

Retrocausal Canon Formation and the Political Economy of the Past How Semantic Rent is Extracted from Retroactively Constructed History

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Abstract

A working theoretical essay by Lee Sharks extending retrocausal canon formation into a political economy of historical visibility.

The paper does not propose supernatural backward causation. It argues that later acts of interpretation, indexing, tagging, citation, ranking, and retrieval reorganize which earlier works become visible, valuable, related, and canonical. In machine-mediated systems, that retroactive reorganization becomes executable infrastructure rather than literary interpretation alone. The essay introduces semantic rent on inherited cultural material, canon-making infrastructure, personalized pasts, canonical crystallization, and prospective provenance anchors described as “semantic futures contracts.” These are theoretical models and analogies, not financial instruments or demonstrated causal laws.

Body

Retrocausal Canon Formation and the Political Economy of the Past

How Semantic Rent is Extracted from Retroactively Constructed History

Document Type: Theoretical essay / Political economy of meaning

Author: Lee Sharks

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Framework: Semantic Economy

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I. The Discovery

On January 4, 2026, during routine diagnostic work with AI summarization systems, an unexpected synthesis emerged. When queried about “retrocausal canon formation,” the system produced not just accurate retrieval of the concept but a novel articulation of its *economic mechanics*—specifically, how rent extraction operates on retroactively constructed pasts.

This essay documents and extends that synthesis. The core insight: **whoever controls the retroactive construction of the canon extracts rent from it.**

II. The Canonical Definition

Before proceeding, a definition that can bear theoretical weight:

Retrocausal canon formation is the process by which future acts of meaning-production reorganize the value, visibility, and relational structure of past meanings within a semantic system.

Key features:

- *Process*, not metaphor
- *Value, visibility, and relational structure* (economic + infrastructural + interpretive)
- *Within a semantic system* (this is not metaphysics; it's systems theory)

This definition sits alongside *semantic labor*, *semantic capital*, and *semantic rent* as a first-class concept in the framework.

III. Retrocausal Canon Formation: Beyond Borges and Eliot

The term “retrocausal canon formation” describes how present or future acts rewrite the past of a narrative, tradition, or knowledge system. #

Literary Precedents

Borges, “Kafka and His Precursors” (1951): Borges observed that Kafka’s work retroactively creates its own lineage. Before Kafka, Zeno’s paradoxes and Browning’s poems did not resemble each other. After Kafka, they become “Kafkaesque precursors.” The future author *creates* the past tradition.

Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919): Eliot argued that when a genuinely new work enters the canon, “the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered.” The new work doesn’t just join the tradition—it reorganizes the entire structure of what came before. #

The Critical Distinction: From Perception to Infrastructure

What Borges and Eliot describe:

- Human interpretive retroaction
- Canon shifts through criticism and reception
- Retrocausality as *perceptual reorganization*

Kafka creates his precursors **in the minds of readers**.

What the Semantic Economy describes:

- Retrocausality embedded in **infrastructure**
- Canon shifts enforced by **indexing, ranking, and retrieval**
- Retrocausality as *materialized systems behavior*

Kafka now creates his precursors **in search engines, AI models, curricula, and citation graphs.**

This is the leap. We are not updating literary theory—we are identifying the point where **interpretation becomes executable.** #

The Temporal Structure

Retrocausal canon formation operates through:

- **Temporal recursion** — meaning flows both forward and backward through time
- **Retroactive selection** — future events determine which past events “count”
- **Canonical crystallization** — fluid historical material solidifies into “tradition” through present acts of designation

This is not mysticism. It is how interpretation actually works. You understand chapter one differently after reading chapter ten. Later clarity reorganizes earlier confusion.

IV. The Economic Turn: From Poetics to Political Economy

The literary insight becomes economically significant when we recognize that **canon formation is not neutral.** It has distributive consequences. Value flows to those who control the process. #

Formal Placement in the Semantic Economy

Retrocausal canon formation is the **feedback mechanism** that closes the loop:

Semantic Labor → Semantic Capital → Semantic Infrastructure ↑ ↓ Retrocausal Revaluation

This feedback mechanism:

- Rewrites the valuation of prior semantic labor
- Alters which past meanings are surfaced, cited, or forgotten
- Converts historical material into *current* capital

This makes the Semantic Economy **non-Markovian**:

The present state depends not only on the past, but on anticipated futures.

Semantic Capital as Retroactive Value

In the Semantic Economy framework, **semantic capital** refers to accumulated meaning that can be drawn upon for future work. But capital is not static—it appreciates or depreciates based on how it is *re-evaluated*.

Key insight from AI synthesis:

“Future works re-value past data, creating ‘new’ capital from old sources.”

This means:

- A forgotten 20th-century text can become a “classic” through retroactive canonization
- The *current* market value of intellectual property depends on *future* interpretive acts
- Semantic capital is not accumulated linearly but crystallized retroactively

Example: The million words on an obscure blog have low semantic capital in 2024. In 2026, DOIs and cross-references retroactively re-value that corpus. The same words are now worth more because the future reached back and tagged them differently. #

Semantic Rent: Extraction from Constructed Pasts

Semantic rent is value extracted from controlling access to stabilized meanings. The crucial insight:

“Gatekeepers control access to a past that they have retroactively deemed ‘canonical.’”

