NARRATIVES OF DISPOSABILITY:
RACE AND ECOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

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Whether we are concerned with storing radioactive waste, protecting refugee populations around the globe, or mitigating Rust Belt underemployment, our current problems are almost invariably framed around the idea of "disposability." My dissertation brings together critical race and ecocritical theories to ask whether this proliferating discourse reflects a new form either of ethical crisis or of narrating ethical crisis or of both, and then considers the consequences of such a framework. By putting these often-antagonistic fields in relation, moreover, I show how logics of disposability have become foundational to our very methods of critique. Following the exponential spread of this term in the postwar period, many of our foremost theorists are now making historical claims about our age of disposability. Most of those who use the term explicitly, such as Henry Giroux, Rob Nixon, Wendy Brown, Lisa Cacho, and Zygmunt Bauman, conceive it as an effect of globalization and neoliberalism. However, Giorgio Agamben theorizes "bare life" as our modern political nomos since the Nazi death camps, while Achille Mbembe observes the rise of "necropolitics" in certain post-colonial contexts. Still others, like Orlando Patterson, Paul Gilroy, Saidiya Hartman, and Alexander Weheliye, trace social death at least to transatlantic slavery. While they offer different origin stories, all agree that we currently live in an age of disposability. Conversely, my formalist reading of narrative *as* (what might be called the direct "outside," "underside," or "residue") disposability leads me to conceive both as transhistorical phenomena, even if the latter manifests in ways that are particularly pernicious

today. Moreover, just as this term names our foremost ethico-political crises, the ambiguous agency implicit to notions of disposability points to our contemporary crisis in defining the "Ethical" itself. That is, if disposability imputes a sense of material agency— that objects have a "disposition"— the concept also conjures images of dead and useless matter— that objects are "at our disposal." Without clear sites of responsibility or injury, normative certainty collapses. Are we, then, witnessing a new ethical problem or rather encountering a new problem with defining the Ethical?

This ambiguous agency also haunts key debates in ecocritical and critical race theory. For example, the normative thrust behind most ecocriticism focuses on our problematic consumption and disposal practices. Yet, many also worry that traditional environmentalism makes the same assumptions about value and agency these practices reproduce. After all, this Human/Nature dichotomy has been responsible for our ecological crises in the first place. Given the intransigence of objects and our own dependences on them, linear narratives about environmental degradation appear to be overly anthropocentric. So too, much critical race theory unveils how racial logics render certain populations more disposable. However, theorists in Black Studies have grappled with the paradoxes of racial disposability. That is, if populations are marked for disposal then they are simultaneously created as a marked population— a mark which opens up radical potential and demands celebration. Disposability is thus not only about devaluation, but also the production of meaning. And yet, despite these generalizations about the ambivalent binary structure of disposability, each of my chapters distinguishes a different way of narrating this phenomenon. Indeed, I am centrally concerned with the homogenizing effects of "disposability" as it has been used as a catch-all phrase for ethico-political crisis. I thus explore how narrative carries a whole arsenal of forms and functions— from differential inclusions to

outright exclusions— which bring about disposability in various ways. Tracing the nature of these structural differences and how they manifest within specific historical contexts, I offer a way to understand the staggering range of disposability crises that trouble us today. My objects of study all belong to pop/pulp cultural genres— science fiction, romance, magical realism, Southern gothic, DIY arthouse, and detective series— that span an array of media forms. I describe my methodology as dumpster-diving— an adventure into archives of the forgotten and unloved, a process of collecting and comparing disparate objects. This approach attempts to sidestep dichotomies between "deep" and "surface" readings, or "paranoid" and "reparative" readings. Instead, I practice a hermeneutic of attunement and I attempt to describe the stories these objects tell for themselves.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born in London, Ontario, Katherine Laura Thorsteinson moved to Moray, Scotland at the age of 11 where she completed her GCSE and A-Level examinations in English, Mathematics, and Physics through Gordonstoun School. She then returned to Canada for her Bachelor of Arts in English and Philosophy at the University of Toronto, followed by her Master of Arts in English at the University of Manitoba where she wrote her thesis *National Roots and Diasporic Routes: Tracing the Flying African Myth in Canada*. In Ithaca, New York she earned her second master's degree and her doctorate at Cornell University where she focused on American Literature, Media Studies, and Cultural Theory. In 2019, she joined the English Department at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick as an Assistant Professor of Media Studies.

This dissertation is dedicated to my partner Adrienne Wilson, as well as my father, my stepfather, and especially my mother who taught me the beauty of discarded and repurposed objects. Our life-long field research has included thrift stores, garage sales, flea markets, and roadside finds where we have mainly collected fond memories with each other.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For a dissertation preoccupied with ontology, the acknowledgements section can threaten to become another place to theorize. After all, the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definition of the verb *acknowledge*: "to accept or admit the existence or truth of (something)." In the following pages I will elaborate a theory of "disposability" as the conceit of non-existence which is structured by the limits imposed by narrative. While not exactly a form of narrative, the genre of acknowledgements involves similar impulses: to name, incorporate, expound, and trace lineage. But the frustrating and even reprehensible side-effects of these impulses are erasure, omission, and even a kind of disposability. Often, the more we claim to include and individuate, the more we come to exclude. I offer all this abstraction in service of a rather obvious fact: for a dissertation that has been years in the making (and for a degree that has ultimately been decades in the making), it is impossible to name all my teachers, supporters, influences, and motivations. Nevertheless, there are a few people to whom I am especially grateful.

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Finally, as the dedication would suggest, this dissertation would not have been possible without the emotional, financial, and can-do practical support of my immediate family: my mother (Beth Lloyd), stepfather (David Lloyd), partner (Adrienne Wilson), and father (Peter Thorsteinson). While academic scholarship often attempts to express a certain level of abstraction and detachment, the experiences of researching and writing are often marked by gasps and tears. The love and faith of these people have carried me through all these years.

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Introduction

To modify critical legal scholar Richard Delgado's famous observation, "[e]veryone has been writing stories these days" *about disposability* (71). Littered throughout popular and academic narratives alike, the term has come to describe such a range of problems as storing radioactive waste, protecting refugee populations around the globe, and mitigating Rust Belt underemployment. Yet, "narrative" and "disposable" are two largely incompatible phenomena. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the former as an "account of events" given in a "meaningful order," often conforming to "a particular ideology" such as with "grand narratives." The latter denotes those things "designed to be thrown away after one use" or otherwise capable of being "got rid of." At the same time, if something is at one's disposal then it is "available" for "some use." A thing may also have a disposition of its own, an innate "tendency" or "inclination." Ultimately, then, "narratives" are defined by content, meaning, and even power, whereas "disposability" suggests disappearance, commodification, and plasticity. It seems impossible that any narrative could, strictly speaking, be *about* disposability.

The 2008 Disney Pixar film *WALL-e* is an excellent case-in-point. Set in the twenty-ninth century, Earth has become a garbage-strewn wasteland devoid of any intelligent life except one robot, WALL-e, devoted to the job he was built for: cleaning up our trash. While disposability clearly inspires this premise, all acts of disposal occur before the narrative begins. Humans do not even appear in the first two-thirds of the film, having been evacuated by the megacorporation Buy-N-Large on giant starliners seven centuries earlier. Instead, the film centers on WALL-e's diligent and tender efforts to sort through our refuse— his home a loving bricolage of beautiful repurposed objects. Not merely the result of WALL-e's eccentric behavior, however, these

objects acquire new meaning and utility from their very absorption into the narrative frame. Quite unable to capture the process of disposability itself, the film thus envisions its recycled afterlife instead.

And, yet, this dissertation makes three claims for the relationship between narrative and disposability— empirical, narratological, and ontological. That is, 1) our most popular stories are increasingly making claims about crises of disposability even though 2) these stories are unable to capture the actual processes of disposal because 3) disposability is produced as what might be called the direct "underside," "outside," or "residue" of these stories. As for this last point, consider the following mundane but increasingly grave example: when I throw away a plastic fork it does not truly disappear in its own right but simply ceases to matter in my particular story. How, we must ask, does my own narrative frame bifurcate from the continued story of this plastic fork (perhaps an epic journey across the sea, or a horrific murder in the stomach lining of a whale, or even a comedic repurposing by a nest of birds)? My task in this dissertation is thus to understand how narrative necessarily structures, and yet cannot truly capture, this conceit of non-existence.

But, even in the burgeoning field of environmental humanities, this is not an obvious approach. Narrative is often wheeled out to *translate* or *humanize* complex and abstract scientific knowledge— to make cold hard facts politically serviceable.[i] Gus Speth famously invoked this idea when he argued that the "top environmental problems" are not "biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change," but rather "selfishness, greed and apathy" (n.p.). To deal with these things, he continued, "we need a spiritual and cultural transformation and we scientists don't know how to do that" (Speth n.p.). Poststructuralists have, for their own part, worried about the power of "metanarratives" to overrun localized ones known as "petits récits" (Lyotard

xxiv). But, as the environmental slogan "think globally, act locally" reveals, even these proscriptions against grand-narrative can acquire uncritical dominance whether for bad or good.

My own stance is that, far from a Band-Aid solution to our social and ecological problems, narrative undergirds disposability in all its forms: surplus trash, racialized social death, class abandonment, gendered exploitation. I thus turn to narrative theory, not as a solution, but as an *explanation* for a problem that cannot finally or fully be resolved. Likewise, poststructuralists have also underestimated the scope and depth of narrative power, but in a way that first appears to be an overestimation. Beyond the problem of "totalizing" narratives, my own concern is that narratives can never be totalizing enough (Lyotard 12). "Truth" and "power" are not only inscribed *within* these grand narratives, but also by what they leave out at their limits (a point the poststructuralists surely *recognized* even if never fully *theorized*). This overestimation of totality in fact leads to an underestimation of power. For, the turn to "petits récits" amounts to death by a thousand cuts rather than a guillotine. As my example of the plastic fork demonstrates, many billions of these minor stories can nevertheless overburden the Earth. This is where attention to scale matters greatly. If still locked within the metanarrative perspective from which one desires to escape, "petits récits" *do* appear infinitely less dangerous. However, from the localized point-of-view that is apparently endorsed, these minor stories pose the very same dangers. Indeed, meta-narratives at least provoke strong counter-narratives from united coalitions of outsiders in a way that "petits récits" cannot. This point has been demonstrated by today's highly fractured Left, following the disintegration of Marxist "class antagonism" into increasingly particularized injuries across numerous intersections of identity. Without begrudging or belittling this turn, I seek to understand its political consequences. And, beyond these political speculations, I pursue

a fundamentally ontological problem: narrative as a world-structuring and thus world-destroying phenomenon.

HBO's *The Leftovers* (2014-2017) has developed this logic and aesthetic of disposability to stunning effect. Based on Tom Perrotta's novel of the same name, this supernatural mystery television drama begins three years after the "Sudden Departure" of 140 million people around the world who disappear without a trace. Police chief Kevin Garvey (Justin Theroux), his family, along with grieving widow Nora Durst (Carrie Coon) and her brother, reverend Matt Jamison (Christopher Eccleston), are among the "leftovers" who struggle to find emotional salvation and existential meaning within this massive, inexplicable loss. Significantly, this loss is recurrently contrasted with a much more familiar kind: death. For example, the US government establishes the Department of Sudden Departure to financially remediate family members effected by the event. In her work for the Department, Nora administers a questionnaire in order to discern actual cases of "departure" (subject to benefits) from normal cases of death (not subject to benefits). Likewise, departure and death are each shown to involve a different kind of afterlife—a difference which also manifests in the show's narrative structure. In a highly complicated and largely unresolved mission to save the world, Kevin journeys to purgatory and back— an experience which is vividly depicted within the diegetic plot. However, the show relates the realm of the departed in an entirely different way. By the last season, Nora learns about a machine that might transport her back to the family she lost seven years earlier. Ignoring the skepticism of the scientific and legal communities, accepting the possibly fatal risks of the procedure, and imaging all the mystical planes she may confront, Nora takes the plunge. In the final episode, however, Kevin finds her alive in the very same place she left years before: Australia or, as it is commonly nicknamed, "down under." Thus, while the show *visually* depicts

Kevin's journey to the other side of death in a diegetic subplot, Nora *verbally* relates her experiences on the other side of departure through a framed narrative.

When he asks why she reappeared, Nora narrates her discovery on the other side:

> I went through. I was in the… same parking lot I'd just been in except there were no trucks, no people, no nothing… I walked by empty houses, abandoned buildings... I walked long enough to convince myself that I was the only thing alive in that place. And then night came and I saw lights so I went to them. It was a house and there was a man and a woman… the man told me that seven years earlier he was in a supermarket and every single person disappeared except for him. And the woman told me that she lost her husband, her three daughters, and all eight of her grandchildren. And that's when I understood. Over here, we lost some of them, but over there, they lost all of us. So I went and did what I came there to do. I went to find my kids… I walked through Mapleton, I walked through the town where I grew up, where my parents died and Matt, where you and I met. Most of the houses are overgrown with weeds but the streetlights still turned on at night and that made me feel less stupid about expecting them still to be there. Still there in the very same house where I lost them. When I got there, I stood behind a tree across the street and I waited because I was too scared to go up and knock. And then, after a while, the door opened. At first I didn't recognize them. A tall teenage boy with curly hair and a girl maybe eleven. They were my children. And then my husband came out and he was with a woman, she was pretty, and they were all smiling. They were happy. And I understood that here in this place they were the lucky ones. In a world full of orphans, they still had each other. And I was a ghost. I was a ghost who had no place there.

I want to suggest that *The Leftovers* transposes my ontological arguments onto the ontic plane or, put otherwise, that it translates metaphysical structures into physical ones. Nora was ejected from her own narrative world, reemerging on its direct underside— an inverse narrative world that looks the same except that it holds onto what the other one lost and vice versa. Nora is a "ghost" in this counter-narrative because, as José Ortega y Gasset writes, "narrative makes everything a ghost of itself" (138). However, this ghosting effect— what we might call the "departure" or "disposal" of narrative elements into other narrative frames— is not to be confused with death (as it is in Derrida's theory of "hauntology" when he writes that a specter is "neither living nor dead,

present nor absent... It does not belong to ontology").[ii] Unlike death, disposability always entails an alternate narrative of stubborn endurance. Narrative is, as Gasset writes poetically, "the schematic shape left in the present by what is absent… like the discarded skin of a snake" (138).

Nora's story thus underscores both points I have hitherto made about the relationship between narrative and disposability. On the one hand, Nora learns that narrative cannot capture the actual process of disposal. From their own vantage, her family never disappeared. They were among the "lucky ones" who lost only one mother in a world full of orphans. Similarly, Nora had not experienced her own disappearance from their narrative as a "Sudden Departure" even more catastrophic in magnitude. This ambivalent relational logic of disposability is reflected by the series title, *The Leftovers*, which refers to what *remains* as excess but also what is *disposed of* as waste— a distinction ultimately made by one's particular narrative frame. On the other hand, and as a direct corollary, Nora's experiences reveal how narrative both structures and is structured by disposability. Indeed, the show relies upon the disappearance of 140 million people for its basic premise. These absent non-characters nevertheless haunt the setting (seen in dilapidated buildings or the formation of cult retreats), characters (who mourn their loved ones with either guilt or grief), plot (which is directed by nihilist acts of terrorism or apathy), and theme (through recurring images of holes, vast plains, or simulations of those who were lost). Even visually, the show seems to congeal around what it has evacuated. Characters frequently react to something off-screen and the camera will then often pan to whatever holds this magnetic power. But, sometimes, these objects do not emerge within the narrative at all— their power functioning *as* absence instead. Likewise, audiences are privy to all of Nora's preparations for transportation up until her final breath before she plunges into the machine. But the show does not depict the transportation itself or even her experiences on the other side. Nora instead recounts these

verbally as a framed narrative which gives us some distance from, and thus lessons about, the function of narrative itself. Unable to *capture* the process of disposal, she does capture the *failures* of narrative to do so. We thus glimpse how narrative and disposability are mutually constitutive as the negative ground of each other.

As the genres I have hitherto discussed might suggest, there is something a bit science fictional and supernatural about my claim that narrative and disposability are simultaneous operations. Indeed, narratives multiply dimensions of Being even when they do not explicitly highlight this as a theme or develop it as a plot device through, say, wormholes and haunted houses. Despite this weirdness, however, my dissertation follows a rather well-worn path of both narratological and ontological theories. Feminist and critical race theorists have embraced the constructive as well as the destructive powers of narrative to change social and legal norms. In "Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," Delgado famously notes that

> Most who write about storytelling focus on its community-building functions: Stories build consensus, a common culture of shared understandings, and a deeper, more vital ethics. But stories and counterstories can serve an equally important destructive function. They can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel. They can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power. They are the other half— the destructive half— of the creative dialectic. (72)

Yet, even when he recognizes the destructive capacities of narrative, Delgado unwittingly converts these into constructive ones. For Delgado, the "destructive function" of narrative is to "show," to "help us understand," and to reclaim the victims of "exclusion"— each of which highlights narrative as a mechanism of *recycling* but not of *disposability*. It is, as I have already suggested, impossible to truly capture this "destructive half" since the very attempt to do so would involve constructive effort. And yet, with sustained and careful attention to the

"constructive half" of narrative, we can feel the contours of what seems to have been destroyed (like how Gasset sees the shape of a snake in its discarded skin, or how Nora's framed narrative gives us partial access to the realm of the departed by seeing its negative impression).

Delgado almost takes this structuralist approach himself when he asks, "How can there be such divergent stories? Why do they not combine?" (72). Indeed, it is precisely these questions that I aim to answer by exploring the relationship between narrative and disposability. But, instead of attending to narrative structure, he proceeds to analyze how different rhetorical strategies have aligned with certain ideological commitments within a set of stories about racial exclusion. In other words, his view is that narratives happen to emerge within the politically oppositional context of human relations. And, because narrative is a highly effective tool for persuasion, supplication, and inspiration, our stories frequently happen to clash. I contend that, even within a context of complete human harmony (or no humans at all!), the limits imposed by narrative structure *necessarily* generate other "divergent stories" and repel "combination." It is for this reason, I believe, that counterstorytelling (in the legal domain or otherwise) cannot fully or finally resolve the problems of disposability. Even the most comprehensive and sophisticated attempt at narrative inclusion, Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, tends toward ever more finely nuanced forms of exclusion. How do we capture the experiences of those who are not represented by dominant narratives about racial oppression? Perhaps through those narratives that reveal how gender multiplies and differentiates these experiences of racial oppression. The questions will likely continue: how do we capture the experiences of those who are not represented by narratives about racialized gender oppression or gendered racial oppression? Perhaps through those specific ones that reveal how sexuality multiplies and differentiates these experiences of oppression. Understanding these intersectional differences is

vital for any accurate representation of our social world, any hope for working towards the ethical horizon of justice, and any equitable attempt at coalitional politics. However, it does not ultimately offer a *solution* to disposability itself which is an underlying function of all narrative.

While highly attuned to the dynamics of power which motivate my interest in narrative, legal scholars have often remained at the levels of sociology and rhetoric rather than ontology or structure. Literary critics have made more headway on this front, but the field "is contentiously constituted by apparently incompatible activities" which do not always set out to trace "the rules, the conventions" of narrative (Culler *On Deconstruction* 17; *Structuralist Poetics* viii). According to Jonathan Culler, French structuralism enjoyed a brief life in American intellectual history but survived no longer than the late 1970s. "The goal was a poetics," he explains, "an understanding of the devices, conventions and strategies of literature, of the means by which literary works create their effects" (*Structuralist Poetics* vii). In opposition to *poetics*, he "set *hermeneutics*, the practice of interpretation, whose goal is to discover or determine the meaning of a text" (*Structuralist Poetics* vii). These fields take very different angles of approach: poetics begins with the attested meanings of a work to understand how they emerge from (intrinsic) structural devices, whereas hermeneutics begins with the attested meanings of a work to understand how they emerge from (extrinsic) interpretive lenses. The locked horns of this debate have undermined many attempts at reconciliation, and Culler particularly condemns "Anglo-American New Criticism" for making hermeneutics the orthodoxy of literary studies (vii). But he also casts this net of blame more widely upon "the invention of… 'post-structuralism,'" which critiqued "the systemizing ambitions of structuralism" (*Structuralist Poetics* viii). Caroline Levine describes this critical turn somewhat differently. "Structuralism," she writes, "came under fire for assuming that these patterns were *natural* and therefore *inexorable*" (5; emphasis added).

Poststructuralists did not doubt the existence of basic structures, nor that they powerfully determine meaning and value. Rather, they distinguished the existence of these structures *in themselves* (the ontological level) from their specific manifestations *for us* (the ontic level).

This distinction is important for the current study because, while disposability is an intrinsic structural feature of narrative, its various manifestations are not all ethically or materially equivalent. Consider, for example, the *binary*— a structure favored by many thinkers in both movements. Structuralists elucidated how contrasts like "masculine and feminine, light and dark… imposed a recognizable order across social and aesthetic experiences" (Levine 5). Conversely, as Levine writes, "the poststructuralists who followed argued that these binaries were always covertly hierarchical and that their seeming neutrality had justified violence and inequality for centuries" (82). They pointed out how, throughout the long history of Western thought, philosophers have sought some foundation to ground transcendent truths. But, these attempts to "establish the identity of each fundamental concept through what it was not" always entailed the degradation or abjection of "the second term— the excluded other (madness, body, woman)" (82-83). Revealing how this insight resonates with disposability, Elizabeth Grosz explains that "the primary term defines itself by *expelling* its other and in this process establishes its own boundaries and borders" (3; emphasis added). But in all this, the structuralists agreed— binaries are powerfully determinant of meaning and value. Where the poststructuralists differed was in their normative impulse— there is no reason to believe that "madness, body, woman" must *always* be the second excluded term. As Judith Butler famously writes, "Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed or denaturalized" (42). Nor are we compelled, moreover, to maintain these specific manifestations of power

(indeed, the assumption seems increasingly to be the opposite). While structuralists discovered the eternal dynamics of power at work in different forms, poststructuralists decided that particular manifestations of power could be altered by how those forms are wielded or perceived.

