and in a thousand other nameless instances arising every minute in the day, there was prisoner, felon, bondsman, plain as plain could be.

These reflections allow Magwitch his basic humanity, which exceeds Pip’s capacity upon his first startling reunion with the transport. During their initial meeting, Pip is struck by Magwitch’s bestial quality:

> Some of his teeth had failed him since I saw him eat on the marshes, and as he turned his food in his mouth, and turned his head sideways to bring his strongest fangs to bear upon it, he looked terribly like a hungry old dog.

In other words, Magwitch is indelibly marked by the colonial encounter, which, in Pip’s eyes, has further erased his already-compromised humanity. This encounter has in some way dehumanized him, (re)made him other than a proper Englishman. Hardt and Negri identify this as a fundamental terror underlying the traditional imperial experience:

---

47 Dickens, *Great Expectations*, p. 156.
48 Dickens, p. 357.
49 Dickens, p. 352, emphasis added.
50 At the same time, the colonial encounter has proven to be Magwitch’s material good fortune, as it has allowed him to build his wealth. There is, then, a contradiction between Pip’s conception of Magwitch as a returned sub-human convict, and Dickens’s conception of Magwitch as a socially marginalized figure who makes good in a new land.
from the European perspective, the primary danger of colonialism is disease—or really contagion...Physical contamination, moral corruption, madness: the darkness of the colonial territories and populations is contagious, and Europeans are always at risk.\textsuperscript{51}

And because the Imperial project is/was premised on an absolute (racial) difference between the colonizer and the colonized, any threat of contamination becomes a deadly existential danger. As Homi Bhabha puts it, ‘The ambivalence of colonial authority repeatedly turns from \textit{mimicry} – a difference that is almost nothing but not quite – to \textit{menace} – a difference that is almost total but not quite’.\textsuperscript{52} Pip experiences this socio-cultural anxiety that transforms any sign of colonial mannerism into a sign of almost total Otherness, almost complete inhumanity.

Should we wonder then that Maggs violently opposes any suggestion that he is anything other than a pure and unsullied Englishman? When Percy Buckle and the lawyer Mr. Makepeace suggest that Maggs return to New South Wales to avoid the possibility of hanging, Jack emphatically declares, ‘I am a fucking \textit{Englishman}, and I have English things to settle. I am not to live my life with all that vermin. I am here in London where I belong’.\textsuperscript{53} And when Mercy implores him to return to his biological children, Richard and Jack, Maggs tells her he is not of ‘The race of Australians’ because ‘I am an Englishman’.\textsuperscript{54} Maggs apparently refers to an emerging national identity among Europeans transported to Australia, not to Aboriginal Australians. The reference to race might seem ambiguous at first. However, after Maggs and Mercy Larkin move to Australia and marry, she ‘very quickly gave birth to five more members of “That Race”’, so it seems doubtful that Maggs’s other two children were Aborigines.\textsuperscript{55} As early as the 1820s, in a letter back to England, Edward Smith Hall identifies Anglo transports as a separate ‘Australian’ race: ‘The people of New South Wales are a poor grovelling race [whose] spirit is gone... they are no longer \textit{Britons} [but have]... degenerated into Australians’.\textsuperscript{56} This suggests that by the early nineteenth century a distinct (white) Australian identity began diverging from British identity. (The silence of Aboriginal voices is a noteworthy omission in a novel concerned with Australian postcoloniality and the silencing/appropriating of Australian voices and narratives).

Despite his own assertions, Maggs is, like Magwitch, physically marked by his time Down Under. Oates brags to Lizzie about discovering Maggs’s status as a returned transport, claiming, ‘You can hear the cant in his talk. He has it cloaked in livery but he wears the hallmarks of New South Wales’.\textsuperscript{57} Even Carey, in his third person description of Maggs offers the ambivalence of a body marked by the colonial encounter. Near the end of the novel, Carey states, ‘Now, all these long years later, Jack Maggs had become such an Englishman’ as he had imagined in his nostalgia for London; but, in the very next paragraph, ‘The face he turned towards Mercy Larkin

\textsuperscript{52} H. Bhabha, \textit{The Location of Culture}, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 131.
\textsuperscript{53} Carey, \textit{Jack Maggs}, pp. 140-141.
\textsuperscript{54} Carey, p. 340.
\textsuperscript{55} Carey, p. 356.
\textsuperscript{56} E. Smith Hall quoted in Belich, \textit{Replenishing the Earth}, p. 263 (original brackets, and emphasis).
\textsuperscript{57} Carey, \textit{Jack Maggs}, p. 96
was hardened by its time in New South Wales—it had been rubbed at by pain until it shone’. In reproducing a Victorian fear of the colonial, of the alien, Carey links what Bhabha calls colonial ‘mimicry’ with the literary adaptation of Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. Carey’s Maggs answers back and reproduces in a distorted form the cultural anxiety Pip experiences when confronted with Magwitch, in much the same way Carey answers back and reproduces in distorted form the cultural capital and ideology of Charles Dickens. *Jack Maggs* draws attention back to the ideological underpinnings of Dickens’s—and the Victorians’—more generally—imperialist and capitalist ethos, and the novel does this precisely by highlighting the narrative instability of *Great Expectations*.