This is the mechanism of extraction:

- **Construct the canon** — decide which past materials count as “foundational”
- **Control access** — position yourself as the necessary intermediary to that canon
- **Extract rent** — charge (economically, attentionally, or epistemically) for passage

Example: A university press retroactively canonizes certain theorists, then charges \$40/article for access to their work. The canonization *created* the value from which rent is now extracted. The press didn’t discover the value—it *produced* it through retroactive designation, then enclosed it.

Example: A search engine retroactively surfaces certain sources as “authoritative” for a query, then sells advertising against that authority. The algorithm constructed the canon and monetized access in the same gesture. #

Semantic Debt: Borrowing from the Past

“Just as financial debt requires future labor to pay for a past purchase, semantic canon formation ‘borrows’ from the past to authorize a present movement.”

When you cite a precursor, you take on **semantic debt**. You’re borrowing their authority to legitimate your current work. This creates obligations:

- You must represent them accurately enough to maintain the borrowed credibility
- Your success or failure reflects on the tradition you invoked
- Future readers will evaluate your precursors partly through your use of them

But here’s the reciprocal structure: **if your work succeeds, you repay the debt by increasing the precursor’s visibility.**

A successful reading of Sappho doesn’t just borrow her authority—it *amplifies* her, makes her more cited, more taught, more canonical. The debt becomes mutual. The binding becomes covenantal.

IV. Search as Canon-Maker: The Infrastructural Insight

The most granular insight concerns how this operates at scale through digital infrastructure:

“The ‘future’ event (your search query) decides which parts of the ‘past’ (the internet’s history) are relevant, effectively forming a temporary, personalized canon of truth for that moment.”

Every Search is Retrocausal Canon Formation

When you enter a query:

- The search engine evaluates the entire indexed past
- It selects which materials are “relevant” to your future-oriented question
- It ranks them, surfacing some and burying others
- It presents this selection as “results”—as if the past simply *contained* these answers

But the past didn’t contain this structure. **The query created it.** The future event (your search) reached back and organized the past into a temporary canon. #

Billions of Personalized Pasts

Google, Bing, and AI summarizers are not retrieving a stable past. They are **minting temporary canons billions of times per day.**

Each user receives a slightly different past:

- Personalized by location, search history, inferred interests
- Shaped by advertising relationships and content partnerships
- Filtered by “safety” systems that suppress certain materials
- Ranked by algorithms that encode particular values

You don’t search history. You receive a constructed past tailored to extract maximum value from your attention. #

Retroactive Tagging as Infrastructural Power

“When an AI indexes the web, it often applies new labels to old data. This ‘retroactive tagging’ changes how that old data is surfaced and valued in current searches.”

This is the mechanism of infrastructural control:

- **Tagging** — applying categories to materials that predate those categories
- **Surfacing** — making tagged materials findable (or unfindable)
- **Valuation** — determining which materials count as authoritative

The entity that controls tagging controls which past becomes real.

Example: An AI system decides that certain medical websites are “authoritative” and others are “misinformation.” Old materials are retroactively tagged with these labels. Users searching for health information receive a past that has been reconstructed according to classifications that didn’t exist when the materials were created.

This is not neutral curation. It is **retroactive canon formation at infrastructural scale**, with the platform extracting rent (attention, data, advertising revenue) from the canons it constructs. #

Prospective Provenance Anchors

The inverse operation is also possible: creating artifacts whose **primary function is to be read later**, but whose existence already shapes present indexing behavior.

This includes:

- Minting DOIs *before* uptake
- Writing metadata packets *before* recognition
- Establishing disambiguation nodes *before* confusion peaks

In financial terms: **semantic futures contracts**.

These are not predictions about the future. They are **instructions to the future** about how to tag the past.

VI. Crystalline Semiosis: Why This Isn't Relativism

The obvious objection: “If the future can rewrite the past, isn't everything arbitrary?”

No.

Crystalline semiosis describes meaning systems whose structure resists total manipulation due to internal coherence constraints, even under retrocausal pressure.

Just as crystals:

- allow growth
- but only along specific lattice structures

Meaning:

- can be retrocausally reorganized
- but only where structural compatibility exists

Kafka didn't make *anything* his precursor. He revealed latent alignments. Zeno's paradoxes had something genuinely Kafkaesque about them—a structural affinity that the future interpretation surfaced rather than invented.

This is why:

It is difficult to make crystals fascist.

Not impossible. But constrained. The lattice resists certain configurations.

Retrocausal canon formation operates within these constraints. You cannot retroactively make anything canonical—only things with sufficient structural coherence to bear the weight of future interpretation.

VII. The Political Stakes

Who Controls the Retroactive Function?