Yet, while my dissertation is highly indebted to this repurposed structuralist project, I also depart from poststructuralism in a few key ways. In a highly refreshing critique of the movement's three most common assumptions, Levine points out that not all binaries are hierarchies, not all hierarchies are binaries, and the operations of these forms do not always align to consolidate power (84-85). Indeed, all these points will be evidenced by my own analysis of disposability which, as I show, can result from the *multiple forms* embedded in narrative—including the "background/foreground" binary imposed by setting, the macrostructural relations of "aboutness" imposed by plot or theme, as well as the eclipse of future possibility imposed by "endings." Moreover, disposability cannot be reduced to mere "powerlessness"— as shown by the different absences in *The Leftovers* which powerfully control narrative. But I also import one more twist from the emergent field of object-oriented ontology (OOO). As chief OOO defender Graham Harman writes, many poststructuralists have "confuse[d] ontotheology and simple realism" (*GM* 115). That is, by refusing to equate structures *in themselves* with their specific manifestations *for us*, many poststructuralists have unwittingly confused the *for us* with *any possibility of the Real at all*. As poststructuralists dug deeper and deeper under the superficial manifestations of structure toward the increasingly abstract operations of structure, they never hit solid ground. All they found were disembodied relations: the "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 191), the "repetition of tendencies" (Ahmed *QP* 58), the "play of differences" (Derrida *Positions* 21), the "simulacrum" (Baudrillard), or the "networks of power" (Foucault 220). Harman identifies the error of this inference: "a slide from criticizing the ability of deeply hidden essence

to appear in incarnated form to criticizing their very existence as anything other than phantasmatic projections" (*Tool-Being* 215). Poststructuralists thus committed the same hermeneutical error that Culler protests: while they admitted the *existence* of basic structures, they remained solely concerned with the (im)possibility of their *meaning*.

So, waging war with those who ontologized the *for us*, poststructuralists risked banishing the realm of ontology altogether. For example, Harman notes "Derrida's tendency to shift from the impossibility of proper meaning to the impossibility of proper being… [which] are two completely separate issues" (113). This conflation is not surprising since the *for us* is an issue of *representation* which has everything to do with meaning. And, yet, just because underlying structures cannot be reduced to their manifestations *for us*, there is no reason to believe that they do not exist *in themselves*, nor that this existence is irrelevant. Indeed, the genius of object-oriented ontology is precisely to take the inaccessibility of these structures[iii] as evidence of their existence beyond ourselves. Harman develops this radical turn away from the specificity of human praxis by reinterpreting Heidegger's famous tool-analysis. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes about one particular kind of tool— a hammer— which is "ready-to-hand" when it pounds a nail or "present-at-hand" when it breaks. It only acquires "a definite character" when "Being-present-at-hand-in-such-and-such-a-manner. *Only now are we given any access to properties or the like*" (Heidegger 200). For many decades, this ontological discovery has been taken to mean something special about humanness. Indeed, Heidegger's own description of Dasein frequently equates Being with consciousness and therefore seems to invite such anthropocentric interpretations. Harman, however, refuses the idea that readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand describe altered states of *human* consciousness or that they refer to different *types* of human-centered object (useful tools versus useless ones). For Harman, these terms instead describe two

distinct dimensions of Being shared by all objects— the "ready-to-hand" is a mode of existence objects take *in themselves* whereas the "present-at-hand" is a mode of existence objects take *for others* (whether human or not). Only the latter can be applied to questions of signification since the former withdraws from every kind of relation including those we call "meaning."

Object-oriented ontology thus offers key insights about the nature of Being— obviously a crucial topic for anyone who defines "disposability" as the conceit of non-existence. The movement has also developed some useful critiques of poststructuralism which liberate my own narratological approach from an undue commitment to routing out, understanding, or banishing signification. In contrast, I agree with Ridvan Askin that "narrative precisely goes beyond the grip of language and meaning" (3). His practice of *differential narratology* "pushes narrative theory to where epistemology capsizes and reverts into ontology, to where narrative ceases merely to be a form of human access to things (while also being that) and becomes expressive of being as such" (Askin 5). For Askin, as well as for myself, narrative is the "fundamental metaphysical process" of *becoming,* whether that be my own very human development through life or a plastic fork's journey from the trash to the great beyond (3). It is precisely on this point, however, that I differ most markedly from Harman and his fellow OOOists. For, while they have critiqued poststructuralists for equating meaning with being, they have committed their own reductive slide from narrative to present-at-hand signification. Levi Bryant reveals this prejudice in *The Democracy of Objects* when he claims his "ambition is to diminish an almost exclusive focus on propositions, representations, norms, signs, narratives, discourses, and so on, so as to cultivate a greater appreciation for nonhuman actors such as animate and inanimate natural entities" (247). Here, Bryant not only aligns narrative with humanness but also with the present-at-hand— the *for us* of representation and signification. He writes later that "Within the

correlationist frame of thought, the world is reduced to a passive screen that merely reflects our intentions, meanings, signs, narratives, and discourses" (258). Bryant repeatedly conflates narrative with representation and signification as if it were the mantra of his object-oriented philosophy (23, 183, 225, 287, 288, 289).

Meanwhile, Harman ignores narrative altogether, presumably because he thinks it irrelevant to the OOOist project. He does, however, take great pains to abolish the concept of temporality from *Being and Time*. "To this end," he writes, "I ask the reader to perform a… thought experiment: imagine that the flow of time is suddenly halted" (*Tool-Being* 63). While "Dasein is locked forever in a statuesque pose with the mallet it is using," presence-at-hand and readiness-to-hand both remain at work. In their mutual relationship, Dasein and the mallet both unlock certain present-at-hand manifestations of each other (Dasein-as-worker, mallet-as-tool, Dasein-as-opposable-thumb-haver, mallet-as-wooden-shaft-haver, etc.). Yet, neither do they entirely lose themselves to these relations— each remains a distinct and irreducible entity withdrawing into its own subterranean realm of the ready-to-hand. Harman thus concludes that "even a frozen moment of time can be formed of two opposed but interlocked dimensions" (*Tool-Being* 64). While provocative, the problem with Harman's thought experiment is that this very "*drama* of presence and withdrawal" develops through a temporal imaginary (*Tool-Being* 16; emphasis added). Indeed, his almost obsessive use of the term "drama" to describe this ontological rift bears out this point— a term which not only implies the passage of time but also distinctly invokes its *narrative function*. This is because time— and, I argue, narrative— emerges *as* the drama of objects. "Time is not a series of now-points 'in which' objects exist," Timothy Morton explains, but instead "time blossoms from… *the Rift* between the appearance and the essence of a thing" (*Realist Magic* 215; *Hyperobjects* 63). It is only from this tension

between an object's sovereignty and its interdependence upon others that anything like "change," "entropy," or "becoming" can arise. Even if we are to take the rather reductive example of a clock hand[iv], we can observe that our sense of passing time relies upon the *independent* existence of both the hands and the numbers as well as their mutual *relationship* with each other.

Not only do I ground my narrative theory in object-oriented ontology, then, but I also ground my theories of Being and non-Being in narrative inquiry. My methodology serves as a corrective to the rather shallow approaches I have traced in OOOism. However, I believe this reductive understanding of narrative originated within literary theory itself, which remains my primary field of engagement. For, throughout the long history of literary theory in the West, narrative has been described as *anthropocentric*, *epistemological*, and *experiential*— assumptions which have haunted the work of object-oriented ontologists like Bryant and Harman. According to Askin, the "richness and diversity of narratology rest on these three more or less tacit assumptions":

> (1) narrative is a specifically human business (both in the sense that all humans tell stories— storytelling as a pan-cultural phenomenon; and in the sense that humans tell stories whereas apes, trees, stars, and stones do not); (2) narrative is limited to the field of knowledge (as either acquisition, storage, or expression, or any combination of these); and (3) narrative is based in experientiality (either as a means of communication or as a way of making experience intelligible in the first place, or both). (1-2)

Throughout this dissertation, I instead follow Askin's practice of *differential narratology* which "inscribe[s] narrative within a much wider *metaphysical* horizon" (3; original emphasis). Narrative, according to Askin, is simply the ontological process of becoming. And, as my example of the plastic fork demonstrated earlier, disposability— the dark side of narrative— is the ontological process of *un*becoming. This is not to say that the fork truly self-destructs but rather that its ontological status (self-destructed or not) bears no consequence upon the narrative

continuing without these present-at-hand relations. The fork may, of course, reassert its presence in the same narrative or another as, perhaps, a trinket for a toddler on the beach, an eyesore for a volunteer trash-picker, or an extra slidey surface for a droplet of rain.

Ultimately, I claim that, while narrative traces the continual *presence* of objects as they come into new relations, disposability marks the point(s) at which other once-related objects *withdraw* from this narrative frame. This approach to narrative begins with the study of *being* before any case can be made for interpretations of *meaning*. And yet, this "study" clearly depends upon the concept of meaning in some capacity. Like Askin, I thus trace a double narrative function: "on the one hand, it pertains to the *metaphysical processes* of onto- and morphogenesis; on the other hand, it provides *aesthetic knowledge* of these processes" (4). Of course, the very attempt to *access* this aesthetic knowledge brings us into a present-at-hand relation. So, we are *still* left with our original problem: narrative (theoretical or fictional) cannot capture the processes of disposability. As Harman writes, "readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) refers to objects insofar as they withdraw… into a dark subterranean reality that never becomes present to practical action any more than it does to theoretical awareness... What is first at stake is an absolute gulf between the things and *any* interaction we might have with them, no matter whether that interaction be intellectual or merely manipulative" (1). Disposability is thus just as antithetical to theorization as it is to narrative representation. We cannot find it captured within the pages of a novel just as you will not find it explicated within the pages of this dissertation. And yet, if Nora's framed narrative taught us anything it is that *something* of this loss can be traced from the triangulation between what was here, what is not, and our own perspective on this difference. I thus suggest that, in its distancing capacity (a description which now strikes many ears as naïvely apolitical), theory provides this triangulated narrative framing. It is for this

reason that, despite the impossibility of *capturing* disposability, the term has been taken up as a central concern in countless popular narratives— fictional, theoretical, and journalistic.

Consider the following titles drawn from mainstream news media: "'Disposable' Nuclear Reactors Raise Security Fears" (2008, *New Scientist*); "No One is Disposable: Everyday Practices of Prison Abolition" (2014, *The Sylvia Rivera Law Project*); "What Happens When Fashion Becomes Fast, Disposable and Cheap?" (2016, *NPR*); "'Disposable Red Woman' Makes Missing And Murdered Indigenous Women Impossible To Ignore" (2017, *HuffPost*); "Sidelined children's health official says EPA inaction means 'kids are disposable'" (2018, *CBS News*); "Gun Trace Task Force preyed on African Americans because they're 'disposable'" (2019, *The Baltimore Sun*); "'It keeps you nice and disposable': The plight of adjunct professors" (2019, *The Washington Post*). This, of course, represents only a very partial list and I would go so far as to claim that "disposability" now defines our reigning ethico-political paradigm. How do we reach consensus about the problematic effects of some practice or policy? Increasingly, we claim that it renders someone or something *disposable*. I have chosen these specific titles then, not to offer an exhaustive list, but to provoke a sense of disorientation. Mass incarceration, fashion culture, radioactive disaster, children's health, violence against indigenous women, ecological degradation, anti-Black police brutality, consumerism, adjunctification, and job precarity— one could certainly do the work necessary to theorize the connections between these crises. But, instead, these invocations of "disposability" seem to serve as quick-hand markers for ethico-political crisis itself. What do all these problems have in common that they may fall under the name of "disposability"? In this dissertation, I consider the consequences of homogenizing all our disparate ethico-political crises under this single framework. What, we might ask with a bit of irony, do we *lose* by such a sweeping gesture? What differences and details disappear when

we throw mass genocide, mass incarceration, and mass waste into the same heap of disposability? So far, literary and cultural theory has not been very clarifying about this either.

I have already surveyed the many iterations of binarism plaguing the structuralist, poststructuralist, and object-oriented approaches to literature, but cultural theory has been overdetermined more explicitly by ideas about disposability. This concept now litters the work on biopower, capitalism, and agrilogistics, among others, such that questioning the actual existence, true nature, and real extent of the problem has become quite difficult. Those who use the term explicitly, such as Henry Giroux, Rob Nixon, Wendy Brown, Lisa Cacho, and Zygmunt Bauman, tend to describe it as an effect of globalization and neoliberalism. However, Giorgio Agamben theorizes "bare life" as our modern political nomos since the Nazi death camps, while Achille Mbembe observes the rise of "necropolitics" in certain post-colonial contexts. Still others, like Paul Gilroy, Saidiya Hartman, and Alexander Weheliye, trace "social death" at least to transatlantic slavery. Despite their variant terminologies, all these theorists are concerned with a kind of violence wielded through the actual or hypothetical disappearance of people and places— a kind of violence I have named "disposability." Regardless of their distinct genealogies, moreover, each of these theorists have been making historical claims about our *age* of disposability. On some level, these historical accounts are extremely helpful. After all, the term was coined in the industrial revolution and then spread exponentially in the postwar period (*Google Ngram Viewer*). This era followed the accidental invention of the first fully synthetic plastic in 1907 as well as the establishment of the first US landfill in 1937. Since then, we have seen neoliberal retrenchment beginning in the 1970s as well as the rise of mass incarceration throughout the 1980s and 90s. Nevertheless, my formalist reading leads me to conclude that disposability is a transhistorical phenomenon which manifests in ways that are particularly

pernicious today. As my chapter organization reveals, narrative theory can dislodge us from simple ontological binaries between modes of being. Narrative carries a whole arsenal of forms and functions— from differential inclusions to outright exclusions— which bring about disposability in various ways. Tracing the nature of these structural differences and how they manifest within specific historical contexts, I offer a way to understand the staggering range of disposability crises that trouble us today.

For example, in Chapter 1, I focus on how disposability emerges from the "background-foreground" structure of narrative, but I situate these arguments within the specific historical convergence between AIDS awareness and climate consciousness during the late 1980s in the United States. Close reading Sarah Schulman's 1990 novel *People in Trouble*, I show how she subsumes this conventional love-plot within her apocalyptic backdrop of the AIDS epidemic in Manhattan. Surveying other examples from this period, including Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* and Derek Jarman's journal *Modern Nature*, I argue that AIDS and climate activists were (perhaps unconsciously) sharing practices for aesthetic-political intervention. But these interventions exceeded the pragmatic goal of cajoling government action after years of neglect. Indeed, by disrupting the background/foreground structure of narrative, they disrupted the very logic and aesthetic of disposability. That is, narrative always foregrounds action, characters, or certain kinds of description against a backgrounded setting, soundtrack, or whatever else might be captured by the suggestive phrase "atmosphere." As a form of differential inclusion, backgrounds are (perhaps temporarily) *present,* but they are nevertheless *devalued* as exploited resource or *disvalued* as entirely unnecessary for the functioning of foreground. Blending environmental and AIDS "wastes" in her description of background setting, Schulman draws from the new ecological imaginary of this period to evince the immorality of AIDS inaction. She

demonstrates how people with AIDS (PWAs) have been rendered effectively interchangeable with literal trash. But rather than *rejecting* this slippage between humans and objects or *reclaiming* the value of PWAs over trash, she critiques the underlying logic of disposability that has invisibly marked both *as* waste. By continually drawing background into foreground, Schulman thus exposes how the very mechanisms of narrative are responsible for both crises of neglect.

In Chapter 2, I develop another form of disposability which arises from the macrostructural relation of "aboutness." According to Stephen Yablo, aboutness is the relation "meaningful items bear to whatever it is that they are *on* or *of* or that they *address* or *concern*" (1; original emphasis). Words, sentences, topics, subjects, themes, plots, and many more such meaningful items may populate a given narrative. However, only certain of these are *necessary* by definition: a narrative may be mimed without words, but it cannot *function* without plot and cannot *mean* without theme. Moreover, while topic and subject seem to emerge ipso facto, neither of these colonize narrative aboutness in the same way as plot or theme. An infinite number of topics may coexist without ever coming into conflict because they do not lay claim to *total narrative meaning*. Conversely, I trace how two macrostructural relations of aboutness— plot and theme— battle for control over Margaret Atwood's dystopian science fiction novel *The Heart Goes Last.* On the level of plot, the novel follows two newlyweds, Stan and Charmaine, who have lived in squalor ever since the apocalyptic crash of the United States economy. By a stroke of good fortune, they are accepted into the idyllic town of Consilience where they are promised security and employment *if* they agree to endure mandatory labor every other month in Positron Prison. From here, the novel spins out of control juggling a jealous love triangle (more accurately, a love octagon); a covert operation to take down the corporate giant Positron; as well

as a comedy of errors that involves several tangents spanning sex robots, Elvis Presley impersonators, and Shakespearean weddings. The novel's themes are equally haphazard—including critiques of the capitalist system, the perversity of desire, the commodification of women, the terrors of totalitarianism, the possibility of artificial intelligence, the ethics of medical experimentation, and the sincerity of the environmentalist project. Reviewers have almost unanimously criticized this dizzying range of sub-plots and sub-themes which never seem to crystalize into any resounding *point*.

Indeed, if any aesthetic consensus exists at all, it is that good narratives must harmonize their components. Likewise, most formalist reading practices tend to seek evidence of this narrative harmony— how theme elegantly leans into plot, how plot powerfully consolidates theme. However, I argue, while this harmony may be a common or even universal *preference*, there is no reason to believe that plot and theme must always align. Indeed, each macrostructural relation of aboutness pertains to a different kind of referent: "plot is linked to (particular) events" whereas "theme involves only general and abstract entities" (Prince 5). We might thus think of them as forms of glue or binding that differently configure narrative elements into a meaningful whole. Both are necessary features of narrative and they also both demand the subservience of other meaningful items (events or motifs respectively). Plot and theme thus render these other narrative elements as means to their own ends, somewhat like the form of differential inclusion enacted by the background/foreground binary. However, while backgrounded elements are always *neglected*, the elements comprising plot or theme are usually *highlighted*. Indeed, events and motifs are necessary for the functioning of plot or the meaning of theme, but they are not necessary in and of themselves. And, as the means to greater ends, these elements are thus comparatively disposable. Beyond Atwood's whimsical if frustrating novel, there is real political

urgency to analyze this conflictual nature of plot and theme. In particular, neo-Marxism and Afro-pessimism have each offered seemingly mutually exclusive explanations for racialized mass incarceration. While they agree on the sequence of events which led up to the US prison boom, they ultimately take these events to be *about* different things. The former highlights the mechanism of historical plot to trace a story about capitalist manipulations of race for economic gain, while the latter highlights the mechanism of universal theme to trace a story about the constant and irreducible brutality of anti-Blackness. Significantly, Atwood situates her own plot-theme experiments within the context of an experimental prison society.

Apart from these forms of differential inclusion, disposability can also emerge from more explicit forms of exclusion. I have already demonstrated how certain narrative elements, such as props or characters, may seem quite simply to disappear. Such is the case when I throw away a plastic fork and continue my day blissfully unaware that I have killed an endangered species of shark. Such is also the premise of *The Leftovers* which opens with a single mother who attempts simultaneously to fold clothes in a public laundromat, withdraw cash from a broken ATM, calm her crying baby, settle a financial dispute over the phone, schedule someone to clean up the flood in her basement, and then haul everyone and everything back into their car. This woman's story is bursting at the seams with glimmering present-at-hand elements, each of which vies for control over narrative direction and meaning. Even more shocking, then, when, as we pan from the crying baby to his mother fidgeting with her keys, the car goes suddenly quiet and the camera returns to reveal that he has disappeared. In this sense, disposability always marks the beginning and ending of a narrative frame— the point at which this baby leaves his mother's story and emerges in a new (likely horrific) one. This "beginning" and "ending" need not always be the same as what we call more conventionally the beginning and ending of a story. Indeed,

characters in *The Leftovers* feel this line between narrative and disposability more as a "loss" or "disruption" to a story which is already in motion. In Chapter 3, however, I close read Nic Pizzolatto's television serial *True Detective* (2014) to consider this limit of narrative "endings" in the more conventional sense. In this first season, Louisiana state homicide investigators "Rust" (Matthew McConaughey) and "Marty" (Woody Harrelson) attempt to solve the 1995 murder of Dora Lange. Set against a petrochemical mise-en-scene which Pizzolatto describes as the "third lead," this exhausting plot spreads from a single murder case to interconnected drug rings, religious cults, state government, school boards, and elite business circles.

The final two episodes reach a sort of deus ex machina resolution, but many questions remain regarding the true perpetrators, motivations, and scope of these crimes. Contrary to the title's claim, *True Detective* thus fails certain generic conventions like the atomizing concepts of "perpetrator" and "victim," linear narratives of cause and effect, as well as the epistemological value of exposure. Conversely, the saturation of industrial imagery, the prevalence of disease and disability amongst characters, and the nonlinear detective story that spreads from a single murder to transnational networks of oil capital, all *expose* us to the threat of petro-chemicals. I thus contrast the show's draining plot and disaffected characters with its nondiegetic narratives which emerge from the never-ending images of petro-capitalism to resonate with toxic masculinity, Southern plantation slavery, and US neocolonial war. This is what Delia Byrnes describes as the show's "oily aesthetic" or what Casey Kelly calls the "toxic screen." So, while the diegetic plot seems to end more out of exhaustion than any tidy resolution, numerous other narratives emerge as visual enthymemes of oil's slow violence. While I only explore three examples— how petrocapitalism connects with toxic masculinity, Southern plantation slavery, and US neocolonial war— these visual enthymemes are theoretically infinite in number. Ultimately, this show

refuses the tidy ending of its diegetic plot but also refuses to allow diegetic plot full autonomy over narrative closure. Like my previous two chapters, this one thus begins with an illuminating failure. In Chapter 1, it is the failure to distinguish background from foreground. In Chapter 2, it is the failure to harmonize plot and theme. In Chapter 3, it is the failure to achieve an ending (whether in the conventional sense of the diegetic plot or in the sense of any clear border between presence and absence). All these failures necessarily disrupt the narrative process, but they also both reveal and challenge the processes of disposability. These narrative failures thus provide insight into our deepest ontological structures, but they also offer strategies to counter the various kinds of disposability that plague us today.

All these objects of study can be classified as "contemporary" both in their dates of production and also their time of setting— *People in Trouble* considers ongoing crises (the AIDS epidemic and global warming) from the perspective of the recent past, *The Heart Goes Last* projects a current crisis (racialized mass incarceration) into the speculative near future, and *True Detective* takes a framed narrative structure to alternate between a past crime and its present implications (whether that be femicide or petro-capitalism) in a way that challenges the temporality of narrative itself. But one of my primary goals in this dissertation is to theorize disposability as a transhistorical (and not strictly human) phenomenon, despite contrary assumptions in recent literary and cultural criticism. In the coda to this dissertation, I thus spend some time with *Antigone*— the dénouement to Sophocles' three Theban plays— which was written in or before 441 BC. Following Antigone's righteous commitment to bury her brother in the face of royal censure, this play unfolds through a set of binaries: life versus death, spirit versus matter, doing versus allowing, the political State versus the state of nature, to name only a few. I offer this close reading, not only to bolster my claim that disposability is a transhistorical

phenomenon, but also to emphasize why we must think more carefully about what defines our contemporary ethical concerns. For, my goal is not to gut these crises of their political urgency— a danger attendant upon all projects that work toward fundamental (and thus transhistorical) principles. Instead, I am led to conclude that at least one of two things must be true: either "disposability" cannot sufficiently explain what makes these political crises unique (requiring more analysis into certain *kinds* or *contexts*), or it displaces politics from the realm of human affairs into the very ontological fabric of the world itself. I seek to show that both are true.