The fluidity of adaptation undermines a neoliberal ethos of (intellectual) property by confronting ostensibly stable notions of ownership. As a form, adaptation brings multiple voices, ideas, and worldviews into contact with one another, which Hardt and Negri identify as the basis for a cultural commons. As we saw earlier, the term Hardt and Negri use for these socially productive experiences of alterity is the ‘felicitous encounter’, which they claim constructs and amplifies the global commons. Hardt and Negri largely address these felicitous encounters as interpersonal—occurring within the metropolis, which they characterize as the social space *par excellence* of late capitalism. However, I see no reason why these kinds of encounters cannot also incorporate literary or artistic encounters with works/voices from other cultures. Kwame Anthony Appiah suggests that transcultural encounters can and do occur productively through the arts and literature:

> Conversations across boundaries of identity—whether national, religious, or something else—begin with the sort of imaginative engagement you get when you read a novel or watch a movie or attend to a work of art that speaks from some place other than your own. So I’m using the word ‘conversation’ not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the ideas of others.

When, for instance, one author’s work overtly encounters another, or multiple narrative voices co-exist in the same literary space, are those not types of encounters which could build a commonly shared culture? Late capitalism is deeply invested in individual ownership. This is, of course, the foundation that makes capitalism (as well as imperialism) comprehensible. Because of this investment, the collaborative and commons building ethos of adaptation—particularly when it highlights the polyvocal encounter, the way Carey’s novel does—poses a deep and abiding challenge to the ethics of capitalist ownership.

**Conclusion**

Adaptation puts one set of ideas and values (in the adapted text) in conversation with another (in the adaptation) to be encountered by audiences/readers intended to

---

58 Carey, p. 350.
59 Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, p. 131.
appreciate that heteroglossic dialogue. As we saw at the beginning of this paper, this is particularly true of minor character elaboration, which often functions distinctively as a narrative corrective to silences enforced by hegemonic power structures.\(^{61}\) Because adaptation requires, evokes, and creates shared and communal traditions, it poses a challenge to simplistic models of intellectual property ownership. Commons theorists like Lewis Hyde and David Bollier trace the massive expansion of copyright protections in the 1970s and 1990s, when US copyright laws were rewritten to vastly favour media producers/owners to the detriment of the public domain.\(^{62}\) As a result of the 1886 Berne Convention, an international treaty enforcing automatic copyright for all created works, guidelines like those adopted by the US are broadly shared across the globe.\(^{63}\) Although adaptation is a protected use of intellectual property under the Berne Convention, the relationship between cultural production, adaptation, and intellectual property control is not simplistic.\(^{64}\) Linda Hutcheon notes the troubled relationship between adaptation and the capitalist desire for gain:

> Adaptations are not only spawned by the capitalist desire for gain; they are also controlled by the same in law, for they constitute a threat to the ownership of cultural and intellectual property.\(^{65}\)

Many adapters—particularly in Hollywood and in Britain’s heritage industry—capitalize on pre-existing audiences for authors like Dickens, Austen, Shakespeare, etc. But the act of re-working a prior text into a new artistic artefact erodes the foundational logic of intellectual property ownership, thereby raising questions about property ownership as such.

Given Dickens’s activism in promoting international copyright law, one might wonder how he would feel about contemporary adaptations of his work, including *Jack Maggs*. On the one hand, Carey’s novel promotes Dickens’s work by depending for its full impact on an audience already familiar with *Great Expectations* and Dickensian tropes. On the other hand, its critical deployment of heteroglossia and its postmodern/postcolonial destabilization of the idea of originality challenges Dickens’s claim to individual ownership of the novel as a unique literary/artistic artefact. Clearly this is not functioning at the level of copyright law (by which *Great Expectations* is no longer covered), but the form of adaptation as such raises questions about the premises that support individual intellectual property ownership. To what extent is *Jack Maggs* Peter Carey’s novel? To what extent is it Charles Dickens’s? And to what extent does it derive from the myriad experiences of Dickens’s England and Carey’s Australia? The question becomes particularly murky when we consider how Carey capitalizes on Dickensian tropes, those well known images and ideas that, as we noted earlier, have moved beyond the singular control of Dickens and entered into a cultural commons.


A common conception of culture would abandon current, rigid ideas of copyright, accepting that shared culture can best be advanced through the open exchange, interplay, and development of ideas. This is, of course, opposed to existing capitalist property laws that establish individual (frequently corporate) ownership of ideas in the pursuit of profit. On this point Hardt and Negri write,

If you use that idea productively, I can use it too, at the very same time. In fact the more of us that work with an idea and communicate about it, the more productive it becomes.66

Because adaptation inherently involves working with and further developing ideas—particularly ideas already carrying substantial intellectual/cultural currency—thinking of adaptation as a process inherently confronting the ethos of ownership in late capitalist neoliberalism allows us to situate our resistance within the texture of postmodern aesthetics.

---

66 Hardt and Negri, Commonwealth, p. 381.