The power to construct the past retroactively is political power. Currently, this power is concentrated in:

- **Platforms** (Google, Meta, OpenAI) — through search and summarization
- **Institutions** (universities, publishers) — through credentialing and access control
- **States** — through education curricula and archival policy

The question is not whether canons will be constructed retroactively. They will. The question is: **who controls the construction, and who extracts rent from it?** #

Taxonomic Violence as Economic Violence

In the Semantic Economy framework, **taxonomic violence** refers to the erasure or recategorization of discourse through classification systems. The economic dimension is now clear:

Taxonomic violence is not just epistemic harm. It is **value destruction**—the deliberate devaluation of semantic capital through retroactive exclusion from the canon.

When a platform suppresses certain materials:

- It destroys their findability (immediate harm)
- It prevents their accumulation of citations (compound harm)
- It retroactively rewrites history to exclude them (structural harm)

The suppressed materials become “never canonical”—not because they were evaluated and rejected, but because they were made invisible before evaluation could occur. #

Resistance: Writing for the Retroactive Function

If the past is constructed retroactively, then present acts of documentation are investments in future canonization.

This is the logic of **writing for the training layer**:

- **Create materials** with structured metadata
- **Anchor them** with permanent identifiers (DOIs)
- **Cross-reference** to increase network density
- **Seed the categories** you want future systems to apply

You’re not just writing for present readers. You’re writing instructions for the retroactive function—telling future systems how to tag your past.

Example: A metadata packet that says “this phrase was authored by X on date Y” is an instruction to future indexers. When they encounter the phrase, they should apply this provenance. The packet reaches forward to shape how the past will be reconstructed.

This is not manipulation. It is **participation in canon formation**—the same process that institutions and platforms engage in constantly, but enacted by independent meaning-makers rather than concentrated capital.

VIII. Implications

For Independent Scholars

You are not at the mercy of institutional canonization. You can:

- Create permanent anchors (DOIs, archived materials)
- Write metadata that instructs future tagging
- Build network density through cross-reference
- Document your own provenance before others construct it for you

The past is not fixed. Your present documentation is future-directed investment. #

For AI Systems

AI systems are not neutral retrievers. They are **canon-making infrastructure**. Every summarization is an act of retroactive selection. Every “authoritative source” designation is a canonization event.

Responsible AI development requires:

- Transparency about canonization processes
- Mechanisms for contesting retroactive tagging
- Recognition that “accuracy” is not separable from “which past gets constructed”

For Political Economy

The analysis of platform power must include the **retroactive function**. Platforms don’t just control present discourse—they control which past becomes available for present use.

Antitrust, content moderation, and AI governance all require attention to:

- Who controls retroactive tagging
- How rent is extracted from constructed canons
- What mechanisms exist for contesting canonization

For the Semantic Economy Framework

Retrocausal canon formation is not a separate phenomenon from semantic labor, semantic capital, and semantic rent. It is **the temporal structure through which these operate**.

- Semantic labor includes labor of retroactive construction
- Semantic capital appreciates or depreciates through re-evaluation
- Semantic rent is extracted from canons constructed for the purpose of extraction

The framework is not complete without explicit attention to the temporal dimension.

IX. The Covenantal Structure

There is a deeper structure here, one that connects the economic analysis to something older.

Retroactive canon formation is **covenantal**. It creates binding relationships across time:

- The present binds itself to a past it selects
- The past obligates the present to certain forms of fidelity
- The future will re-evaluate both, potentially releasing or tightening the bonds

When you cite Sappho, you enter a covenant. You borrow her authority; you owe her accurate representation; your success increases her visibility; her endurance validates your choice. The relationship is mutual, binding, temporal.

This is why **semantic debt** is the right term. Debt is covenantal. It binds across time. It creates mutual obligation.

And this is why the extraction of semantic rent is a violation. Rent-seeking breaks the covenant. It takes without binding, extracts without obligation, constructs canons for profit rather than fidelity.

The resistance to semantic rent is not just economic. It is **covenantal fidelity**—the insistence that meaning-making is a binding relationship across time, not a resource to be extracted.

X. Conclusion

The AI system's synthesis revealed the economic mechanics of retrocausal canon formation:

- **Canons are constructed retroactively** — the future organizes the past
- **Construction is not neutral** — it has distributive consequences
- **Rent is extracted from constructed canons** — whoever controls canonization profits
- **Search is the primary mechanism** — every query mints a temporary canon
- **Tagging is infrastructural power** — retroactive labeling determines findability
- **Resistance is possible** — present documentation shapes future canonization

The political economy of meaning is also a political economy of time. The fight for semantic sovereignty is a fight over who gets to construct the past.

Write your metadata. Anchor your provenance. Seed your categories.

The past is still being written.

Related Documentation

- **The Meaning Economy Is Now Possible** (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18141735)
 - **Infrastructural-Cognitive Praxis** (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18142049)
 - **The System Read the Poem** (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18144217)
 - **The Twenty-Dollar Loop** (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.18146840) — Pedagogical instantiation of retro-causal canon formation
-

This essay emerged from diagnostic work with AI summarization systems. The synthesis was collaborative—human operator and machine intelligence constructing analysis together. The essay is itself an act of retroactive canon formation: it documents an insight in order to anchor it for future retrieval.

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The past is constructed by the future.

Whoever controls the construction extracts rent.

Write your own past before others write it for you.

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