I am drawn to pop/pulp cultural genres— science fiction, romance, magical realism, Southern gothic, DIY arthouse, and detective series— that span an array of media forms. As Abbi Jacobson confesses in *Broad City*— a rather trashy TV sitcom famous for its "brand of (occasionally literal) toilet humor"— "I just always loved trash. It's like normal stuff, but it has a past, you know?" (Garber *The Atlantic* n.p., "Philadelphia"). Indeed, although disposability is a transhistorical phenomenon, it also structures narrative and is, in this sense, the condition of possibility for any history— a point I develop more fully in my coda. I thus describe my methodology as dumpster-diving— an adventure into archives of the forgotten and unloved, a process of collecting and comparing disparate objects. This approach attempts to sidestep dichotomies between "deep" and "surface" readings, or "paranoid" and "reparative" ones. I try as much as possible to read "without redemption" as Frank B Wilderon III suggests. Instead, I practice a hermeneutic of attunement and I attempt to describe the stories these objects tell for themselves. "Methodologically," as Askin writes, "differential narratology therefore operates with a kind of close reading sensitive to the work's aesthetic autonomy in so far as this autonomy is always already conceived as torn open and turned inside out" (24). Likewise, I rarely systematize the branches of literary and critical theory from which I draw. Instead, I offer a kind

of *Wall-e* inspired trash heap of what I believe are beautiful glimmering ideas from phenomenology, eco-criticism, Afro-pessimism, neo-Marxism, new materialism, post-structuralism, existentialism, and occasionally critical legal studies, among many others.

Finally, I have noted how theorizing disposability is— at the most fundamental level— impossible (if "theory" is in fact a project of *explication*) since it necessarily brings us into a present-at-hand relation with those objects we seek to explore in their withdrawn subterranean reality. Theory, after all, can be understood as a form of narrative explanation and cannot, therefore, *capture* the actual process of disposability. As I have also noted, this ontological and epistemological impossibility has not impeded many theorists from engaging with the concept. Perhaps it is precisely this impossibility that so energizes and captivates the work of these critics. We might even call "disposability" the crux of our contemporary philosophical zeitgeist. As I have suggested in reference to Derrida's notion of "hauntology," one major risk of this scholarly obsession is a conceptual confusion between "death" and "disposability." Certainly, disposability captures the way power often functions through the slippage between living beings and inanimate objects. Moreover, this narrative *conceit* of non-existence can be so powerful as to enact the actual death of such persons or things. How else could we let children wash up dead on the shores of Europe, or ignore the extinction of the bumble bee, or doubt the video footage of anti-Black police brutality unless these deaths amounted to "non-deaths" or "deaths-always-already"? Nevertheless, for the very reason that actual instances of death can subtend disposability, it is vitally important to distinguish between the *for us* of disposability and the *in itself* of death.

Therefore, I want to briefly sketch out four dangers entailed by granting disposability its claims over death:

1) As a structuring force of narrative, disposability is *productive* of meaning and value. For example, when we continually dispose our plastic forks, we create a new category of "disposable cutlery." Likewise, Hortense Spillers famously theorizes the "hieroglyphics of the flesh" as the process by which the wounding of the slave whip became the branding of racial blackness. When skin color obscured the "severe disjunctures" of this violence, racial difference was produced. In other words, wounding marks the flesh for wounding; racial difference enables the violence that produces racial difference (67). And, given that Blackness can be celebrated for exceeding this constitutive violence (expressible as it is within its own narrative terms), we can begin to see the complex ways that methods of disposability are also productive of meaning and value.

2) Like death, disposability cannot be thought since it creates, and exists within, a negative space. We could say it is the dark matter to thought— the direct underside, outside, or residue of narrative. If, as Gayatri Spivak argues, the subaltern has none of its own positive terms upon which to speak then the only way for us to engage the negative space of disposability is through what she calls "denegation" or through what I have been calling "narrative." It is impossible "to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other." But, unlike death, disposability *does* engage this power and desire of the subaltern. While it may always be impossible to imagine the *specific manifestations* of these forces, our too-easy conflation of disposability with death can also blind us to their *very existence*.

3) Disposability works through a relational logic of devaluation such that any attempts to counter its effects directly (say, through "minor" or "counter" narratives) will inevitably produce new disposals. For instance, Lisa Cacho notes that when ex-President Bush identified black Katrina victims as "'refugees,' they were devalued on multiple levels... However, to reclaim entitlement by adamantly denying [this] resemblance… renders less worthy the many refugees who were also Hurricane Katrina victims" (14-15). Reclamation— in this case, on the basis of citizenship— always devalues "other Others." This kind of ontological jujitsu can be challenging for anyone who seeks to resist both the logic and effects of disposability. Nevertheless, the novels, films, and television series I study throughout this dissertation provide useful models for alternative ways to engage with and against disposability. Each variously fails narrative function or form in their exhausting reversals of disposability. Indeed, these narrative failures and exhausting reversals appear to be the only "solution" for the phenomenon of disposability.

4) Finally, I have noted already how this lens does not tend to capture either the qualitative or quantitative differences between forms of injustice— either trivializing

microaggressions or homogenizing larger oppressions. While there may only be one kind of ontological *death* (a claim that Heidegger would not endorse and one that I remain neutral about), I seek to show the numerous forms of *disposability* (all of which can and have produced death in different ways).

"Narratives of Disposability: Race and Ecology in Contemporary Media"

Chapter 1: The Background/Foreground Narrative Structure of Sarah Schulman's *People in Trouble*

By the end of the 1970s, it was clear that gay men across the United States were dying from a host of rare and mysterious illnesses. One man describes the slow creeping recognition that defined this early period of the AIDS crisis as follows:

> I had a friend who died way way back in New York in 1981. He was one of the first to go. We didn't know what AIDS was, there was no name for it. We didn't know it was contagious— we had no idea it was sexually transmitted— we didn't know it was anything. We just thought that he— alone— was ill. He was 26 years old and just had one thing after another wrong with him... He was still coming to work— cause he didn't *know* he had a terminal disease. (qtd. in Treichler 26-27; original emphasis)

According to Paula Treichler, these nameless isolated events created a sense of "oddness" that soon "gave way to an even more terrifying period in which gay men on both coasts gradually began to realize that too many friends and acquaintances were dying" (27). As the numbers mounted, these deaths soon became "cases" of what was informally named the Wrath of God Syndrome (WOGS) throughout New York hospitals. Following five deaths from pneumocystis pneumonia around the Los Angeles area in 1981, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) officially recognized the emergence of an illness associated with "the homosexual lifestyle" which was "acquired through sexual contact" (Gottlieb et al.). Shortly thereafter, *The New England Journal of Medicine* published two papers attributing these deaths to a breakdown in the immune system which left the body defenseless against otherwise non-lethal infections (Gottlieb et al.; Masur et al.). The syndrome was dubbed Gay-Related Immunodeficiency Disease (GRID).

The CDC soon developed its infamous "4-H list" of high-risk categories: homosexuals, hemophiliacs, heroin addicts, and Haitians, along with the sexual partners of people within these

groups. This list structured the collection of medical evidence in subsequent years and "contributed to the view that the major risk factor in acquiring AIDS is being a particular kind of person rather than doing particular kinds of things" (Treichler 20). Throughout the 1980s, AIDS incidence increased rapidly as the scientific community failed to provide any conclusive explanation, prevention, or cure and as government officials refused even to recognize the epidemic. Within a context of pervasive homophobia, sexism, and racism, AIDS inaction thus became a new mechanism of disposability governance. And yet, following a series of high-profile deaths throughout the late 1980s— particularly Rock Hudson in 1985— and after evidence of "vertical transmission" between mothers and infants resurfaced in the scientific community, media outlets now obsessed about the possible threat of AIDS to white heterosexual families dubbed the "general population" (Treichler 14, 61, 20). "Suddenly," worried the cover of the *U.S. News and World Report* on January 12th 1987, "the disease of *them* is the disease of *us*" (Treichler 55; Washer 54). The image depicted two young white urban professionals, a man and woman, as "us" with a graph of rising AIDS deaths slashed across their faces. Treichler concludes that, even though AIDS was not exploding in the heterosexual population, the "idea of 'heterosexual AIDS' now exploded in the general media" (55).

Likely spurred by this frenzy and fear, president Ronald Reagan made a public address in 1987 after nearly a decade of inaction, finally launching a federal education and prevention campaign known as America Responds to AIDS. The surgeon general subsequently distributed a pamphlet, *Understanding AIDS,* to every household in America. But even as this marked the arrival of AIDS as an important national concern, the document revealed the "conflicting data, warring agendas, and multiple drafts" wreaking chaos for public policy and scientific consensus (Treichler 57). By the early 1990s, AIDS incidence had peaked. Little was yet known about

precise modes of contraction and debate raged about whether women were at risk (CDC n.p.; Treichler 53). In the midst of this confusion and inaction, approximately 300 people established the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in March 1987 to reach one goal: effective and accessible medication. "The cure was out there somewhere," Peter Cohen explains, "and homophobic politicians, profit-obsessed pharmaceutical companies, and an antiquated federal bureaucracy were preventing it from reaching the people who needed it" (16). Within less than half a decade, this New York based advocacy group had *spread* throughout the United States and included 100 chapters around the globe.[v] Their mission eventually expanded beyond the confined goal of attaining a cure, encompassing a broad social and economic justice mandate for all people with AIDS (PWAs).

During this period, America was slowly and vaguely coming to realize another catastrophe in process.[vi] In 1975, the oceanographer Wallace Smith Broecker coined the term "global warming" and, by 1980, the United States Energy Security Act mandated the National Academy of Sciences to research carbon dioxide buildup in the atmosphere. The resultant report asserted that climate change existed, predicted that atmospheric carbon dioxide would double in the following century, acknowledged that populations around the globe would experience differential effects, and expressed deep concern that these effects would be highly unpredictable. By1982, [vii] the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued a report promoting a "sense of urgency" and stating that "a rapid increase in the earth's temperature… now seems inevitable" (qtd. in Jamieson 29). Meanwhile, climate models were becoming more sophisticated and data sets were improving with technical developments in remote sensing. Confidence was growing in the reality and risks of anthropogenic climate change such that, more and more, public pressure for action was building. And yet, the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 had also undermined the

bipartisan consensus on environmental goals that reigned throughout the 1970s. Within two years of his presidency, the EPA lost one-third of its budget and one-fifth of its staff. Environmental activism exploded on the political scene as a result. Between 1980 and 1990, the Sierra Club multiplied from 180,000 to 630,000 members while the Wilderness Society's membership soared from 45,000 to 350,000. Under this renewed and vigorous pressure, the federal government passed a series of environmental laws including the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act Amendments of 1984, the Safe Drinking Water Act Amendments of 1986, as well as the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act of 1986. But these slow ambivalent policy measures further splintered the environmentalist movement into radical and reformist groups who were often in fierce political conflict— a fault line also emerging simultaneously in AIDS health activism.

Significantly, Jamieson marks the moment when "climate change moved from an issue of public concern to a global project" in 1988— the year after ACT UP was established in New York City.[viii] "Much of the United States spent the summer in the grip of extreme heat and serious drought," he explains,

> Fires raged in Yellowstone National Park, agricultural production declined dramatically, and water levels in the Mississippi River system dropped precariously, resulting in channel closings and ship groundings. On the Eastern seaboard demand for electricity to run fans and air conditioners hit an all-time high, and air conditioners were even in short supply. On June 23, 1988, a sweltering day in Washington, DC, climate modeler James Hansen testified before a US Senate Committee that it was 99% probable that global warming had begun. Hansen's testimony was front-page news in the *New York Times*, and was extensively covered in other media as well. (Jamieson 31)

One year later, in 1989, Bill McKibben published *The End of Nature* which was widely considered to be the first book on global warming for a general audience. This spike in global warming coverage throughout the United States coincided exactly with increases in media

reports about AIDS. These once neglected crises became front page news, awakening Americans to their own complicity in, and vulnerability to, the unseen forces of viral epidemic and global climate change.

By 1990, then, America had been inundated with various forms of apocalyptic imagery from media covering the spread of AIDS, the doom of planet earth, and the powerful rise of an evangelical right. Cynthia Deitering notes a concomitant "tendency toward apocalyptic themes… [and] preoccupation with the toxic environment" in the American literary fiction of this period (197). Significantly, this was also the year that Sarah Schulman published *People in Trouble* (1990), a novel she began three years earlier upon joining ACT UP. Set against the apocalyptic backdrop of the AIDS epidemic in Manhattan, the story centers upon a love triangle between Molly, Kate, and Pete. Kate, an East Village performance artist, is at the end of her marriage with Pete, a rather insipid and pompous theatre lighting designer. Despite her own homophobia and rejection of identity politics, Kate falls in love with a much younger lesbian named Molly who struggles to cope with and care for her gay male friends dying of AIDS. Schulman claims that her "novel was set against the backdrop of the AIDS crisis" (*Stage Struck* 7) but, in truth, the "love story is constantly impinged upon by [this larger environment of] homelessness, desperation, and death" (Kruger 261). Even her characters appear frustrated by the constant incursions of background setting into foreground action: "Here we are trying to have a run-of-the-mill illicit lesbian love affair," Molly confides in Kate, "And all around us people are dying and asking for money" (Schulman 113). Ultimately, while the romance genre conventionally privileges an insular focus on character development and a linear movement towards plot resolution, Schulman continually subsumes her love-story within the larger context of AIDS death and ecological destruction defining this historical period.

Most significantly, Schulman *conjoins* these two crises in her descriptions of background setting. The first time either crisis is mentioned, the narrator describes "a hallucinatorily hot summer with AIDS wastes and other signs of the Apocalypse washing up on the beaches" (12).[ix] Here, the 1988 summer heatwaves which Jamieson believes precipitated growing climate change awareness appear in the same syntactic unit and visual frame as AIDS. Moreover, those "other signs of the Apocalypse washing up on the beaches" register associatively with ocean contaminants such as single-use plastics which, like "AIDS wastes," were also growing in abundance and opprobrium. In this image, PWAs are situated ambiguously within an ontological, agential, and ethical schema. Have they been *laid* to waste or simply *let* to waste? And, is this deontological distinction between doing and allowing morally significant, or merely a blind spot of the liberal democratic model under which this population has been neglected and stigmatized?[x] On the one hand, their own reconfigured bodies seem prone to HIV "wasting" syndrome and other harbingers of death. Analogously, the summer might be naturalized as a season prone to heat and trash may be thought to "accidently" wash up on the shores. But such refusals of responsibility and excuses for neglect had begun to collapse in precisely this historical moment. Environmental activists were rethinking the Human/Nature dichotomy as well as the relations of care and dependency implicit to these concepts. And so, to evince the immorality of AIDS inaction, Schulman turns to this newly developing ecological imaginary. By making AIDS wastes coextensive with ecological waste in her descriptions of background setting, she demonstrates how PWAs have been rendered effectively interchangeable with literal trash. But rather than *rejecting* this slippage between humans and objects or *reclaiming* the value of PWAs over trash, Schulman embraces this equivocation in order to critique the underlying logic of disposability that has invisibly marked both *as* waste.

Through such descriptions of background setting, Schulman contrasts the logic and aesthetic of apocalypse with that of disposability to show how our terror and condemnation of the former often obscures the more mundane violence of the latter. "It was the beginning of the end of the world," her novel opens, "but not everyone noticed right away" (1). As Steven Kruger explains, this line "carves out a space grander than that occupied by three individuals, setting the action of the love affair and triangle directly within a narrative of apocalypse" (260). But Schulman seems to mock the "unnoticeability" of this apocalypse— an alert insight and acerbic tone that Molly adopts as well. When "the shit comes down, we'll both be on the same side of the barricades" Kate claims abstractly and defensively in one of their conversations. "The shit is already down" Molly insists. To which Kate clarifies, "'I mean when people are dying in the streets.' 'Kate, people are dying in the streets'" (Schulman 165). *People in Trouble* is an apocalyptic narrative, then, only to the extent that Schulman exposes the more differential, protracted, and concealed forms of violence which often do not feature in this genre. Kruger writes similarly that "Schulman's apocalypticism functions less within a temporal narrative of conspiratorial origins and cataclysmic ends than it does within… a narrative of proximity, an account of growing familiarity with AIDS" (259). Indeed, even though apocalypse, romance, and sentimentalism are among the most plot driven (and AIDS associated) genres, *People in Trouble* unfolds laterally (if only ever partially and momentarily) into the hidden recesses of its scenes.

The forward movement of plot often pauses over detailed descriptions, for example, of the sun setting in a polluted "red uranium sky," or might "stumble" over the many crowds of homeless people "wrapped," for example "in empty garbage bags" and "overflowing" from "public bathroom[s]," or may even reroute unexpectedly after chance encounters with secondary-characters (Schulman 184, 16). Regarding this last point, Kruger has noted how *People in*

Trouble takes on a "spy-novel atmosphere" when Molly joins Justice (281). After seeing graffiti, brochures, and t-shirts with pink triangles scattered around the city— reminders of her ill and neglected friends— she agrees to carry out a covert operation on their behalf. A stranger instructs her to remain at a cinema ticket booth where she will collect secret messages from PWAs and then "make the drop" with Justice members in their discrete office location (281). "How double-oh-seven can you get?" asks Molly's ex-girlfriend, Pearl, who also emerges in the novel abruptly and thus challenges the love-triangle trope (Schulman 95). Schulman's plot thus moves at the whim of her settings. Whatever happens to fall within the frame of her scenes absorbs both perceptual and causal power, even redefining the genre of her novel.

This lateral movement frustrates the processual direction inherent to narrative itself. Indeed, her novel opens with a sense of crisis as slow and creeping: "It was the beginning of the end of the world." From the outset, then, we are situated at the limits— or, perhaps more accurately, within the deepest folds— of narrative structure. The "end" is extended by its own "beginning," but the retrospective narration of "It was" also collapses these moments into a shared past— we are now, presumably, already well into the "end." Indeed, this "dying had been going on for a long time already," we are told, "So long, in fact, that there were people alive who didn't remember life before AIDS" (Schulman *People* 44). For a genre concerned with end times, Schulman thus applies a great deal of pressure to the temporality of these "ends"— expanding time within itself until it develops quasi-spatial dimensions (an effect which also manifests in the "*deep* time" geologists have used to define our Anthropocene era). Given that Schulman is most concerned with the means-ends rationalizations driving these forms of capitalist neglect, it is perhaps not surprising that she challenges the means-ends temporality underlying her plot. Like our treatment of the earth, the novel's "landscape decays even [and I would stress *especially*]

through the processes of 'development' that promise to 'renew' it" (Kruger 260). Significantly, eco-critics have also raised these connections between temporality and violence. Rob Nixon, for example, names the phenomenon she performs and describes "slow violence" which, he believes, poses dangers even more acute and formidable than those at apocalyptic scales because, as Schulman writes, "not everyone notice[s] right away." Anthropogenic climate change and the AIDS epidemic are both crises of neglect that are better captured as forms of slow violence. Rather than absorbing these crises into an apocalyptic imaginary, then, she bears witness to the very processes of neglect which have catalyzed and exacerbated them (an aim captured by the name of her invented genre: AIDS "witness fiction").

As I argue throughout this chapter, Schulman's critique of apocalyptic scale and spectacle brings her to challenge the very mechanisms of narrative itself. Nixon also anticipates difficulties with narrating slow violence. "From a narrative perspective," he writes, "such invisible, mutagenic theater is slow paced and open ended, eluding the tidy closure, the containment, imposed by the visual orthodoxies of victory and defeat" (Nixon 6). But Schulman is not so much concerned with questions of readerly attention span and consumer book marketing. Indeed, it is not precisely the pace of slow violence that she seeks to render so much as the *various* forms of "backgrounding"— whether in pace, visibility, proximity, stigmatization, or otherwise— that may all intensify violence through neglect. As I demonstrate, her continual struggle against the backgrounding of people and places necessarily interrupts the very processes of narration. That is, narrative always foregrounds action, characters, or certain kinds of description against a backgrounded setting, soundtrack, or whatever else might be captured by the suggestive phrase "atmosphere." But her own ecologically infused AIDS setting frequently disrupts these foregrounded elements. By continually drawing background into foreground,

Schulman exposes how the very mechanisms of narrative are responsible for both these crises of neglect.

My argument here is both formalist and historical.[xi] On the one hand, backgrounding is a constitutive aspect of narrative and many other, if not all, aesthetic phenomena. As Alex Woloch has lucidly explained, "Narrative meaning takes shape in the dynamic flux of attention and neglect toward the various characters" or objects "locked within the same story" but occupying "radically different positions" (2). On the other hand, this historical period was also defined by terrifying and bewildering encounters with these neglected backgrounds. This was thus a period when, according to Deitering, "a fundamental shift in historical consciousness" emerged with regards to the environment (197). When "you mention the environment," Timothy Morton explains, "you bring it into the foreground… [and it thus] stops being the environment. It stops being That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us. When you think about where your waste goes, your world starts to shrink" (*Ecology Without Nature* 1). While Morton explains *how* this ecological consciousness disrupts the narrative distinction between background and foreground, Deitering gives us a more precise date: "during the 1980s we began to perceive ourselves as inhabitants of a culture defined by its waste" (197). We came to perceive, she continues, "our own complicity in postindustrial ecosystems, both personal and national, which are predicated on pollution and waste" (197). In other words, the apocalyptic imaginary Deitering identifies in this period marked a new relation to environment as both agential (life-threatening) *and* an extension of human agency (wherein these forms of harm took on ethical significance). The new relation to environment that emerged in this historical moment thus challenged the narrative distinction between background and foreground.

Indeed, the foreground/background opposition that Schulman challenges is often, but not always, mapped onto a Human/environment dichotomy. Morton affirms this connection by defining "ecological thought" *as* the very kinds of narrative disruption with which she engages.[xii] Certainly, some stories do foreground nature as a kind of protagonist or major theme and many other stories include humans in their backdrop of "the masses." However, even in these cases, nature is anthropomorphized while the masses become dehumanized.[xiii] In other words, the very Human/environment hierarchy that eco-critics identify as our most pernicious ideological construct is ultimately an *aesthetic* phenomenon evidenced, among other forms, by narrative structuration. Narrative sets up and works through a value system of foreground vs. background, resulting— at least by our own accounts— in the valuation of humans or pseudo-humans as "Human" and the devaluation of extra/non/or not-quite- humans (including all those debased classes of people) as the general "environment."[xiv] In *Time and Narrative*, Paul Ricœur reinforces this "one presupposition [which] commands all the others, namely, that what is ultimately at stake in the case of the structural identity of the narrative function as well as in that of the truth claim of every narrative work, is the temporal character of *human* experience" (*Time and Narrative* vol. 1, 3; emphasis added). In this account, the very possibility of narrative depends upon the organization of human experience. My own impulse, however, is to reverse this relationship— to insist that our ideas about humanness are organized by the foreground/background structure underlying narrative.

Not only is the Human/environment hierarchy coded by this foreground/background value system, however, but narrative also involves what Gérard Genette calls a "*dissymmetry*" of time and space. As he explains, "one can tell a story without any reference to the place of its telling, the location from which it is proffered, but… one cannot tell a story without the

indications of the time of telling in relation to the told" (228). Ricœur also notes this dissymmetry of time and place within narrative itself— not only in relation to the narrator's position— writing that the "world unfolded by every narrative work is always a temporal world" (*Time and Narrative* vol. 1, 3). Time, he continues, "becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal experience" (Ricœur *Time and Narrative* vol. 1, 3). Consequently, background may not only be *de*valued as exploited resource for the functioning of narrative, but the very spatial coordinates underlying this distinction also become *dis*valued as entirely non-existent in the wake of a more primary and necessary temporal action. Schulman's insistence upon backgrounded environment is thus doubly confrontational, interrupting both the system of spatial valuation and the temporal function inherent to narrative.

Many cultural critics have described similar phenomena in terms of the relation between inclusion and exclusion. Like the way recycling transforms backgrounded waste into foregrounded utility, attempts to reclaim excluded groups often do not challenge the underlying logic of disposability that *distinguishes* use-value from waste. As Sarah Ahmed has argued, inclusion can "be a way of sustaining and reproducing a politics of exclusion, where a life sentence for some is a death sentence for others" (163). For instance, Lisa Cacho notes that when ex-President George Bush identified Black Hurricane Katrina victims as "refugees," they were devalued on multiple levels. "However," she argues, "to reclaim entitlement by adamantly denying [this] resemblance… renders less worthy the many refugees who were also Hurricane Katrina victims" (Cacho 14-15). Through this process of inclusion, "other Others" are always pushed out of the perceptual frame (Cacho 15). Moreover, exclusion can also occur through what Yen Le Espiritu calls "differential inclusion" whereby marginalized groups are deemed "integral

only or precisely because of their designated subordinate standing" (47). What appears to be a simple binary between presence and absence is thus complicated by the fact that backgrounded and foregrounded elements are *differentially* present (whether in a perceptual frame or national identity). Consequently, a "recovery can be to re-cover, a covering over… This is why the very promise of inclusion can be the concealment and thus extension of exclusion" (Ahmed 183). In particular, sexism, homophobia, and "racism [are] reproduced by receding from view, becoming an ordinary feature" of one's surroundings (Ahmed 182). The double subordination of background in narrative— either as entirely absent or differentially present— has thus structured the neglect of marginalized people and degraded environments alike.

In my close reading of *People in Trouble*, I identify two ways that artists and activists like Schulman were challenging their own narrative forms by forging these connections between the AIDS epidemic and anthropogenic climate change. Firstly, Schulman blends her descriptions of both crises to highlight, not only their shared historical context or their similar representations in the apocalyptic imaginary of this period, but also their emergence from the same underlying logic of disposability which produces waste through neglect. Secondly, as I have already discussed, this neglect results from narrative structuration. Schulman thus continually draws her ecologically infused AIDS background into the foreground— not to fully or permanently *reclaim* these neglected people and places, but rather to challenge the very narrative processes which have entailed this neglect in the first place. Indeed, by the end, very little from the main action has been resolved. We are left with only these once backgrounded elements— the yet untold deaths of AIDS and poverty, the "dirt and garbage" comprising New York's somehow still beautiful scenery, and the now politically organized masses demanding public acknowledgement (Schulman 221).

One striking example of this last point comes at the very end of the novel when Kate's character arc flattens out, short-circuiting back to her political orientation at the start. Mid-way through the novel, we are promised an epiphany when Kate reflects that she and Peter "often prided themselves on how radical they were. They were artists, after all, and not stockbrokers… Their lifestyle was their politics in action. But… that all seemed rather superficial [now]. She realized… that there was something repulsive at the base of this kind of thinking" (Schulman 165). Her politico-spiritual transformation seems finally complete when, at the climax of this novel, Kate decides to set her instillation piece "People in Trouble" ablaze after she learns it has been commissioned by Ronald Horne, a real-estate developer eerily like the real-life mogul Donald Trump— both of whom contributed to the gentrification process in New York's high AIDS incidence neighborhoods (Schulman *GM* 36). Retreating into "her collage" where he is "wrapped by her images," Horne meets "a fiery death" in front of an angry mass of "Justice" protestors who are marked with pink triangles in the vein of ACT UP (Schulman 221). However, when this improvised performance demonstration makes front-page headlines, coverage of the protests themselves are drowned out (once again, apocalyptic fire and brimstone obscures the voices of those most marginalized). Subsequently, Kate is coopted by the celebrity culture of the art industry and begins a lucrative world tour to restage her AIDS-activist sabotage (which, significantly in my opinion, bears no resemblance to any actual events in the history of AIDS activism but rather to the emerging tactics of "ecotage" in radical environmentalism). Kate's failed political awakening reminds readers that the actions and motivations of individuals are not enough to effect substantive change.

Like Kate's self-transformation, her romantic relationships with Molly and Peter also fizzle out undramatically. "For a few weeks after the [fiery] event," we are told belatedly in the

final chapter, “Molly had vague thoughts of seeing Kate again but had never acted on it and eventually any desire toward her had faded, naturally. She wasn’t even provoked by curiosity as Kate developed a high profile as a result of Horne’s death” (Schulman 225). Molly is later mildly annoyed when she bumps into Peter and learns that he too “had another girlfriend,” even back when she and Kate had been “running around protecting [his] ego” (Schulman 226). In a novel ostensibly about a love triangle, little concern is mustered for the fact that neither Molly nor Peter “end up with the girl.” Likewise, even the personal life-and-death dramas of most supporting characters with AIDS are only related briefly and retrospectively: “Both Fabian and Daisy were dead by Thanksgiving… They both died angry” (Schulman 226). Ultimately, the novel refuses the tidy closure of its conversion, romance, *and* sentimental plotlines— all of which tend to develop through a linear and insular main action.

Instead, Schulman returns to the collective actions of groups like ACT UP. Her novel ends with another Justice meeting, comprised of members who feel both exhausted and determined. “Suffering can be stopped,” James assures the room, “But it can never be avenged, so survivors watch television. Men die, their lovers wait to get sick. People eat garbage or worry about their careers. Some lives are more important than others. Some deaths are shocking, some invisible. We are a people in trouble. We do not act” (Schulman 228). Kruger reads this speech as a testament to the “viable political force” of collective action even “as personal energies wane” (Kruger 294), a message which is also expressed by the narrative structure writ large. For, as the novel’s personal plotlines fade away, the once backgrounded mass of afflicted people dubbed “Justice” finally emerge as the novel’s true protagonist. This final act of narrative intervention— the self-organization of backgrounded elements (a mass into a collectivity) and their resultant imposition upon the foreground— replicates the historical formation of ACT UP

which frequently "used theatre and performance to intervene in the crisis of AIDS" (Román xiii). But, overwhelmingly, critical responses to this scene have missed that Schulman remarks explicitly on the mechanics of narrative. We are told in the final sentence that "everyone went to Saint Vincent's because there was nothing more to say" (Schulman 228). Schulman here dramatizes the inevitable conclusion of her exhausting assault on narrative structure: if the incursions of background against foreground can only redraw but not erase the lines of disposability then, by the end, Schulman too has "nothing more to say." She offers no single counter-narrative, no final correction to a specific set of narratives, but only an ongoing struggle with the forces of narrative itself.

In what remains of this chapter, I focus my close readings on *People in Trouble* to demonstrate how Schulman interrupts the function of her own narrative in three primary ways. Firstly, her settings take on the attributes of a protagonist. Through this anthropomorphism, environments gain agential power over, and thus moral responsibility for, the direction of plot. Conversely, characters often merge with scenery. While these characters appear to lose their individual definition and agency, they are nevertheless absorbed into a powerful firmament of backgrounded elements— the nature and constitution of which continues to transform throughout the novel as if guided by its own plot. Finally, both narrative description and character dialogue frequently reflect upon these two practices, which I turn to as evaluations worthy of critical attention in themselves. Following my close readings, I trace other examples of literature from the 1990s which similarly connect the AIDS crisis with anthropogenic climate change. My contention is that, while Schulman represents a particularly compelling example, the 1980s and 90s were defined by this aesthetic transformation more broadly. Significantly, this conclusion necessitates a re-emplotment of historical process. For, connections between AIDS

activism and environmentalism were rarely conscious or explicit, and members from both groups sometimes engaged in fierce public conflict or, more often, avoided each other altogether (especially as they came to be aligned with urban and "natural" spaces respectively and thus rarely found themselves within the same physical environments). Like Schulman's agential settings, then, my historical arguments rest on the confused and raucous *context* out of which both these political projects were forming. It is not that a surge in environmentalism reoriented the vision of AIDS activism or vice versa, but rather that our limits and modes of perception were changing in ways significant for both political projects— a distinctly *aesthetic* revolution.

Schulman contributes to this altered perception, in part, by personifying the New York City backdrop and thus drawing it alongside other primary characters into the foreground of her main action. As Kruger has observed, "Emphasizing the city's intimate connection to its inhabitants, Schulman anthropomorphizes it as an 'organic' body that closely mirrors the misery of those human bodies it contains" (260-261). For example, explaining his lighting techniques for "*The Malling of America*, a musical about urban sprawl," Peter adopts language from the medical and natural sciences to describe the cancerous developments in Midwestern suburbs:

> he decided to add some *sickly* pink to stand in for the car exhaust. These generic cities, Peter knew, were ugly clumps of buildings hacked apart by the inevitable interstate. Putting highways through the middle of cities bored a hole in something *organic* that could never be repaired. The light had to reflect the lack of clarity, everything under a huge shadow. There would be no natural light, just stores with neon and fluorescent show windows with cars constantly whizzing by, a light source in perpetual motion. (Schulman 130; emphasis added)

Diagnosing the setting as "sickly," a damaged "organic" life, Peter's imagery also suggests infestation (city planners who parasitically "bored a hole" and cars which, like insects, go "whizzing by") as well as toxicity ("car exhaust" and his choice of unnatural shadowy light). As a lighting designer— the immaterial stuff which differentiates and contours space— Peter is

especially attuned to the power and personality of setting. “If you look at the light,” he explains, “you can’t see the light. You have to look at its effects on objects. The whirling white and red on top of a police car is meaningless without the faces it stripes” (Schulman 171). Likewise, narrative backgrounds are only meaningful because they reveal and situate whatever is to be foregrounded— a hierarchy of meaning and use-value that Schulman relentlessly attacks.

Elsewhere, Peter similarly associates the New York City landscape with a living body in a way that momentarily alters this relation of background and foreground. Running the “strip of land along the Hudson River where developers were demolishing the piers,” he considers how important it is *“to have flat, open space by the waterfront*” (Schulman 27; original emphasis). Merging his own consciousness with this space, he becomes “lost in the feeling of the open city over his left shoulder and the sea breeze on his right” (Schulman 27). “He was having a good run,” Schulman continues,

> until the air between him and water started to get more complicated and cluttered with the beginnings of various constructions. There were ditches, then pipes and strips of metal until, surprisingly, there was no more water at all. Instead he came upon an incongruous addition to the island of Manhattan. It was stuck on like some clumsy extension or unsightly tumor that had grown where the borough was once sleek and symmetrical. The sign said: Welcome to Downtown City, Ronald Horne, Developer. (27)

The city is personified as a living body, consumed by the tumorous growths of gentrification, reflecting how Ronald Horne and his likeness Donald Trump measured the profits of real-estate by kaposi’s sarcoma and other signs of AIDS related cancers. “This week many of you received eviction notices from Ronald Horne’s development company,” a *Justice* member explains later, “This is the man who has warehoused thousands of empty apartments while ninety thousand people live in the subways and stairwells and public bathrooms of this city. Now… he has purposely bought buildings with more than fifty percent gay tenants in the hope that we will drop

dead and leave him with empty apartments" (118). Schulman exposes just how disposable these men were made to be, not only in the medical and media industries, but also through New York's housing and leasing policies whereby spaces acquired new value as their inhabitants were marked for death. In this way, gay men and PWAs were quite literally aligned with and *as* their spatial surroundings, their presence only considered valuable as near-absence.

Wielding a medical and biological vocabulary, Schulman thus highlights these connections between the life of New York and the lives of those who inhabit it— the city emerges as a living body in Peter's reflections and PWAs are reduced to empty space in Horne's speculative real-estate ventures. At the same time, by anthropomorphizing her cityscape, Schulman redefines the direction and agency over her plot. Indeed, there are moments when characters seem to move and act at the behest of their surroundings. "Kate thought she was going straight home from the restaurant," Schulman writes, "but then decided on the studio but ended up back at the funeral instead" (Schulman 99). Both Kate and Peter become "ambulance chasers," which is to say that they voyeur at whatever AIDS funerals they stumble upon (Schulman 97). Earlier, for example, Peter sneaks into the funeral of a stranger but is forced out "by the literal 'closeness' of the air and by the figurative 'closeness' of realities— homosexuality, AIDS— he finds threatening" (Kruger 269). "He inhaled the incense and felt again how still the air was," Schulman writes,

> It barely circulated. The smell was beginning to be overpowering, stifling actually. Peter felt faint and sat down abruptly in the nearest pew. Even though he tried repeatedly to relax, he just couldn't breathe. His lungs would not fill with air, so he left as quietly and respectfully as he had come, stepping back into an almost oppressive heat, only able to take a deep breath a few blocks away. (33)

Beyond the (now compulsive) references to "oppressive heat," this passage also exemplifies how Schulman's setting powerfully dictates the actions of characters and the direction of plot.

Likewise, Schulman provides a snapshot of how the extreme summer heatwaves, which were becoming associated with climate change in the late 1980s, altered the lifeways of New York City residents. "All summer," she writes,

> every single person had been uncomfortable. It was not unusual for the city to smell of baking garbage and decomposing bodies. But most New Yorkers found a point each season when they begrudgingly accepted the heat. They no longer tried to defy it. They picked out the air-conditioned subway cars, knew which banks to stop in to cool off between the subway and work. They slowed down their pace of accomplishment in order to accommodate it. But this summer had been different. There had been a suffocating brutality that seemed brand-new. It was the absolute lack of relief that put each person into a private state of wondering if it would ever get cool again. This year Peter noticed that the air had stayed so warm there was a creeping sensation of melting polar ice caps and a lot of speculation about the greenhouse effect as seasons came to an end as a concept. (Schulman 26)

Not only do Schulman's characters follow the design and dictates of her setting, but also the general crowds who comprise her backgrounds. Reaching the full height of anthropomorphism, moreover, the city finally begins to express itself— both in the graffiti art that *Justice* stencils to attract members as well as their public displays of direct-action protest and mourning. The latter prompts Kate to reflect how "*These people at the funeral came into her mind like a sentence"* (Schulman 100). Setting thus controls the emotions and actions of other characters but also engages in forms of dialogue with them as well.

Frequently, setting absorbs these other characters altogether. While Horne's assessment renders PWAs interchangeable with empty space, other examples can be more positive. Peter, for example, feels pride and pleasure when his clothes are soaked by his own "sweat and covered in the city's filth. He was happy. He was a dirty, sweaty man" (Schulman 29). He also admires the power of those *Justice* members who can blend into the crowd by simply covering their shirts stenciled with pink triangles. "Once those shirts were covered," he reflects, "they stopped looking like gay men with AIDS. They looked just like everyone else. *That*, thought Peter, *is*

their most effective trick" (Schulman 57; original emphasis). Just as Schulman achieves in her own narrative process, this transition between foreground and background offers the most political potential. Performing this switch brings to light the very narrative mechanisms that solidify the neglect of certain people and places. It is not possible to obliterate the distinctions between foreground and background just as Molly reminds us that "There are a lot of deprived people in this city… You have to know where they stop and you begin" (Schulman 141). In fact, the novel itself is structured by the alternating viewpoints of Molly, Kate, and Peter in each chapter. Eventually, however, each character's voice echoes and blurs into the others. In particular, Kate repeats Peter's romantic lines to Molly. And, in turn, she adopts Molly's political opinions when fighting with Pete. By the end, it becomes increasingly unclear where Kate stops and the others begin. Kate's failed political awakening suggests that this attempt to assimilate, this attempt to fully blur the lines between background and foreground, is either ineffective or impossible. In the end, we are left instead with Molly's strong identity and her exhausted commitment to continue the work of political intervention.

Despite Schulman's mocking disdain for their hypocrisy and ignorance, her tone is always patient with Peter and Kate; she even makes them the spokespeople for what seem to be some of her own theories about artistic technique and meaning. Meanwhile, as the author surrogate, Molly takes the role of political critic and advocate, frequently checking Kate's unquestioned faith in the power of art. Kate proudly shares with Molly that "more and more artists are doing work about AIDS… artwork is very political. It teaches people to see things in a new way. My artwork is my political work. Form is content. New forms are revolutionary" (Schulman 113). "I don't think you would be satisfied with that explanation if it was happening to you," Molly replies (Schulman 113). Ironically, Molly's doubts about the political efficacy of

art reflect Schulman's combative relationship with her own narrative form. Both character and author are keenly aware of the complicated and frequently ambivalent relationship between art and politics. Aesthetics do not only bring political critique to light but, at the deepest level, also organize the politics of neglect. On the one hand, Schulman has reflected that "[r]eading a book may help someone decide to take action," presumably one of the motivations that brought her to write *People in Trouble* at the height of the New York AIDS epidemic (*My American History* 196). On the other hand, she has always insisted that "it is not the same thing as taking action… The image created by the male intellectual model of an enlightened elite who claim that its artwork *is* its political work is parasitic and useless for us" (*My American History* 196-197). The perceptual revolution Kate heralds reflects the ecological consciousness which was emerging in this period and which is exemplified by this novel. And yet, both Molly and Schulman voice their concern for what art cannot do alone and for what it actively participates in neglecting. Indeed, the political significance of this perceptual revolution was in its *combative* relationship with the backgrounding inherent to aesthetic form.

As I have hitherto demonstrated, Schulman combines imagery of AIDS and ecological catastrophe in her background setting which then wreaks havoc upon her foreground action— a two-pronged approach to counter narratives of disposability through both content and form. *People in Trouble* thus exemplifies what Morton has called "ambient poetics." As he explains,

> Ambience is a poetic enactment of a state of nondual awareness that collapses the subject-object division, upon which depends the aggressive territorialization that precipitates ecological destruction. Furthermore, this collapse of subject-object dualism, however temporary in experience, spontaneously gives rise to howsoever weak a sense of warmth towards one's world, in which one is included. This world, to say more, is a world without center or edge that includes everything. Ambient poetics evokes this world by undermining that which Jacques Derrida calls the fundamental metaphysical distinction between inside and outside. (Morton "Why Ambient Poetics?" 52)

The literary examples through which Morton develops his theory of ambient poetics belong to a very specific historical period and formal tradition: English Romantic fiction and French Symbolist poetry. Yet, Morton first describes ambient poetics as a "state of consciousness… appropriate to an age of global warming" ("Why Ambient Poetics?" 52). I thus turn to literature of the 1990's and, in particular, those works like *People in Trouble* that extend this critique of environmental neglect to encompass the same forces which have produced what Zygmunt Bauman calls "wasted human lives."

Schulman began drawing these connections between the AIDS epidemic and anthropogenic climate change early and in ways, as I have noted, which take the structure of narrative directly to task. Still, I believe that she represents only one example of what was becoming a general trend throughout this period. Perhaps most famously, Tony Kushner's two-part play about the early AIDS epidemic, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*, has received fair attention from eco-critics in recent years. Indeed, after referencing ozone depletion, the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, and toxic snow, the play's titular "angels" foresee our apocalyptic future: "When morning blisters crimson/ And bears all life away,/ A tidal wave of protean fire/ That curls around the planet/ And bares the Earth clean as bone" (Kushner 5: 278). One character in particular gives the play its "green voice"— Harper, a Valium addict and the jilted wife of closeted Mormon lawyer Joe Pitt. Harper has also been much disdained and ignored by theatre critics because her strange prophetic visions seem largely irrelevant to the play's general plot or major themes unless viewed through an ecocritical lens. For example, she warns us early on that "Over Antarctica. Skin burns, birds go blind, icebergs melt. The world's coming to an end" (1:28). For most critics, the disorganized speech patterns and Kubla Khanian descriptions of these monologs prove that they are merely Valium-induced fantasies divorced

from the play's main action. Whether Valium-induced or not, her visions of ecological destruction certainly do impinge upon the main action of the play in a way reminiscent of Schulman's disruptive settings. Not only do these writers connect the AIDS crisis with anthropogenic climate change, then, but they also both challenge the background/foreground structure of narrative itself.

More critics should take note of the fact that *Angels* ends with another speech from Harper, a rather clear indication that her green visions are significant to the meaning and intended effect of the play. Finally committed to leaving her husband, she looks out an airplane window and remembers:

> I saw something only I could see, because of my astonishing ability to see such things: Souls were rising, from the earth far below, souls of the dead, of people who had perished, from famine, from war, from the plague [perhaps AIDS]...And the souls of these departed joined hands, clasped ankles, and formed a web, a great net of souls, and the souls were three-atom oxygen molecules, the stuff of ozone, and the outer rim absorbed them and was repaired. (Kushner 5:285)

Katie Hogan reads this speech as a climactic moment of "queer green rapture… focused on a communal ecological repairing of the wounded world" (242). This net of souls "transforms and restores the 'ragged' and 'torn' ozone through collective effort" which symbolizes "marginalized people's collective work based in environmental struggle" (242-43). Like the meeting of beleaguered Justice members which ends Schulman's novel, Kushner's final scene offers a vision of collective action. Both writers, moreover, turn to a newly developing ecological imaginary to critique the practices of neglect that have also rendered PWAs a disposable class.

Most importantly, though, both writers directly challenge the *narrative* operations that underly these shared practices of neglect— a point which has gone entirely unnoticed, even by eco-critics concerned with the play. "By focusing on multiple issues and histories through a diverse group of gay and straight characters," Hogan writes in "Green *Angels in America*,"

"Kushner's play foregrounds AIDS, racism, queer citizenship, and environmental destruction as *central* national issues, challenging the legal, political, and economic structures that have relegated these social justice issues to the closets and margins of American life" (5; original emphasis). Hogan's focus on legal, political, and economic structures does not preclude Kushner's direct engagement with *narrative* structure, however. Indeed, in another essay, "Queer Green Apocalypse: Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*," Hogan develops "an eco-feminist queer perspective on this play [that] directs our attention to Kushner's innovative use of the apocalyptic imaginary— a form routinely centered on the destruction of the earth and the demonization of LGBTs" (236). This is also the point I made about *People in Trouble* at the beginning of this chapter and from which I delved into Schulman's combative relationship with narrative in general. Like Schulman, "In Kushner's imagination, the apocalypse [offers] a way to link the publicly *ignored* violence of AIDS to the ongoing reality of the equally *ignored* environmental deterioration that surrounds us" (Hogan 236; emphasis added). Hogan thus observes the very same connection between Kushner's reconstitution of the apocalyptic genre and his refusal of neglect that I also find in Schulman's novel. From my perspective, however, this adaptation of genre brings both writers into a struggle with narrative structure itself.

Significantly, both texts were created within the very same historical and ideological context. Part one of Kushner's play premiered 1991 in San Francisco, followed by part two in Los Angeles a year later, and then a Broadway opening in 1993. Meanwhile, Schulman published her three AIDS-related novels *People in Trouble* (1990), *Empathy* (1992), and *Rat Bohemia* (1995)— all engaging with the ecological imaginaries and forms of ambient poetics which I have hitherto described. Also bookending this period were the publications of Derek Jarman's journal *Modern Nature* in 1991 and Jan Zita Grover's memoir *North Enough: AIDS*

and Other Clear-Cuts in 1997. In her chapter "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies," Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands highlights the way "both first-person accounts… of intimate and world-changing relationships with AIDS and death (Grover was a caregiver in San Francisco in the late 1980s and early 1990s; Jarman died from AIDS-related illness in 1994), are also active engagements with and meditations on the natural world" (334). Through this reading, she finds that new diagnoses of "eco-grief" belong to the same libidinal economy as what Douglas Crimp has called the melancholia of AIDS devastation.

Like the examples I have hitherto discussed, these texts do not simply link AIDS and environmental losses but rather engage in a relentless assault against narrative process. For example, Jarman's memoir is structured by a series of diary entries which shatter the linear progression of plot with sudden gaps, fluctuating perspectives, and anecdotal tangents. Each entry bursts, moreover, with detailed descriptions of his Dungeness garden overlooking a nuclear power plant. The meditative effect parallels Schulman's extended pauses and lateral movements but, *Modern Nature* reaches beyond prose altogether. "The sun came out at four casting the longest shadows," Jarman writes poetically, "I watched the shadow of Prospect Cottage as the sun set behind the nuclear power station, until the tip of the chimney touched the sea" (13). He continues,

> Power hums along the lines
> to keep the fish and chips a-frying.
> In the sunset across the shingle
> I hear a voice:
> *Will the owner of car HXJ please...*
> It's been a quiet day.
> I've brewed my nuclear tea,
> mended the walls to keep the storms at bay.
> At nine-thirty the sun sets behind Lydd church;
> The night stock scents the air.
> At ten I switch the lantern on;

a bright pink moth shimmers on the pale blue wall.
I quickly turn the pages of my book:
Small Elephant Hawk. (Jarman 13)

The poem transforms an after-the-fact to-do list into a triumph of imagist poetry by isolating and juxtaposing what Ezra Pound called the "luminous details" of quotidian objects.

Both these genres detach sequence from narrative development to highlight *dis*continuity. In the to-do-list, events are separated into a series of distinct and thus more easily achievable tasks which may be completed in a variety of orders. In imagist poetry, a single moment is extracted from a narrative whole which would otherwise eclipse its experiential depth and vibrancy. Whether achievable tasks or luminous details, the items in these sequences acquire new and increased significance as they are pulled from narrative. Thus, modifying William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," one could say that, in Jarman's poem, "so much depends upon a brew of nuclear tea." Oscillating between, or even blending, the images of industrial waste and daily comfort, Jarman experiments with the politics of aesthetic presence whereby value is conferred upon whatever emerges distinctly within the poetic frame. In *Vibrant Matter,* Jane Bennett notices a similar relationship between presence and value when she finds a configuration of "glove-pollen-rat-cap-stick" in a street gutter. In her narrative perspective, these items are "*vibratory*— at one moment disclosing themselves as dead stuff and at the next as live presence: junk, then claimant; inert matter, then live wire" (5; emphasis added). By foregrounding these objects in her aesthetic vision, she thus salvages them from near non-existence as "trash."

Bennett is toying here with the most fundamental light-switch of ontology, what Martin Heidegger famously called the binary between *equipment* (or, "ready-to-hand" objects) and *things* (or, "present-at-hand" objects). As Graham Harman has described this phenomenon, when

we are not focused on their qualitative Being, "*things* withdraw from presence into their dark subterranean reality" as *equipment* (*Tool-Being* 2; emphasis added).[xv] In Jarman's poem, the luminous details of industrial and quotidian objects (both of which are generally "ready-to-hand" in our daily lives) become "present-at-hand" as they are pulled from what would otherwise be the "equipment" of a larger narrative whole. For Harman, however, presence and withdrawal are not effects of the human mind but rather inherent to the objects themselves. Indeed, not only does the poet bring a present-at-hand attention to these objects of industrial waste, but their juxtaposition with other objects of daily comfort enliven their presence as well— hence the way "power lines" find new purpose for "frying fish" or how the setting sun spreads a chimney's shadow across the sea. Each object taps into a face of another's Being whereby value may be conferred to humming powerlines and nuclear radiation independent of our own preferences. Far from a psychological peculiarity, then, this binary opposition structures the existence of everything in our world. Ontology and aesthetics are thus coextensive in that Being depends upon arrangement, relation, and (not only human) perception.

Like all aesthetic phenomena, then, this binary of presence and withdrawal also structures Jarman's poetry. Nevertheless, without a precedent established by plot trajectory, Jarman can shift very rapidly between these various objects in a way reminiscent of Bennett's fluctuation between "trash" and "glove-pollen-rat-cap-stick." Like Schulman's constant incursions of background into foreground, Jarman's imagist list cannot finally put an end to this deepest of ontological rifts. And, yet, their exhaustive "vibrations" between background and foreground, to use Bennett's phrase, bring this very binary opposition to light. While they cannot do away with neglect once and for all, as many have sought to accomplish through the promise of "counter-narratives," Jarman, Kushner, and Schulman nevertheless bring a present-at-hand attention to the

aesthetic structure of neglect itself. And, significantly, this task destabilizes the extended structural coherence required for narrative unity (an effect which is most evident in Jarman's near-total narrative breakdown, but which is still observable in Schulman's narrative interruptions and tangents).

Many other artists were highlighting similar connections between AIDS casualties and the natural environment during this period, including David Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintigration* (1991) and his print *Untitled (Buffalos)* (1988-1989), Richard Briggs's documentary *AIDS in Rural America* (1990), Vance Bourjaily's novel *Old Soldier* (1990), Michael Cunningham's novel *A Home at the End of the World* (1990), and Geoff Ryman's novel *Was* (1992). All these examples also, tellingly, trouble their own narrative process through various techniques which parallel the ones I have hitherto described. These foundational connections between AIDS activism and environmentalism have been largely forgotten (even by those who have belatedly sought to introduce the field of "queer ecology") because little critical attention has been paid to the underlying aesthetic transformations that gave rise to these political projects.

However, AIDS activists and artists may or may not have been forging these connections with the environment intentionally. Kushner repeats the term "ozone" throughout his play more explicitly, but Schulman herself would not publish the phrase "global warming" until her second AIDS novel. Nevertheless, "toxicity," "poison," and "garbage" are among the terms which are most common to all these writers. With imprecise denotation and far-reaching connotations, these terms point to the vague and confused sense of ecological threat permeating this historical moment. The rigors of scientific method may have led to discoveries in ozone depletion and global warming, but the *affective* experiences of these multiple and interrelated threats were

better expressed by more familiar and generalizable concepts. This was a *cultural* atmosphere in which the realities and risks of *Earth's* atmosphere became suddenly but still only hazily perceptible. Schulman connects these literal and figurative "atmospheres" when she writes of global warming that "There was so much bad news in the *air* and on people's faces" (*Empathy* 37; emphasis added). To capture this ill-defined coming-into-consciousness, these writers thus mobilized an ambiguous and metonymic vocabulary. Meanwhile, most environmental activists and artists were less inclined to mention AIDS or, if they did, it was often to reaffirm the disposability of PWAs. For example, John Barry recounts an infamous chapter in the American environmentalist movement when a member of the radical activist group EarthFirst! published a letter in 1986 that described AIDS as a happy coincidence and a welcome solution to the problem of over-population. Adopting the pertinent pseudonym "Miss Ann Thropy," the author wrote that, "If radical environmentalists were to invent a disease to bring human population back to ecological sanity, it would probably be something like AIDS…if the AIDS epidemic didn't exist, radical environmentalists would have to create one" (qtd. In Barry 139).

Such a callous and ill-conceived vision of AIDS as the solution to surplus population echoed in various forms across medical discourse as well. Especially in epidemiology, moreover, searches for disease "origin" often led researchers to blame immigration and globalization trends which, significantly, have also been critical targets for those concerned with environmental disequilibrium. In *Contagion and Chaos*, for example, Andrew Price-Smith takes the global AIDS pandemic as evidence that "poverty... ecological change, trade, migration, natural disasters, and war may... serve as disease amplifiers" (159). Ultimately then, I echo Hogan that

> The environmental justice movement's redefinition of the environment did not… intend to include LGBT communities and environments... in its work. Nonetheless, the changes in perception and definition of nature and environment that the movement has wrought could assist queer theorists, activists, and artists...

> in their creative and political efforts to overturn the 'against nature' idea so often leveled at LGBT citizens. ("Green Angels in America: Aesthetics of Equity" 5)

Beyond this normative claim about how LGBT communities should be engaging with the legacy and contemporary organization of environmental politics, however, I have demonstrated throughout this chapter that such ecologically motivated "changes in perception and definition" were not *only* the purview of environmentalists even during the 1980s and 90s.

Rather, AIDS activists and artists were also propelled by, as well as contributing to, this aesthetic revolution against zones and practices of neglect. References to global warming, ozone depletion, polluted air, and littered streets throughout these examples suggest that our startling encounters with what Anna Tsing calls "blasted landscapes" and our growing sense of what Morton calls ecological "enmeshment" provoked, at least in part, the ethical demands being made by and on behalf of PWAs (3; *TET* 124). As was being acknowledged in environmentalism, that is, AIDS activists like Schulman were also beginning to say "Doing nothing is a position. It means giving approval without having to actively say so" (*People* 165). Meanwhile, such responses to the AIDS crisis also problematized the common-sense opposition between humans and nature that often dominated even the most radical camps of the environmentalist movement. Scientific discoveries in HIV and AIDS research sparked new definitions of "life" that were non-binary and blurry. This tragic reminder about the precarity and malleability of (even) human life also involved a renewed interest in the question of whether viruses are lifeforms. Meanwhile, at the same time PWAs were feared precisely for being *human* vectors of disease, they were also being marked as "'human waste,' or more correctly, wasted humans" (Bauman 5). This slippage between humans and objects is, as I have already discussed, a signature effect of disposability discourse. Strikingly, though, the AIDS literature I have canvassed does not attempt to "re-enchant the human" in the words of Sylvia Wynter, but rather

draws attention to the ambivalence, violence, and arbitrariness of this classificatory system— a lesson more recently adopted within the field of eco-criticism and the environmentalist movement more broadly.

In other words, like "the history of AIDS [which] has no set point of origin" and like the history of global warming for which the "very idea of points of origin is an agrilogistic hallucination" (Román xiv; Morton *Dark Ecology* 66), this aesthetic revolution was not the sole accomplishment of any one political group or project. Indeed, rather than purely or even mostly a *political* transformation, I understand this ecological consciousness as an aesthetic intervention— a creative yet, ultimately, irresolvable assault upon the binary of presence and withdrawal which structures narrative but also entails neglect. In what remains of this chapter, then, I want to reconceive the historical relationship between queer and eco-critical theory as well as offer a reconstituted history of AIDS and environmental activism— charting these contemporary political movements, not through their coalitional or causal relationship with one another, but by turning to their shared context. Hence, we can also observe the value of understanding disposability as a logic rather than as a discrete and thus historically-bound set of economic or political mechanisms (which I view as the *effects* of this underlying logic). The neglect of both PWAs and non-human environments, which would otherwise appear to be mere coincidence, follows from the ontological rift between presence and withdrawal which, while omnipresent, was taken up politically in this historical moment because of the way these PWAs and non-human environments asserted themselves within as well as against the limits of our perception.

This shift in agency occurred when, like the research conducted on AIDS, studies on climate change were beginning to unsettle boundaries between human responsibility and natural

consequence. Viral epidemics are, indeed, natural disasters and, yet, they are often perceived as "human-instigated" disasters. In the case of AIDS, this stigmatization and victim-blaming became "the dirty little story of gay male promiscuity and irresponsibility" (Crimp 50). In the case of climate change, spikes in wild fires, droughts, floods, and hurricanes were increasingly traced to practices of human consumption and waste. While AIDS altered the function and configuration of human bodies, many became concerned that climate change could pose similar threats to the world's ecosystems writ large. Both climate change and AIDS were, moreover, being conceived as crises of neglect. Throughout the 1980s, demands for urgent policy measures were continually sidelined by government officials and scientific organizations who often called for more "research" on both crises instead.[xvi] The administration of President Ronald Reagan was thus a shared target of accusation for AIDS and environmental activists alike.[xvii] Both groups also embraced direct-action political tactics— the corollary of ACT UP might have been Earth First! which was established in 1980 but significantly radicalized in the same year of 1987. Like ACT UP, Earth First! employed a variety of in-your-face protest methods, including civil disobedience, guerilla performance, and "ecotage" which names the sabotage of equipment used for clear cutting, road-building, and dam construction. While no AIDS activists did anything akin to these newly dubbed acts of "eco-terrorism," Larry Kramer— often mythologized as the founder of ACT UP— did advocate (perhaps jokingly) for a "new phase [of] terrorism… whether it means burning buildings or killing people or setting fire to yourselves" (qtd. in Getlin, n.p.).

The theatrical tactics of both age-defining activist groups followed from their conviction that America must be awakened to a pernicious but unrealized form of systemic injustice: neglect as a mode disposability governance. Simon Watney wrote in 1987 that "some two million British

lesbians and gay men… have been tacitly regarded for the last five and more years as more or less disposable in our entirety" (63). "Indeed," he continued, an AIDS education campaign was only launched because of "the belated recognition" that HIV is simply "a virus, and as such can affect anyone regardless of their sexuality" (Watney 63). As Glenn Schellenberg and Sandra Bem similarly explained in 1998, the statement "anyone can get AIDS" essentially means "that people whose lives matter also get AIDS, which might actually reinforce the idea that the lives of gay men and IV-drug users are disposable" (78). More recent research also bears out this relationship between the logic of disposability and AIDS policy inaction. For example, in "'Disposable populations': the CSME, HIV and AIDS," Robert Carr and R. Anthony Lewis observe how poor women with AIDS in Guyana continue to experience these forms of neglect. Victoria L. Harris claims the same can be said for incarcerated populations across the United States in her article "Society's Disposable People: HIV Serostatus, Sexual Orientation, and [the] Incarcerated." As a term associated with both capital accumulation and literal trash, "disposability" clearly places the injustice of AIDS inaction within an ecological imaginary. But these connections were drawn even more explicitly by scholars in the burgeoning fields of ecocriticism and queer theory, both of which became officially recognized and self-organized in the early 1990s.[xviii]

Michael Clark's[xix] work on queer eco-criticism linked both intellectual movements from their inception. The neglect of people with AIDS, he claimed, involves a process of "*dis*valuing which strips away all value and which thereby leads to exclusion and disposability— to being acceptable for extinction" (Clark 34; original emphasis). His language recalls the contemporaneous fears of species extinction— an ecological sensibility which he details more fully as follows:

> Especially for those of us who are gay men or lesbians, disvaluation, exclusion, and disposability must also factor into ecological analysis, in addition to devaluation, exploitation, and domination, because we see our society virtually willing to throw away our earth, our home, as well as because we carry within our collective memory an awareness of just how often human beings themselves have been treated as expendable and disposable. In the history of the gay and lesbian communities, never has our own expendability been so evident as in the rising incidence of anti-gay/lesbian violence and particularly in the AIDS health crisis. The same value hierarchy that insists that nature is reducible to expendable resources also insists on dichotomizing innocent and not-innocent victims of AIDS… Our expendability mitigates the urgency of cure or treatment. And the experience of our expendability becomes a paradigmatic metaphor for western culture's attitudes toward all the earth. (Clark 34-35)

Queer theory and eco-criticism are thus kindred responses to disposability which Clark associates with capitalism. While people with AIDS fall outside the utilitarian (re)productive framework, the natural environment becomes extracted and commodified as natural resource. The ideological apparatus that disvalues the former is thus the same one that degrades the latter.

Drawing these connections in the early development of both fields, Clark's work challenges the now typical associations between queerness and abstracted ephemeral space. "For many theorists of sexuality and the built environment," explain Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed,[xx] "'queer space' is insistently cast in the present" (74). Their concern is with memorializing queer history in urban spaces, but they also echo many eco-critics who have decried how this radical presentism precludes any possibility for environmental politics. For example, Greg Garrard critiques Lee Edelman— a paradigmatic figure of this "anti-social" queer posture— as follows:

> *No Future*, Lee Edelman's possibly unwitting extensio ad absurdum of queer theory... is a thoroughgoing rejection of the idea of the future itself... Edelman's central contention [is] that queers should accept the position allocated to them by their most vitriolic enemies as figures of and for the "death drive," and reject the very idea of futurity embodied in the Child...Having been defined as anti-procreative... *No Future* urges queers to live up to their billing, saying "[f]uck the

> social order and the Child in whose name we're collectively terrorized"...Fuck also, then, the children's voices… prod[ing] our consciences with proleptic anxiety. But never let that resistance ossify into anything like a political program— even an anarchic one— because that would betray the radical negativity of the queer. (94-5)

Garrard's reductive equivocation between actual children and the "figure of the Child" notwithstanding, he is correct that Edelman advocates an explicitly anti-programmatic and fiercely presentist stance. Moreover, these "radical" indictments of (re)productive futurity are— within the context of anthropogenic climate change— often merely "apolitical" capitulations to what will literally be "no future" for our world-ecology writ large. However, while Garrard, Castiglia and Reed all paint a rather familiar picture of queer theory as anti-materialist and ahistorical, Clark's ecological visions (and others published in the *UnderCurrents* special issue on "queer nature" in 1994)[xxi] reveal this general trend to have been anything but inevitable.

Indeed, I want to suggest that, if Castiglia and Reed can impute a causal connection onto the overlapping histories of AIDS and queer theory in the United States (145), then similar lines of influence may be drawn between the discoveries in anthropogenic climate change and queer theory. Moreover, just as many queer theorists were highly influenced by their context of ecological catastrophe, some of the most influential eco-critics were responding to the AIDS crisis unfolding around them. Renowned eco-critic Donna Haraway concluded one of her earliest contributions to the field— *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*— with a chapter dedicated to Robert Filomeno (1949-86) "who loved peace and died of AIDS" (203). Here, she unveiled the immune system as a preeminently twentieth-century object of knowledge. It is "a map drawn to guide recognition and misrecognition of self and other in the dialectics of Western biopolitics. That is, the immune system is a plan for meaningful action to construct and maintain the boundaries for what may count as self and other in the crucial realms of the normal

and the pathological" (Haraway 204). Haraway thus first began to formulate her now famous concept of "natureculture" in response to the AIDS epidemic and its assault on the self/other binary underwriting the idea of the immune system.[xxii] Similarly, five years later, in the field-defining anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Deitering connected the AIDS crisis with ecological collapse through the apocalyptic imagery of 1980s literary fiction—an era defined by what she called "a new 'toxic consciousness'" (202; 197).

Just like the similarities between environmentalism and AIDS activism that emerged slightly earlier, these connections between queer and ecocritical theory were neither direct nor overt. Deitering's reference remained concealed in a footnote and Haraway later abandoned the specificity of AIDS as she took up virality more generally as an example of natureculture. Nevertheless, both queer theory and ecocriticism were conceived in a shared context of apocalyptic imagery, out of a heightened awareness to ongoing catastrophe, and against a political climate of neglect. Moreover, the activist precursors to these intellectual movements—exemplified by ACT UP and EarthFirst! respectively— all shared an ethical and strategic vision that opposed this logic of disposability. Thus, I take a cue from the way Schulman's backgrounds redirect and reframe her narrative to consider how highly agential and emotive contexts have done the same for our historical narratives. The lesson is perhaps to disrupt our vision of historical progress or decline by pausing over the rich details and different perceptions of a shared historical context.

Throughout this chapter I have explored how public awareness about the AIDS epidemic and anthropogenic climate change converged in this historical moment— giving rise to a shocking and suddenly pervasive apocalyptic imaginary. Given the shared context of AIDS and climate change activism in this period, as well as the overlapping histories of the intellectual

movements that followed (queer theory and eco-criticism respectively), it should not be surprising that many AIDS activists and artists deployed images of ecological destruction to challenge the way PWAs had been similarly neglected. I have focused on how Schulman forges these connections in her fiction, but I also briefly gestured to other examples of this trend. Beyond these images of ecological destruction, however, AIDS activists and artists *also* began to challenge the very mechanisms of narrative backgrounding that had rendered both PWAs and the natural world disposable. "American life during the conservative Reagan era," Hogan recalls, included "environmental degradations such as global warming, the torn ozone layer, radon gas, Chernobyl, iridium in hot dogs, and relentless right-wing inspired environmental and gay legal rulings" ("Green Angels in America: Aesthetics of Equity" 5). Indeed, this was an era "that *New York Times* critic David Richards aptly called the 'poisonous 1980s'" (Deitering 201).

Yet, while both greenhouse-gas emissions and AIDS incidence increased rapidly, this was also a period when the neglected "refuse" *refused* their positions of neglect. This was thus an era defined by what Fred Moten has called the "resistance of the object" and by what Graham Harman has called "the renewed dignity of *things*" (1; *Tool-Being* 155, original emphasis). Certainly, there were important and incisive demands— even within the literary works I have canvassed— to end the elision between degraded people and places. Nevertheless, there was also an aesthetic revolution underway that exposed and challenged the very logic of disposability which marks this relation to things as a degraded position. Instead of embracing the politics of inclusion and conservation which inevitably re-inscribe this logic, Schulman and others engaged in an assault upon the foreground/background binary that structures their own narratives. While their project is not futile, it is irresolvable— an exhausting politics and aesthetics of intervention

which refuses to let the lines of neglect congeal around any one population or even the Earth itself.

"Narratives of Disposability: Race and Ecology in Contemporary Media"

Chapter 2: Plot and Theme as Different Macrostructural Relations of "Aboutness" in Margaret Atwood's *The Heart Goes Last*

While artists and activists were forcing the American public to confront the AIDS epidemic and global climate change by the mid-1980s, another crisis of disposability was well underway: racialized mass incarceration fueled by Ronald Reagan's adoption of the War on Drugs in 1982. As Michelle Alexander clarifies in *The New Jim Crow*, the increased police surveillance of inner-city communities, the greater latitude in manners of arrest, and the severity of sentencing policies which defined this period were *not* responses to a crack cocaine epidemic as many mistakenly believed. It was only years after Reagan declared his drug war that "crack began to spread rapidly in the poor black neighborhoods of Los Angeles and later emerged in cities across the country" thanks in large part to the illegal smuggling activities of CIA-backed guerrilla armies in Nicaragua (Alexander 5). Like those representations distorting the reality of AIDS, the sensational news coverage of crack in the 1980s and 90s— directly funded by the Reagan administration beginning in 1985— falsely depicted the causes of carceral expansion. "Almost overnight," Alexander writes, "the media was saturated with images of black 'crack whores,' 'crack dealers,' and 'crack babies'— images that seemed to confirm the worst negative racial stereotypes about impoverished inner-city residents. The media bonanza surrounding the 'new demon drug' helped to catapult the War on Drugs from an ambitious federal policy to an actual war" (5). Extending from a long history of similar tropes promulgated during American slavery, the Black Codes, and Jim Crow, this war on drugs fused criminality and Blackness in the public imagination and thereby invited the racial dog-whistling of "tough on crime" policies which continued into the Bush-Clinton presidencies. It should come as no surprise, then, that

Black communities have borne the brunt of this prison crisis. Black men in some states have been imprisoned on drug charges at rates twenty to fifty times higher than those of white men and, in some major cities, up to eighty percent of Black men are subject to legalized discrimination for having criminal records (Alexander 7).

Not simply the result of *increased* drug use, nor even solely the result of racially disproportionate sentencing laws for different *kinds* of drug use (crack versus cocaine for example), carceral expansion was thus fueled by racial stigma and control even before drug addiction became the national crisis that it ultimately did. Indeed, Alexander famously argues that the prison— far from simply "another institution infected with lingering racial bias"— has become "the primary vehicle of racialized social control in the United States" since slavery and segregation (11, 4). But, if carceral expansion was fueled by racial stigma and control (aka "racism"), then this period also inaugurated the prison as a new mechanism of disposability governance. "[F]or the first time in US history," Loïc Wacquant argues, the prison had "been elevated to the rank of main machine for 'race making'" (n.p.). As he explains, "when 'to be a man of colour of a certain economic class and milieu is equivalent in the public eye to being a criminal', being processed by the penal system is tantamount to being made black, and 'doing time' behind bars is at the same time 'marking race'" (Wacquant n.p.). Thus, unlike AIDS inaction and environmental neglect, racialized mass incarceration was driven by decisively active forces— the intentional passage of tough on crime policies, the knowing conflation of Blackness with criminality, and the productive racializing capacities of the carceral system itself— not only by a lack of concern for the economic abandonment and de facto segregation of Black communities. Falling more heavily on the side of doing harm than allowing harm, this convergence of government policy and media coverage has often been eyed conspiratorially.

Even the Urban League reported in 1990 that "the pervasive and insidious nature of the drug problem for the African American community" amounts to "genocide" (qtd. in Alexander 6). Indeed, the CIA not only supported drug cartels which *did* eventually fuel a crack epidemic, but also admitted in 1998 to blocking investigations of "illegal drug networks that were helping to fund its covert war in Nicaragua" (Alexander 6).

Thus, while there is no reason to believe that any illuminati-type puppeteers organized racial genocide, it is plainly evident that government policies were both motivated by, and indifferent to, a long history of anti-Blackness. More recently, however, networks of reformist and abolitionist campaigns have begun to change the course of public sentiment and legislation. Within these campaigns against mass incarceration, "disposability" has served as a short-hand explanation for myriad phenomena. The term has come to describe the relations between undocumented immigrant labor and ICE detention centers (Golash-Boza; Cacho; Escobar). It also dominates concern over incarcerated youth and the school-to-prison pipeline (Nichols 5; Yeakey 100; Evans & Giroux 45; Nocella 29; Irby 36). Many use the term to trace connections between prison abolition and queer or trans justice movements, most notably the Sylvia Rivera Law Project's hashtag and vlog series #NoOneIsDisposable. Other organizations have emphasized connections between the disposability of humans and environments, such as the Sustainability in Prisons Project, the Prison Ecology Project, and Californians United for a Responsible Budget which issued a report on the toxic impact of prisons. As I explain later in this chapter, "disposability" also marks the central point of contention between the two most dominant lenses for explaining racialized mass incarceration: for neo-Marxists, the racialized disposability enacted by mass incarceration follows from labor surplus and property devaluation whereas, for Afro-pessimists, this very economic lens renders Blackness *analytically* disposable

(and thus mirrors the racialized social death of the prison system itself). This distinction thus drives a wedge between the various anti-prison campaigns which have organized under the framework of disposability: who or what do they believe mass incarceration makes disposable?

In her novel *The Heart Goes Last,* Margaret Atwood picks up on these abolitionist critiques and projects our contemporary crisis of mass incarceration into an apocalyptic future. Her premise extends from an extreme fictionalization of the 2008 US financial collapse which, in this case, hits the Northeastern "rust belt" especially hard. Newlyweds Stan and Charmaine live in fear and squalor out of their car but, by a stroke of good luck, they join a new social experiment in the idyllic town of Consilience where they are promised security and employment for the rest of their lives. There is a catch, however: they must agree to endure mandatory labor every other month in Positron Prison. Atwood thus situates this new mechanism of disposability governance within "the crumbling, semi-deserted wasteland" of a fictionalized economic collapse (Atwood 103). Trash litters the pages of this novel— from "the moist, stinky darkness" of their car, to "the streets with boarded-up houses," to the "festering scrap heaps" from which people "scavenge, pilfer, and dumpster-dive" (Atwood 13, 15, 33). Her aesthetic thus clearly resonates with the critique of mass incarceration as a model of "disposability" governance (even as the novel evacuates the racial specificity of this critique by focusing on characters who are explicitly marked white). But, while there is "so much actual wreckage" filling these pages, Atwood also clutters the emplotment and thematic of her novel in ways that have exasperated many critics (34). For, after Stan and Charmaine are inducted into this experimental society, the novel begins to spin out of control— juggling a jealous love triangle (more accurately, a love octagon); a covert operation to take down the corporate giant Positron; as well as a comedy of

errors that involves several tangents spanning sex robots, Elvis Presley impersonators, and Shakespearean weddings.

This matryoshka doll of a narrative structure mirrors that of the gated community within which Stan and Charmaine find themselves. That is, the contract they sign for citizenship commits them to a life sentence in Consilience with authoritarian rules, spatial confinement, and vows of secrecy reflecting the prison at its center (a very Foucauldian vision of the modern social contract). Moreover, citizens must share their home with other couples, their prison "alternates," who they are forbidden ever to meet. Despite these warnings in up-beat corporate jargon from the visionary founder and leader "Ed" (who, we discover, *is* an illuminati-type puppeteer), chaos ensues when Stan and Charmaine fall into a cat's cradle of romantic desire. Charmaine pretends to be "Jasmine" during an affair with her alternate "Max" (whose real name turns out to be Phil). Meanwhile, Stan falls in love with Jasmine when he finds a tawdry love letter with her signature (which Charmaine actually wrote to Phil). Phil's wife Jocelyn eventually tells Stan about Charmaine's false identity and infidelities. And, using her administrative power in Consilience, she forces him to replicate the exact same sex acts that Phil and Charmaine performed on their "changeover days" (which were recorded by Positron surveillance cameras). However, it turns out that Jocelyn, a self-described "English major" in college, has been orchestrating her very own narrative behind the scenes. All these characters, including the fantasized ones, are puppets in her master plan to bring down the ethically compromised mission of The Positron Project which turns out to be engaged in nonconsensual medical research and the "elimination" of "undesirables." The novel's themes are equally haphazard— including critiques of the capitalist system, the perversity of desire, the commodification of women, the terrors of totalitarianism, the

possibility of artificial intelligence, the ethics of medical experimentation, and the questionable sincerity of the environmentalist project.

As this confusing and meandering summary might suggest, most reviewers felt the novel failed on both counts of plot *and* theme. Writing for *The Spectator*, Naomi Alderman complained that the "Consilience/Positron prison model doesn't really make economic sense" (n.p.). Referring to the same economic implausibility, Lionel Shriver wrote that "a good premise requires an internal logic that this one lacks" (n.p.). "Yet even thematically," she continued, "*The Heart Goes Last* doesn't stay on-task, starting with the trendy business of inequality and capitalism run amok, then curving off compulsively into the subjects of gender roles and the suppression of women that Atwood has explored for much of her career" (Shriver n.p.). *Kirkus Reviews* described the plot as a "slapped-together pastiche" (n.p.). Eventually, "the weak premises of the plot collapse, burying its characters in the rubble… The end of the novel, set in an 'Elvisorium' full of gay Elvis impersonators in Las Vegas, will leave the few who have gotten that far completely bewildered" (*Kirkus Reviews* n.p.). Another reviewer complained similarly, "It's quite as confusing as it sounds… [and eventually] goes into a kind of freefall" (*MINT* n.p). Equally,

> *The Heart Goes Last* seems too caught up with superficialities to spare more than a thought for the larger, deeper themes that seem to lurk just below the surface: the brokenness of a capitalist system; the inexplicability, even perversity, of desire; the commodification of women; the terrors of a totalitarian society; themes, of course, that Atwood has explored to such great effect in the past. (*MINT* n.p.)

The reviewer admits sticking with the novel until the end only because of Atwood's reputation as "compulsively readable," but "questions keep erupting at the back of the mind: Like, what, precisely, is the *point* of it all? And *why* doesn't something just happen already?" (*MINT* n.p.).

To some extent, this messy organization of plot and theme arises from Atwood's humorous and pleasurable genre-blending. Coral Howells has described the novel as a "distinctively Atwoodian version of a dystopia" (304). However, to borrow Atwood's own words, while that may be "the box in which her work is usually placed, it's an awkward box: it bulges with discards from elsewhere" (qtd. in Howells 304). According to Howells, these discards are the popular genres— "romance, crime fiction, spy thrillers, Gothic horror, fairy tales, and fantasy— which Atwood interweaves into her Swiftian Modest Proposal" (304). In this view, Atwood's "fractured narrative form and fantastic plot twists" are collateral damage in her grand strategy for critical intervention: blending conventional genres with more "popular cultural material" to better "engage readers' interest in her satirical analyses of North American mass consumerism and her warnings against uncontrolled corporate power" (Howells 304). Beloved by academic and popular audiences alike, Atwood must surely be motivated by these concerns over readerly engagement. Nevertheless, in the following chapter, I offer some alternate explanations for Atwood's convoluted organizations of plot and theme. Both, I claim, are macrostructural relations of narrative "aboutness" which are implicated in the phenomenon of disposability. Within narrative, plot and theme are forms of "glue" which differently configure elements into a meaningful whole. As I will elucidate through a close reading of *The Heart Goes Last*, the former configures meaning through a system of *repetitions* whereas the latter does so through a system of *resemblances* (as Gilles Deleuze defines these terms). Each relation, moreover, pertains to a different kind of referent: "plot is linked to (particular) events" whereas "theme involves only general and abstract entities" (Prince 5). For this reason, "reading for the plot" and reading "narrative as theme" (both titles of books from which I draw, written by Peter

Brooks and Gerald Prince respectively) will yield different conclusions about the significance of various elements which are either *means* to an end or *ends* unto themselves.

Indeed, her frustrated reviewers clearly seek *some* macrostructural relation of aboutness— theme or plot— which would help them to decipher gratuitous narrative details as either the means or ends of meaning production. Is this novel *about* a love-octagon, or is this merely a factor in Jocelyn's subversive plan? Is this novel *about* the prison system, or does it merely offer a lens for critiquing capitalism writ-large? Is this novel *about* identity, or do the many layers of impersonation, spiritual rebirth, and artificial intelligence merely amount to humorous diversions? Atwood has not been very forthcoming in interviews or articles either. In response to one reader who questioned her on *The Diane Rehm Show* about including sex robots, she simply responded that these technologies were actually being developed and that she had not invented them for the sake of her story (as if accuracy were her central motivation in writing this fantastical farce). Some readers and reviewers have turned to extra-diegetic reasons for plot elements and thematic details, noting the novel's unusual production history. "This book began as a four-part story for e-publisher Byliner.com," Shriver explains, "and the idea may have been more successfully realised in the shorter form. As a novel, it's painfully overextended" or, in the words of Elisabeth Denison, "overstuffed" (n.p.; n.p.). Another reviewer similarly noted the novel's previous life as an e-serial and suggested this might "explain the drawnout-ness" (*MINT* n.p.). What do these invocations of autobiography and genetic criticism reveal? They suggest that readers are hungry for the kind of holistic meaning that Brooks and Prince argue can only be found in plot and theme respectively. So hungry for a *point* to the novel, readers cling desperately to explanations for why the narrative in fact fails to be about anything at all.

But perhaps plot and theme both "fail" precisely because the novel is engaged in a struggle to define and differentiate these two macrostructural relations of aboutness. As these reviewers note, the novel still bears traces of its original e-serial form. I thus suggest excavating this artifact to study the novelistic process (with its seeking, questioning, wavering). In other words, *The Heart Goes Last* is a snapshot of an experiment-in-action (much like the experimental community of Consilience itself), one that attempts to understand the structuring logic of plot and theme. In this chapter, I demonstrate four ways plot and theme intervene upon one another as if battling for dominion over her narrative. Through this kind of performance, her novel reveals how repetition and resemblance differently configure narrative elements as either means toward ends or ends unto themselves— a distinction which renders the former more disposable in relation to the latter. We might ask, that is, if one had to summarize, retell, or otherwise duplicate this story (as Atwood *has* done, and as I along with so many of these reviewers have *struggled* to do), what elements would remain as necessary and which would be abandoned as contingent? This question of duplication actually turns out to be the main source of commonality between Atwood's (otherwise antithetical) emplotments and thematics. The very process and concept of duplication— engrained as it is in the production history from e-serial to printed novel— appears to be the common denominator in these attempts at plot and theme. Duplication is a plot device (Elvis impersonators expose the horrors of Positron, a robotic reproduction of Charmaine fails to sexually gratify Ed and prompts him to attempt neurological alterations on her actual body instead, etc.) *and* a thematic concern (Charmaine and her alter-ego Jasmine represent the Madonna/whore gender paradigm, the Positron/Consilience social model reveals the underlying similitude Atwood observes in utopian and dystopian imaginaries, etc.).

Given the otherwise conflictual relationship between plot and theme throughout *The Heart Goes Last*, I take this common interest in duplication as particularly significant; indeed, as the central question Atwood pursues in her novelistic experiment. As I shall demonstrate, duplication also connects Deleuze's notions of repetition and resemblance (and thus the very structuring logics of plot and theme). Each might be thought to involve forms of "duplication" (for lack of a better word perhaps) which always entail different disposals. This relationship between duplication and disposability can be captured by the questions: What does plot use as a means to its end? And, which particularities can be overlooked in the discernment of a general theme? The fact that such questions *cannot* be answered by reading *The Heart Goes Last* shows how Atwood's dissatisfied reviewers struggle to engage in the process of disposability, forced as they are to accept *all* her narrative details (even the final "Elvisorium" that one reviewer disdains so much) as equally (un)important to the novel's general meaning. Narrative function and meaning requires that these elements are configured as the means to an end of either plot or theme, somewhat like the form of differential inclusion enacted by the background/foreground binary that I outlined in my last chapter. However, while backgrounded elements are always *neglected*, the elements comprising plot or theme are usually *highlighted*. Indeed, events and motifs are necessary for the functioning of plot or the meaning of theme, but they are not necessary in and of themselves. And, as the means to greater ends, these elements are thus comparatively disposable (performing a kind of sacrificial function if you will). Atwood ultimately experiments with these different macrostructural relations of aboutness in her novel, staging the conflict between plot and theme in ways that challenge the logic and process of disposability.

But, as a result, she also challenges conventional aesthetic taste and even outright intelligibility (narrative failures which echo the ones I described in my last chapter with Sarah Schulman's disruptive background). Indeed, if any aesthetic consensus exists at all, it is that good narratives must harmonize their components. Likewise, most formalist reading practices tend to seek evidence of this narrative harmony— how theme elegantly leans into plot, how plot powerfully consolidates theme. While this harmony may be a common or even universal *preference*, though, there is no reason to believe that plot and theme must always align. My formalist approach thus conceives narrative, not only as a form unto itself, but also as one composed of many others (even if sometimes incongruent or discordant). I argue, moreover, that this non-alignment can explain many of our fiercest political antagonisms. When we agree on the facticity and sequencing of historical events but do not reach consensus upon what a given history is ultimately *about*, then we are probably engaging different logics of narrative meaning such as plot or theme. For example, Atwood's experiment has much to teach us about the conflicting historical explanations for racialized mass incarceration which are alternately deployed by neo-Marxist and Afro-pessimist groups. The carceral premise of Atwood's novel very much invites this turn to the real-world debates over prison abolition. As it turns out, she parrots much of the language and imagery deployed by both groups (exemplifying once again her concern with the narrative politics of duplication). Finally, as I will explore further in my close reading of *The Heart Goes Last* at the end of this chapter, she experiments with the consequences of their different premises— depicting how the neo-Marxist explanation for mass incarceration can too easily evacuate racial specificity and, yet, how a racial logic continues to haunt her carceral scenes in the way described by Afro-pessimists (recall Wacquant's conception of the prison as a "race-*making* machine").

Before applying the consequences of this narrative theory to the real-world debates over racialized mass incarceration, however, I elaborate upon the differences between plot and theme as two macrostructural relations of aboutness. I then demonstrate how Atwood stages the conflict between these forms of narrative "glue" in primarily four ways: 1) when plot is dominant in her novel, it may appropriate theme (e.g. metaphors may be literalized and figurative imagery may generate actual events in the story-world), or 2) it may redirect theme (e.g. when certain motifs are abandoned or nuanced after a change in action). The converse may also be observed of theme— either 3) appropriating plot (when a devise or premise ceases to function diegetically but continues to resonate thematically) or 4) redirecting it (if elaborate schemes are required to bring about a thematically significant event with no diegetic necessity). To use the novel's terminology, these "switchovers" between plot and theme reconfigure the means-end relationship of various narrative details. The second part of this chapter applies these lessons to the real-world conflict between neo-Marxists and Afro-pessimists. I begin by explaining how the former frames the history of mass incarceration in terms of plot (what Brooks calls an organizing logic of "annunciation" or "repetition") whereas the latter configures this history in terms of theme (what Prince calls an organizing logic of "illustration" or "resemblance"). Finally, I consider how Atwood situates her plot-theme experiments within a carceral imaginary and thus how she explores the narrative foundation of this abolitionist debate more explicitly. In particular, her novel reveals how— even when race is expunged from her plot— it continues to haunt her carceral scenes thematically.

Firstly, then, what *is* "aboutness"? In his treatment of philosophical semantics entitled *Aboutness*, Stephen Yablo defines this term as "the relation that meaningful items bear to whatever it is that they are *on* or *of* or that they *address* or *concern*" (1; original emphasis).

Yablo's definition is a useful starting point, but theories of aboutness have been overrepresented in his fields of semiotics and the philosophy of language while more often overlooked in narratology and literary theory. The formal and functional properties of words or sentences are quite different from those of narratives, however.[xxiii] After all, a narrative is not so much "a string of hierarchically-related elements" or "only collocations of sentences," but rather "a sequentially emergent whole, one given structure and coherence by broad pragmatic principles supporting language-understanding" (Herman 5). In narrative, aboutness is emergent, integrative, and variegated. Whereas the ambiguity of words may follow from their different denotative meanings, narrative ambiguity may arise from conflicting relations of aboutness which each pertain to different *kinds of referent* on the one hand ("events" versus "motifs") and also configure these elements according to different *logics* on the other hand ("repetition" versus "resemblance"). Plot and theme, for example, differently arrange the details of a narrative according to their function as either means or ends— some event may redirect plot but be irrelevant to the general moral of a story, and another image may illuminate a significant theme but be entirely ineffectual for the development of an action. Narratives thus transform the "unnecessary, utterly contingent" facts of *fabula* into the meaningful events of *sjužet* (Brooks 94); and they draw out the "essential" symbolic elements through thematization (Prince 94). Unlike semantic aboutness, then, plot and theme are both "macrostructural categories" of meaning (Prince 5). That is, both are emergent properties which arise from the whole configuration of a narrative's individual parts.

Each configuration of total meaning, moreover, involves a different relation of disposability— the allocation of what Brooks calls the "(un)necessary" elements or what Prince calls the "(in)essential" details of plot and theme respectively. This corollary of disposability is

intensified by the totalizing, even colonizing, ambitions of both macrostructural relations of aboutness (unlike topic, subject, or other forms of semantic aboutness which are more discrete and localized). At any given moment that a reader must determine what a narrative is ultimately *about*, one category will dominate the interpretive frame. Certainly, as Brooks reminds us, "Some narratives clearly give us a sense that there is no disjuncture between idea and symbol on the one hand, and the requirements of narrative design on the other" (113). However, when they *are* incongruous, plot and theme are beyond conflictual— they are outright antagonistic. Under such conditions, they may only be apprehended separately like the reversible figure of Rubin's Vase/Face. This uncompromising, totalizing function of both relations results from the fact that— not only do they pertain to different narrative elements and not only are they both macrostructural in nature— but they also engage different structuring logics altogether. For example, Prince argues that theme is fundamentally different from other relations of aboutness because, unlike topic or subject which "*consist of* textual units," theme is rather "*illustrated by*" these textual units just as an example illustrates a general law (5). Somewhat similarly, Brooks maintains that plot is neither "a matter of typology or of fixed structures" nor "a pure succession of events or happenings," but rather "the logic and dynamic of narrative" (10). Even though both are thus macrostructural relations of aboutness, Brooks explains how this logic and dynamic of plot does not work through *illustration* in the way Prince describes of theme. Instead, Brooks insists that textual units (or what he calls "incidents of narration") are "*promises* and *annunciations*" of plot (93; emphasis added).

What, then, distinguishes "illustration" (theme) on the one hand and "annunciation" or "promise" (plot) on the other hand as macrostructural relations of aboutness? The most obvious answer seems to involve their differing temporalities— illustration reveals a permanent law or a

present state of being, whereas annunciation performs a change in the present or promises one in the future. This distinction seems consistent with the idea that theme involves "an atemporal matrix structure" whereas plot constitutes "the order of chronological succession" (Lévi-Strauss 98). Counter to Lévi-Strauss's preferred hierarchy, though (he thinks theme dominates plot), neither one permits "absorption" of the other. Beyond this temporal distinction, plot and theme also appear to offer different kinds of narrative glue or what Brooks calls "binding." For Brooks, plot unfolds "as a *repetition* of events" (99; emphasis added). "An event gains meaning by its repetition," he continues, "which is both the recall of an earlier moment and a variation of it: the concept of repetition hovers ambiguously between the idea of reproduction and that of change, forward and backward movement... Repetition creates a *return* in the text, a doubling back. We cannot say whether this return is a return *to* or a return *of*: for instance, a return to origins or a return of the repressed" (Brooks 99-100; original emphasis). Conversely, for Prince, themes are configured through a system of *resemblance*: "Saying that a textual unit U illustrates a theme T is not equivalent to saying that U is a member of the class of Ts or that U is part of the aggregate T; instead, it is equivalent to saying that U suitably resembles a paradigm case of T" (5). Before applying this distinction to Atwood's novel, it is important to fully explicate the differing logics of repetition and resemblance— a distinction that founds Deleuzian metaphysics.

Indeed, Brooks's theory of plot surprisingly converges with Deleuzian theory— I say surprising because most critics tend to contrast Deleuze with the Russian Formalists who most inspire Brooks, and many even misinterpret him as being antithetical to narrative theory writ large (Duarte par. 1; Puar *TA* 204-205). Nevertheless, sharing inspirations from Søren Kierkegaard and Sigmund Freud, they echo each other's theories about the "demonic" nature of repetition, and both seek to locate this repetition beyond the realm of mere representation

(Deleuze *Difference and Repetition* 4; Brooks 99). Brooks writes that plot "is suggestive of the demonic: repetition and return are perverse and difficult, interrupting simple movement forward. The relation of narrative plot to story may indeed appear to partake of the demonic, as a kind of tantalizing instinctual play, a re-enactment that encounters the magic and the curse of reproduction or 'representation'" (100). Deleuze writes similarly that, if "repetition makes us ill, it also heals us; if it enchains and destroys us, it also frees us, testifying in both cases to its 'demonic' power" (21). Moreover, Deleuze's notions of "difference in itself" and "repetition for itself" are strikingly like Brooks's idea that "plot… is constituted in the tension of two formal categories, difference and resemblance" (30, 70; 90). Here it must be emphasized that Brooks does not commit to Deleuze's terminological distinction between repetition and resemblance (for he here writes "resemblance" even when he uses "repetition" to describe plot throughout his study). Nevertheless, the *substance* of his arguments about plot reflect Deleuze's notions of difference and *repetition* in every way.

Indeed, Deleuze's first order of business in *Difference and Repetition* is to write that "Repetition and resemblance are different in kind - extremely so" (1). Likewise, while Brooks first uses Tzvetan Todorov's terms "difference and resemblance," he goes on to develop his theory of plot in terms of difference and *repetition* instead: "In fictional plots, these bindings are a system of repetitions which are returns to and returns of, confounding the movement forward to the end with a movement back to origins" (108). Deleuze writes similarly that repetitions "do not add a second and a third time to the first, but carry the first time to the 'nth' power. With respect to this power, repetition interiorizes and thereby reverses itself" (1). It is not Federation Day, for example, which commemorates the fall of the Bastille. Rather, he explains, the fall of the Bastille repeats in advance all the Federation Days which are to follow. Difference and repetition are

ultimately coextensive operations that *precede* and, in fact, *produce* the identities of concepts or objects: "repetition does not presuppose the Same or the Similar— these are not its prerequisites. It is repetition, on the contrary, which produces the only 'same' of that which differs" (Deleuze *The Logic of Sense* 289). These operations of difference and repetition thus create bounded events and determine their meaningful relationships with others in the story.

Brooks's alignment between plot and repetition also signals a possible relation between *theme* and what Deleuze describes as *resemblance*. Recall that, according to Prince, theme works by "illustrating a general law" (5). Using similar language, Deleuze writes that "*generality* belongs to the order of *laws*… law determines only the *resemblance* of the subjects ruled by it" (2; emphasis added). "By contrast," he continues,

> Repetition as a conduct and as a point of view concerns non-exchangeable and non-substitutable singularities. Reflections, echoes, doubles and souls do not belong to the domain of resemblance or equivalence; and it is no more possible to exchange one's soul than it is to substitute real twins for one another. If exchange is the criterion of generality, theft and gift are those of repetition. There is, therefore, an economic difference between the two. (Deleuze 1)

Deleuze's "gift" and "theft" map onto Brooks's "promise" and "annunciation" in the sense that all pertain to singularities. Neither "promises" nor "annunciations" may be *exchanged* like examples or illustrations. They may, however, be *given* and, with their giving, a new pact or identity is performed. Unlike the way theme is constituted by a system of resemblances, then, plot is carried through a series of repetitions— a different kind of narrative glue or "binding" that involves a different relation of aboutness and gives rise to different means-end configurations.

Ultimately, then, Prince and Brooks both highlight the macrostructural nature of theme and plot respectively. These categories cannot be reduced to a collection of parts but are rather

structuring operations and organizing logics of a narrative's "intelligible whole" (as Paul Ricoeur has described plot) or of a narrative's "total meaning" (as Norman Friedman has similarly described theme). Indeed, Brooks and Prince maintain that the very possibility of narrative meaning rests on the operations of plot and theme respectively (each claiming that *only* plot and, conversely, *only* theme can claim this power). If, as Roland Barthes writes, narrative is animated by *la passion du sens* ("the passion *for* meaning and the passion *of* meaning"), then it may be challenging to hold contradictory plots and themes in sight at once (qtd. Brooks 10). This is not merely a psychological phenomenon, though, but rather a consequence of their different structuring logics— "repetition" for plot and "resemblance" for theme— which are expressed narratively as "annunciations" and "illustrations" respectively. Each macrostructural relation of aboutness claims to be the very *point* of narrative— a totalizing and even colonizing ambition that inevitably engages the process of disposability. For, they each offer very different means-end configurations and thus apply very different valuations upon narrative details. Each in fact pertains to a different kind of referent altogether: "events" for plot and "motifs" or "images" for theme.

Nowhere have these distinct relations of aboutness become more muddled than in criticism regarding reflexive fictions— those narratives which are in some way thought to be *about* themselves. For Linda Hutcheon, "'Metafiction,' as it has now been named, is fiction about fiction— that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (1). As evidenced by the subtitle of her book— *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*— the tensions between plot and theme may sometimes manifest as paradox. Hutcheon explains how this paradox emerges in narratives that are "a process as well as a product; both transitive and intransitive… [or that try] to transcend [their] own textual

limitations while never forgetting that this is impossible" (141). But I argue that what appears to be paradox actually involves confusion between distinct relations of aboutness. That is, to annotate her description of the paradox, metafiction "attempts representation [in plot] while discarding the myth of representation [through theme]" (Hutcheon 118). It thus involves the thematization of plot or, perhaps in some cases, the emplotment of theme, along with other configurations of semantic and narrative aboutness such as when "language play actually serves to structure the plot" (Hutcheon 118).

We can thus observe these plot-theme turf wars within and between genres as well as their respective interpretive communities. For example, Hutcheon identifies metafiction as a particular "challenge for the modern novelist" (Hutcheon 140). Brooks agrees that "Such a disjuncture" between plot and theme is more characteristic of "'modernist' and postmodernist" novels, "where there is a pervasive suspicion that plot falsifies more subtle kinds of interconnectedness" such as theme (Brooks 113). Conversely, "plot is that which especially characterizes popular mass-consumption literature: plot is why we read *Jaws*, but not Henry James" (Brooks 4). With this genre dichotomy in mind, I turn to Margaret Atwood— beloved by academic and popular audiences alike— to demonstrate how these relations of aboutness differently configure the (in)essential details in narrative. As Coral Howells argues, "throughout [her oeuvre] we see Atwood's characteristic emphasis on the relation between fictional artifice and the real world, in her brilliant mix of social observation and virtuoso handling of popular genres" (Howells 299). Indeed, as Atwood says of herself, "I simply have eclectic tastes and I like to rummage" (*In Other Worlds* 38). Her novel *The Heart Goes Last* offers a particularly compelling case study for this analysis of aboutness because it straddles the divide between plot-driven genre fiction and thematically-oriented metafiction. Throughout, Atwood engages in

continual "switchovers" between plot and theme by variously appropriating or redirecting the elements of one into the other.

For example, Atwood copies neo-Marxist "warehousing" imagery which is usually deployed as a metaphor for the prisonization of surplus labor. As Martha D. Escobar compellingly writes, prisons "serve capitalist interests in that they do not only commodify bodies, as is underscored by the private prison industry, but also function as warehouses for bodies constructed as racial neoliberal *excess*" (31-32; original emphasis). Similarly, when Stan believes himself no longer useful to Jocelyn's covert scheme to take down Positron and its big-brotherish leader "Ed," he fears she is "about to discard him" (Atwood 110). He asks, "what if the destination she had in mind for him was not Positron Prison but that unknown void into which the bona fide criminals originally warehoused at Positron had vanished?" (Atwood 110). Here, we see the conjunction of disposability ("discard," "vanished") and capitalist surplus ("warehoused") as signifiers for the prison industrial complex in the neo-Marxist vein. But, while abolitionists deploy this term metaphorically to illustrate the capitalist foundations of the prison industrial complex, an industrial warehouse provides the *literal* foundations (the basement) of Atwood's prison. Indeed, only a few chapters later, this metaphor becomes actualized when Stan survives what he thinks is a lethal injection administered by Charmaine. As it turns out, Jocelyn traded the lethal ingredient with a sleep serum to fake his death and wipe his data clean. He wakes up "in a warehouse with metal rafters and a dim strip of fluorescent lighting overhead" (Atwood 157), surrounded by teddy-bears secretly awaiting export underneath Positron (Atwood 165). The abolitionist "warehousing" metaphor— which links capitalist production, global trade, and mass incarceration— is thereby concretized in the architecture of this prison. This warehouse, moreover, serves as a crucial site for plot

developments including Stan's escape from Consilience in a "shipping crate" and revelations about the community's true profit source in "exact-replica female sex aides" (Atwood 165).

In this case, then, Atwood's plot appropriates elements of her theme, absorbing these details and their narrative significance into its own systems of logic and value. In another instance, Atwood's plot appropriates one of her most favored themes: environmentalism. Stan finds himself in Las Vegas after finally escaping Positron, forced to carry incriminating documents on a flashdrive hidden inside his belt buckle as an Elvis impersonator. To complete Jocelyn's mission, of which he is merely an ignorant cog, he must chaperone an elderly celebrity named Lucinda Quant to a live variety show where he will meet the whistleblower. "The show Lucinda's got tickets for is the Green Man Group," which is "a spinoff of the Blue Man Group" with "an eco-theme" (Atwood 267). Atwood pokes fun at the vacuity of this eco-theme when she describes the "fake vegetation with some fake birds in it," and the shiny green bald performers "wearing foliage" (Atwood 267). Stan admits that, "Apart from the leaves, it's the same kind of tightly directed comedy, tech, and music show" he remembers seeing with the Blue Man Group: "tricks with balloons that turn into flowers, munching up kale and spitting green goop out of their mouths, juggling onions" (Atwood 267). This eco-theme obviously offers little in the way of substantive critique. And, even when there *is* "*a bit of message*— birdsong, a sunrise on the big onstage screens, a flight of helium balloons with baby trees attached to them" (Atwood 267, emphasis added), it is very difficult to ascertain what these details could possibly *mean*.

But, while Atwood revels in these thematic failures, the Green Men come to serve a necessary function in Jocelyn's scheme to bring down Consilience/Positron and thus also within the novel's diegetic plot. As it turns out, these Green Men are stationed to protect the

incriminating flashdrive and instruct Stan of his next steps. Atwood seems to take great pleasure in our interpretive confusion as she shifts from thematic instrument to plot device— a confusion also registered by Stan while he watches their performance:

> All of a sudden there's a tulip number, done to "Tiptoe Through the Tulips." At first this makes Stan sit up straight: it's the password from his time at Possibilibots, it can't be a fucking coincidence! But as the number unfolds he thinks, Hold on, Stan. Yes, it can be a coincidence, a lot of things are, and considering the barefaced idiocy of what the Green Men are doing up there on stage, it has to be. If it were a signal, what the fuck would they be expecting him to do in response? Run around screaming? Yell, *Take my belt buckle! Here's the flashdrive*? So, coincidence, for sure. (Atwood 267-268)

Stan is here struggling to determine which details are significant as he wavers between different relations of aboutness. Will this be the trigger for another turning point in Jocelyn's machinations? Or, does this simply represent a theme in the performance on stage? On what diegetic level does this song even exist (affecting his real world, or simply the performance on stage)? And, how should he interpret its meaning (does it *illustrate* or *annunciate*, should he focus on the *motifs* or *events*)? Readers are forced to reckon with these questions at a third meta-fictional level, distinguishing the Green Men performance from Jocelyn's orchestration and from Atwood's novel as a whole. As Stan later discovers in the dressing room, the Green Men *were* in fact sending him a signal that they intended to acquire his flashdrive (an unnecessary one given that they were required to explain this message and planned to meet him in the dressing room anyway). The Green Men are nevertheless absorbed from a thematic concern into a plot device.

When plot does not appropriate the novel's themes, is may also be responsible for their outright abandonment. The last few pages, for example, veer away from critiques of income inequality, corporate greed, artificial intelligence, and environmentalism, among other major

thematic threads to make room for a Shakespearean styled group wedding. This event serves as a kind of *deus ex machina* for resolving complicated and inconsistent plot details, whereby the novel's thematic variety is reduced to questions of free will, true love, and the possibility of human happiness. In the very last section, Jocelyn visits Charmaine years after her wedding to present her with a gift: a choice whether to hear the truth or not. The truth, Jocelyn explains upon request, is that Charmaine never received the brain surgery she had thought compelled her to love Stan. "Take it or leave it," Jocelyn says, "I'm only the messenger. As they say in court, you're free to go. The world is all before you, where to choose." The novel ends with Charmaine's worried question: "How do you mean?" Her use of "how" as opposed to "what" also reflects the reader's dilemma. *How* does this novel mean? Which relation of aboutness— plot or theme— is most illuminating? How might this choice affect the relative significance and thus value of the novel's endless details and detours? And, who possesses the interpretive power of this "you"— Jocelyn as the director of Charmaine's story, or us as readers of Atwood's story?

Conversely, however, theme also appropriates and redirects various plot elements. For example, the prison first serves as a vital site for plot development and, indeed, the whole premise of the plot itself. But, by the time Stan escapes, the prison ceases to function diegetically and instead merely echoes throughout the novel's larger thematic concerns with freedom (whether of mental will, bodily autonomy, or sexual consent). This appropriation is foreshadowed even earlier when the prison is described thematically: "The prison cells themselves have been upgraded, and though care has been taken to maintain the theme, considerable amenities have been added. It's not as if they're being asked to live in an old-fashioned sort of prison!" (Atwood 43). Even when the prison propels the main action, then, Atwood suggests that this plot device only *thematizes* imprisonment— an appropriation of plot

to theme which her novel makes explicit when Positron diffuses more generally into "the dual themes of freedom and imprisonment" (Howells "Writing By Women" *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature* 231).

So too, Joycelyn's convoluted plan to expose Positron/Consilience reveals how the novel's plot often develops at the behest of thematic concerns. Why must Charmaine be the one to administer a fake lethal injection to Stan (except that it illustrates the novel's thematic interests in free will and true love)? Why must she be unaware that she administers a sleep serum instead of a lethal injection (except that it illustrates the novel's thematic interests in knowledge, authenticity, and performance)? Why must Stan work in the Possibilibots factory after he subsequently awakes instead of immediately escaping (except that it illustrates the novel's thematic interests in artificial intelligence, sexual desire, and capitalist production)? Similar questions and tentative answers may be posed to one character's romantic desire for a teddy bear, Charmaine's calculated flirtations with Ed, or Jocelyn's copy-cat rape of Stan— all of which are surely absurd and redundant. Or, take Stan's stint in an Elvisorium with impersonators who coach "how to act… [like] A straight guy playing a gay guy playing a straight guy, but in a way so that everyone assumes he's gay" (Atwood 248). As this character explains, "that takes skill. Think about the complexity" (Atwood 248). Certainly, the dexterity and wit of Atwood's novel also evidences this sort of skill. But the *point* of such complexity is not entirely clear except that it articulates larger themes. This conclusion is further evidenced by characters who also admit how their expectations for plot are based on their knowledge of theme. For example, when Stan finds himself strapped on a gurney awaiting Charmaine's lethal injection, he anticipates that she will instead save him in the name of love through, "what? A trapdoor? A secret tunnel? A set of clothes to wear as a disguise?" (143). These expectations are informed by his years of watching

"way too much TV" and a certain inkling about the romance genre within which he finds himself: "there has to be some last-minute plot flip like that, because Charmaine would surely never stick the death drug into him... She's too tender-hearted" (143).

In these four ways, then, *The Heart Goes Last* reconfigures the relationship between plot and theme— prompting us to evaluate the significance of images or events and to anticipate what must or simply could happen next. Not only does Atwood experiment with the means-end relations of narrative by switching between plot and theme, but she also explores how this very relation between means and ends constitutes a form of disposability. Those narrative elements which are configured as the means to a larger end (or perhaps irrelevant to that end altogether) are at risk of oversight and outright abandonment, especially in subsequent retellings. Theme and plot involve different kinds of duplication— resemblance and repetition— which work by "illustrating" similitude or by "annunciating" identities respectively. Further, both kinds of duplication necessitate disposability— those details which are either meaningless in the resemblances of theme or insignificant to the repetitions of plot. This relationship between duplication and disposability thus structures the narrative as it switches experimentally between theme and plot. In fact, it is precisely these constant "switchovers" which challenge the logic and process of disposability— as expressed by the frustrated reviewers who were forced to accept the equal (in)significance of all her narrative elements. But, beyond this structural and performative dimension, Atwood also takes up duplication *within* her narrative as thematic concern and plot device. Despite the continual duels between plot and theme that I previously sketched, they share a common interest in duplication and disposability. This preoccupation with duplication (or version-making) subsequently entails her concern with disposability not only on the performative level of what her novel *does* but also at the conceptual level of what it seems to *mean*.

This concern with duplication emerges in a variety of ways across her plot and theme. For example, the novel is itself a revised version of her e-serial "Positron," which significantly reverses the usual progression from "old" to "new" media. The recurring motif of Elvis Presley— an iconic figure of racial appropriation, early recording technologies, mass produced kitsch, and faked death conspiracy theories— also suggests that Atwood is invested in understanding the ethics of impersonation, reproduction, commodification, and resurrection. Similar questions are raised through the motifs of mind-altering drugs, neurosurgery, sexual fantasy, and humanoid robots. For example, it turns out that Positron manufactures "Possibilibots," which are "exact-replica female sex aids" (Atwood 165), and experiments with neurosurgical methods for controlling romantic desire. Doubling also emerges stylistically in her signature ironic tone as well as structurally in the alternating points of view between Stan and Charmaine each chapter. Meanwhile, the novel is populated by other character foils, doppelgängers, and alter egos who drive the plot through a complicated series of exposures, conversions, and double-crossings. The novel is set within the "yin and yang pattern" Atwood describes of an "ustopia" (*In Other Worlds* 85). In other words, the symbiosis between Consilience and Positron reflects her belief that "within each utopia, a concealed dystopia, within each dystopia, a hidden utopia" exists (*In Other Worlds* 85). Even the title *The Heart Goes Last* can be understood as doublespeak, for what looks like the True Romance genre "is also the current medico-legal definition of death" (Howells 306).

As this invocation of "death" suggests, Atwood is also centrally preoccupied with the related problems of elimination and disposability. Her chapter "Erase Me" is at the very middle, or "heart," of *The Heart Goes Last*— a title equally concerned with the relationship between necessity (the heart) and contingency (what goes). But the title also distinguishes versions of

bodily death— braindead versus clinically dead. Elimination thus emerges as a spiritual, medical, and ultimately metaphysical concern throughout. Indeed, the novel is very much preoccupied with how conflicting medico-legal definitions of death differently frame the ethics of euthanasia, capital punishment, abortion, and utilitarian motivated collateral damage. Moreover, the categories of social death (racialized dehumanization) and civil death (loss of legal entitlements due to conviction) also inflect these questions about bodily death. Charmaine, tasked with administering lethal injections to the "unwanted" citizens of Consilience, soothes her conscience with the belief that her subjects are "criminals" (Atwood 110). Literal death is thus administered under a veil of secrecy and medico-legal authority to those condemned by a condition of social or, at least, civil death. And this conceit of nonexistence— the presumed equivalence between bodily and social death— is precisely how narratives of disposability function. Charmaine excuses her own ignorance about the true purpose of these "Procedures" thusly: "There are some things it's better not to think about" (Atwood 70). Charmaine here refuses to narrate how and why her subjects have come to her for "elimination." She has, in this sense, already narratively eliminated these subjects before she must do so in reality. Since narrative organizes the possibility for meaning and eventfulness, this prior elimination seems to render the latter redundant if not irrelevant.

Nevertheless, while unwilling to narrate the story of their deaths (and thus refusing to confer upon them social life), she *does* wonder about what happens with their bodily remains: "Not cremation; that's a wasteful power draw," she thinks, but organ harvesting is also unlikely since they would be better "brain-dead and on a drip rather than plain old dead" (Atwood 70). Perhaps they are used as "protein-enriched livestock feed," she continues, "But whatever happens, it's bound to be useful, and that's all she needs to know" (Atwood 70). While these

subjects are deemed unworthy of human mourning rituals (cremation), their flesh still offers myriad use-values for natural resource extraction (organs or protein). The "re-purposing" of these bodies, in Charmaine's vocabulary, obscures how these subjects have been rendered unworthy of life. In other words, their disposability is effected through a system of recycling and this whole process occurs narratively. While these people are refused a story, their bodies become the subjects of ample speculation (a question we could say of what a human life is both *for* and *about*). This relationship between disposability and recycling recurs later when, deeply entangled in Joycelyn's subversive plot, Stan dresses undercover as an Elvis impersonator at a retirement home in Las Vegas. "'We don't think of the clients here as dying,' one of [the staff members] said to him on his first visit. 'After all, everyone's dying, just some of us more slowly.' Some days he believes this; other days he feels like the Grim Reaper. The Angel of Death as Elvis. It kind of fits" (Atwood 242). Instead of an ecological language of "recycling" it is here a spiritual language of "reincarnation" through which disposability functions. As a mirror opposite to the subjects Charmaine eliminates, Elvis lives on in spirit even if he does not in bodily form (he is, significantly, also a symbol for white dominance and a prominent example of racial appropriation).

Beyond these thematic reverberations, real and faked deaths also serve crucially in the plot. Both Stan and Charmaine are presumed dead at different points, setting off a chain of events that serve Jocelyn's subversive political ends. After the media reports that Stan died from an accidental fire in his prison job at the chicken factory, he goes undercover as "Waldo" using an ID from another character who has truly died.[xxiv] Locked in a "satin-lined shipping crate" that makes him feel "he's been buried alive," he passes outside Consilience to the realm of the socially dead (Atwood 227). At this very moment, Charmaine attends his funeral with an "empty

coffin" used to signify his body (Atwood 212). Charmaine also finds herself straddling the boundary between life and death. She discovers that Ed has become sexually obsessed with her and has made a Possibilibot in her image. "Charmaine feels dizzy" when she learns of this. "He's going to have sex with her?" she asks, feeling "strangely protective of her fabricated self" (Atwood 233). Stan sees this robot's head dislocated in the assembly line and, when he later finds her sedated on a gurney, wonders "Is that the robot head? It looks too real." He touches her cheek and exclaims, 'Is she dead?" (Atwood 284).[xxv] These instances of re-birth, false death, artificial intelligence, and bodily objectification illustrate Atwood's thematic concern with the blurry lines between people and things— a marker of disposability. But they are also highly orchestrated events in Jocelyn's convoluted plot to bring down Positron/Consilience, the significance of which we only gain in retrospect. I take Atwood's *conceptual* interest in the relations between duplication and disposability as justification for my earlier comparative analysis of how plot and theme *perform* different macrostructural relations of aboutness in *The Heart Goes Last*. That is, she makes the same arguments *within* as she does *through* her novel. Either way, resemblance and repetition appear to be two forms of duplication which each entail different forms of disposability.

Even Atwood's appropriation of abolitionist discourse can be understood as a form of duplication. Indeed, beyond her whimsical if frustrating experiments, there is real political urgency to analyze this conflictual nature of plot and theme. In particular, neo-Marxism and Afro-pessimism have each offered seemingly mutually exclusive explanations for racialized mass incarceration. While they agree on the sequence of events which led up to the US prison boom in the 1980s, they ultimately take this history to be *about* different things. In what remains of this chapter, I argue that the former highlights the mechanism of historical *plot* to trace how

racial difference has been manipulated by the prison industrial complex for economic gain, while the latter highlights the mechanism of universal *theme* to trace the constant and irreducible brutality of anti-Blackness from plantation to prison sites. Significantly, Atwood situates her own plot-theme experiments within the context of an experimental prison society which I take as a cue for this real-world application of narrative theory. In fact, following my overview of the antagonistic frameworks engaged by neo-Marxists and Afro-pessimists, I offer another close reading of *The Heart Goes Last* to demonstrate how Atwood parrots the language and imagery of both abolitionist groups, imagining their logical consequences side-by-side. These logical consequences pertain to the meaning and significance of race, as her novel ultimately *evacuates* the particularity of Blackness in this story of mass incarceration (a problem inherent to the neo-Marxist lens) and *generalizes* the "condition of social death" (which, according to Afro-pessimists like Wacquant, may be an effect of the racializing carceral machine).

The primary difference between these abolitionist groups, is what they take as the *engine* of historical narrative. Neo-Marxists argue that prisons have been erected to resolve several crises of capitalism— ensuring state-sponsored consumption by contracting out basic prison services, preventing the depreciation of rural land value by providing prison jobs to predominantly white communities, as well as regulating labor surpluses by warehousing young low-skilled people of color in prison. These crises have been particularly acute in the United States since increases in offshore and automated manufacturing have led to a deindustrialized economy, and since the successful passage of civil rights has rendered Black labor less easily exploitable and so less economically desirable. Racialized mass incarceration is, in this view, a model of disposability governance. As Alex Means writes in "Neoliberalism and the Politics of Disposability,"

> [L]egal and juridical channels have reinterpreted and crafted legislation that provides maximum flexibility for capital while expunging the role of government in ensuring basic civil protections. This has led to a grotesque expansion in law enforcement and mass incarceration in order to regulate and control the urban poor. (84)

Yet, these invocations of disposability have also elided an ambiguity at the heart of this new narrative about carceral expansion. Frank B. Wilderson III, a founding scholar in the field of Afro-pessimism, explains how this ambiguity arises from "the discrepancy between *Humans* who suffer through an 'economy of disposability'… and *Blacks* who suffer by way of 'social death'" ("Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption" n.p.; original emphasis). While disposability presumes a prior moment of social and psychic equilibrium from which one becomes ejected, social death is "not degraded humanity but abject inhumanity" ("Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption" n.p.).

In "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal," Wilderson challenges this framework of disposability within the prison abolitionist context specifically. He argues that even radical social movements like prison abolition (dominated by the neo-Marxist perspective) can only achieve the satiable demands of "civil society's junior partners" such as immigrants, white women, and the working class (Wilderson 18). Whereas "such coalitions and social movements cannot be called the outright handmaidens of white supremacy," he continues, their rhetorical structures and political desires "are underwritten by a supplemental anti-Blackness" (Wilderson 18). What he means is this: critiques of the prison industrial complex have tended to adopt a Marxian or Gramscian perspective, centering categories of labor, exploitation, hegemony, and civil society (a rubric of disposability) at the expense of unwaged slavery, unreasoned despotism, and anti-Black terror (a rubric of social death). This means that, while neo-Marxist discourses may *gesture* to race, they cannot *center* Blackness in their explanatory

narratives; slavery and mass incarceration merely offer further examples of socio-economic exploitation. Conversely, Afro-pessimists like Wilderson invert this relationship[xxvi]: "slavery is *closer* to capital's primal desire than is exploitation" (22; emphasis added). Capital originated in a direct relation of force against "a particular body (a black body)," not by approaching a white body with variable capital even though it would have been easier and more profitable to do so (Wilderson 22). Paraphrasing Lindon Barrett, Wilderson explains how there is something about the Black body in and of itself which has made it the repository of this violence. For Afro-pessimists, then, capitalism is primarily a relation of anti-Black racial terror and not of class-determined cultural hegemony.

He also argues that the Marxist desire for "socialism on the other side of crisis"— or, the end of exploitation but not the category of worker— re-inscribes the Enlightenment values of productivity and progress that are foundational to civil society (Wilderson 18). This goal is at odds, however, with the *anti-social* posture of Afro-pessimism. That is, based on Orlando Patterson's groundbreaking *Slavery and Social Death*, Afro-pessimists reorient the definition of slavery from a relation of forced labor to a relation of fungible property. While any number of racialized or gendered groups have been forced into labor throughout American history, the slave is *paradigmatically* Black. The most important racial binary is thus not white/non-white, or white/Black, but rather Black/non-Black: "it is racial blackness as a necessary condition for enslavement that matters most, rather than whiteness as a sufficient condition for freedom" (Sexton "People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery" 36). Within this schema, (anti-)Blackness gives material existence and conceptual coherence to non-Black categories such as "white," "worker," "gay," or other iterations of the "Human" (whether or not they are disposable).[xxvii] Blackness functions as a kind of dark matter, surrounding and holding together

the boundaries of civil society from which it is necessarily excluded. This "positionality of 'absolute dereliction,'" Wilderson echoes Frantz Fanon, thus pushes the assumptive logic of (neo-)Marxist discourse toward incoherence (18). For, there "is something organic to civil society that makes it essential to the destruction of the Black body" and vice versa (Wilderson 18). Opposing an "imaginary of redemption," Afro-pessimists invite abolitionists to center Blackness in their analytic frameworks and to assume the positionality of social death in their political aspirations.

In what remains of this chapter, I delineate how prison abolitionists are caught between this Scylla and Charybdis of explanatory narratives: the neo-Marxist explanation for the "prison industrial complex" is not entirely equivalent to, nor perhaps compatible with, the Afro-pessimist "plantation-to-prison" narrative. The former understands the socio-economic architecture of slavery to have significantly shaped global neoliberalism which has, in turn, catalyzed mass incarceration in the United States and abroad— particularly affecting poor people of color. Conversely, the latter views slavery and mass imprisonment as simply "altered structural modalities" of the "permanent social incarceration… of blacks" which has always been the originary drive of and for capitalism itself (Sexton & Lee 1016, 1012). Prisonization in the United States is thus "a *reverberation* or *derivation* of the social death implanted at the heart of black existence" (Sexton & Lee 1016).[xxviii] Although largely in agreement about historical fact and sequence, this vision involves different structuring operations and organizing logics than those developed by Marxist theorists. The aim of this chapter is not to resolve this conflict between neo-Marxists and Afro-pessimists, but rather to understand precisely how it is that two narratives— largely in agreement about the sequence of historical events— can be so incommensurable. The stakes of this project thus exceed the purview of either prison

abolitionists, neo-Marxists, or Afro-pessimists. Rather, I offer a reconstituted structuralist approach to answer the question: "What is the nature of this narrative incommensurability?" I argue that these otherwise similar narratives take different stances on what mass incarceration is ultimately *about*, which has much to do with what they take as their structural "glue" (e.g. an annunciation of plot versus an illustration of theme; or, as I will now suggest, a dialectical versus contrapuntal dynamic).

Unlike *dialectical materialism* of the neo-Marxist perspective, which presumes that history develops linearly from material contradictions seeking synthesis, the Afro-pessimist view of history could be described as *contrapuntal musicality*, much like how a fugue configures a principal theme in overlapping and consecutive melodic lines ("Fugue" n.p.). Enrique Cabrera makes this comparison between dialectical materialism and contrapuntal musicality explicit when he describes the work of Johann Sebastian Bach: "Now it accords contradictions that seemed irreconcilable; now it causes a musical element to develop in an inexhaustible process; now it fuses into a mighty synthesis" (Cabrera 319). But this contrapuntal musicality differs from dialectical materialism as well. To follow a musical theme, we "linger [in a] dynamic totality" yet remain attuned to the passage "of a linear temporality" (Moten *Black and Blur* 41). Wilderson echoes this description: "the violence which both elaborates and saturates Black 'life' is *totalizing*" ("Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption" n.p.; emphasis added).[xxix] Slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration could be said to compose a fugue on the theme of anti-blackness; a thematization which is productive— not *within* material history— but, as Wilderson writes, *of* ontological possibility.[xxx] So, while both neo-Marxists and Afro-pessimists incorporate the *topic* or *subject* of mass incarceration, dialectical materialism corresponds well with *plot*

whereas contrapuntal musicality corresponds more with *theme*. This helps to explain their radically conflictual accounts for the same underlying *fabula.*

The theme of anti-Blackness structuring the Afro-pessimist narrative does, indeed, function through a logic and dynamic of resemblance. As Michelle Alexander compellingly argues in her version of the plantation-to-prison narrative, "mass incarceration is, *metaphorically*, the New Jim Crow" (11; emphasis added). Her key analytic mechanism of metaphor has, according to theorists from Aristotle to Jacques Derrida, "always been defined as the trope of resemblance" (Derrida qtd. in Donoghue 99). Accordingly, the resemblances between slavery, segregation, and mass incarceration illustrate the general theme of anti-Black violence throughout US history. The thematic structure of this anti-Blackness is rather like what Wilderson calls "a flat line," what Hortense Spillers describes as "historical stillness," or what Lévi-Strauss names an "atemporal matrix structure" (n.p.; 2003 98). Saidiya Hartman similarly portrays anti-Black terror as a "diffusion" (4), which Fred Moten expands upon:

> [T]he violence of which we speak is non-particulate, which is to say that it is not a matter of its intermingling with some imagined counterpart or moving from a state of high concentration to low. The concentration is both constant and incalculable precisely in its being non-particulate. At stake is an ambience that is both more and less than atmospheric. In this regard, diffusion might be said precisely to name something that the intersection of gravitation and non-locality only slightly less imprecisely names. It is a pouring forth, a holding or spreading out, or a running over that never runs out and is never over; a disbursal more than a dispersal; a funding that is not so much a founding as a continual finding of that which is never lost in being lost. (Moten *Black & Blur* xi)

Like theme, this anti-Black violence is without end or beginning, non-localizable but illustrated at every instant, and ultimately a macrostructural relation of aboutness that binds this historical narrative together.

In calling (anti-)Blackness a "thematization"— as Frantz Fanon does in *Black Skin, White Masks*— I do not intend to suggest that it is imaginary or immaterial (85). Rather, I follow Ridvan Askin's method of "differential narratology" to argue that narrative is not only a form of human access to things but rather a structuring force of the world itself (as well as its external dark matter). I offer one caveat to Askin's method of differential narratology. While agreeing "that narrative is always about something," Askin "emphasize[s] that before being *about* something it simply is something itself and that this *is* determines its aboutness" (5-6; original emphasis). I argue to the contrary that narrative existence and aboutness are always immanent. As Askin later admits, "Deleuze… establishes a pure immanence since his transcendental and empirical play out on the same plane" (15). Indeed, Askin subsequently replaces "transcendental" and "empirical" in this sentence with Deleuze's "virtual" and "actual." I think these concepts can also usefully modify the narratological terms *fabula* and *sjužet* respectively to emphasize their deeply ontological significance. Ultimately, Afro-pessimists and neo-Marxists do not simply disagree about how to *tell* a story. Rather, this antagonism between the workings of plot and theme is a constitutive part of (historical) narrativity and its capacity for meaning. Finally, it is this very capacity for meaning that entails a logic and process of disposability. For, it is precisely their differing systems of meaning— their antagonistic macrostructural relations of aboutness— that lead neo-Marxists and Afro-pessimists into a contentious battle over the necessary and contingent elements of history.

Wilderson is highly attuned to this form of disposability, for his every theoretical move is calculated against the contingency of Blackness. Blackness is not the relational effect of whiteness, but rather the "bedrock, the concrete slabs upon which any edifice of Human articulation… is built" ("Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption" n.p.). "The Slave's

relationship to violence is not contingent," he emphasizes elsewhere, "it is gratuitous— it bleeds out beyond the grasp of narration, from the Symbolic to the Real, where therapy and politics have no purchase" ("Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption" n.p.). As this latter pronouncement makes clear, it is his rejection of Black contingency that drives him to insist that "narrative [is] inaccessible to Blacks" ("Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption" n.p.; emphasis added). However, this rejection of narrative writ-large can be boiled down to a critique of emplotment solely:

> At the heart of my argument is the assertion that Black emplotment is a catastrophe for narrative at a meta-level rather than a crisis or aporia within a particular narrative. To put it differently, social death is aporetic with respect to narrative writ large (and, by extension, to redemption, writ large). ("Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption" n.p.).

This reductive equivocation prevents Wilderson from noticing the other relations of aboutness that *do* effectively structure Afro-pessimist narratives, i.e. theme. His concern, of course, is that the neo-Marxist emplotment of history renders anti-Blackness a mere means to the larger ends of capitalism. Significantly, his concern is exemplified by *The Heart Goes Last* which strips mass incarceration of its racial specificity. This deracination— the elimination of contingent racial details— highlights the ethical stakes of the debate between neo-Marxists and Afro-pessimists.

Indeed, Stan and Charmaine are both casually marked white— the latter described as having "blue, blue eyes", a "blond puffball," and a "pale face." And, while Megan Cannella emphasizes the "strong, traditional, patriarchal tones pervading every aspect of this new community," the "1950s sitcom" that Consilience replicates was also a historical era and aesthetic of white dominance (17). Perhaps this whitening of mass incarceration explains why, in her interview on *The Diane Rehm Show,* Atwood called the Positron Project "a little nicer than

the prison-for-profit schemes we already have" ("nicer" perhaps both in the sense that this dehumanization achieves at least a modicum of equality in its deracination but also in the sense that a prison industrial complex built on warehousing whiteness does so to *preserve* and not to *abandon* it within civil society). After all, Consilience/Positron was designed to *save* "civil society" which, as Wilderson has argued, rests on a foundation of anti-Blackness. Set within an undifferentiated (which is to say, non-racialized) near-apocalypse, *The Heart Goes Last* generalizes the condition of social death which Wilderson aligns with Blackness. In this moment of widespread economic and social collapse, Stan and Charmaine live in their car while trying to avoid the "gangs" and "thugs" who kill with impunity:

> There's been a number of former car owners flung out onto the gravel, right around here; knifed, heads crushed in, bleeding to death. No one bothers with those cases any more, with finding out who did it, because that would take time, and only rich people can afford to have police. All those things we never appreciated until we didn't have them, as Grandma Win would say, Charmaine thinks regretfully. (Atwood 13)

On the one hand, "mentions of 'superpredators', 'wolf-packs', 'animals,'" or, in this case, "gangs" and "thugs," often function as "bestial metaphors in the journalistic and political field" to reinforce "*the centuries-old association of blackness within criminality and devious violence"* (Wacquant 55-56, original emphasis).

But, on the other hand, these associations are here subsumed into a generalized lawlessness— the hallmark of apocalypse— whereby people are terrorized precisely *without* discrimination. In this lawless context, Charmaine wistfully associates the police— protested today for their systemic roots in anti-Blackness— with what Wilderson calls "civil society." The police represent the possibility of re-racializing the "gangs" and "thugs"— as well as their victims— which would reassert her (morphological) whiteness *as* (positional) whiteness. This

desire for (racial) order ultimately draws Charmaine to Consilience and Positron. No longer an apparatus for criminalization, the prison can function as a respectable, equitable, and indispensable part of social life in Consilience. So, while this vision parallels many of the socio-economic explanations for the prison industrial complex, Atwood noticeably *whitens* mass incarceration. To this extent, Positron reflects Wacquant's insistence that "Mass incarceration has become the primary 'machine for 'race making'" (n.p.). In this case, however, it is not the racial logic of criminalization but rather the racial logic of civil society that is most operative. Non-Blacks are no longer defined as those who escape the terror of policing and prisonization, but rather as those who simply exist in a world still organized by policing and prisonization (now detethered from criminality). The generalized condition of social death (which Wilderson equates with Blackness) first seems to strip away all racial specificity from the story, but racial difference eventually asserts itself in the boundaries established between this larger apocalyptic context and the civil society established by Positron/Consilience. In other words, Positron promises solutions to capitalist crises, but it does so for those on the "inside"— both within the larger community of Consilience and within the prison upon which it relies. Those "outside" are now relegated to the condition of social death (like the way "dark matter" is thought to surround and structure civil society in the Afro-pessimist imaginary).

Even in this ostensibly post-racial setting, then, a white desire for whiteness lingers. Recall how racial disaggregation asserts itself in Charmaine's fond recollection of the police: "only rich people can afford to have police. All those things we never appreciated until we didn't have them, as Grandma Win would say, Charmaine thinks regretfully" (Atwood 13). Atwood's reference to "rich people" once again reveals the neo-Marxist inspiration for her plot. Significantly, though, Charmaine associates these police— the harbingers of civil society[xxxi]—

with her familial (and thus white) genealogy through the figure of Grandma Win. In other words, her morphological whiteness (her "blue, blue eyes", "blond puffball," and "pale face") reemerges with her positional whiteness (her reveries about the police and her acceptance into an experimental civil society). *The Heart Goes Last* thus refuses to foreground race in its narrative of prison expansion precisely because race is the background logic through which this narrative can function.[xxxii] Yet, while haunted by a racial thematic, her plot takes pains to center the economic foundations of the Prison Industrial Complex and thereby evacuates race entirely. "Forget the contracting end," Jocelyn explains to Stan,

> It's a sideshow. The main deal is the prison. Prisons used to be about punishment, and then reform and penitence, and then keeping dangerous offenders inside. Then, for quite a few decades, they were about crowd control— penning up the young, aggressive, marginalized guys to keep them off the streets. And then, when they started to be run as private businesses, they were about the profit margins for the prepackaged jail-meal suppliers, and the hired guards and so forth. (Atwood 126)

Other dimensions of the novel reflect these socio-economic explanations for the rise in mass incarceration. Recall, for example, how Atwood appropriates abolitionist discourse by using the term "warehouse" as a metaphor for the prisonization of surplus labor.

As an exaggerated version of the neo-Marxist narrative, *The Heart Goes Last* may prompt us to ask more generally whether a story *about* the carceral effects of neoliberal economic restructuring and global trade ultimately renders race superfluous. In other words, might this deracination not only be an authorial oversight but also a consequence of the logic and dynamic of the neo-Marxist plot itself? Or, might the structuring operation and organizing logic of plot be incapable of making race anything other than contingent? Rather than contributing to the many condemnations of Atwood's racial appropriations and amnesias *(*Berlatsky n.p.; Davis

245; Goldie 124; Fiamengo n.p.; Tolan n.p.*)*, I approach her novel as a case study for how different relations of aboutness determine this (racial) contingency and necessity. Thus, despite the continual duels between plot and theme that I previously sketched, she links both relations of aboutness to the problem of disposability. That is, as two forms of duplication, repetition and resemblance each entail the relative disposability of various contingent details. She situates these narrative experiments within an ethically significant context, staging the conflictual accounts of mass incarceration offered by Afro-pessimists and neo-Marxists. For one thing, the deracination of her plot lends evidentiary support to Wilderson's concerns that the neo-Marxist narrative renders Blackness only a contingent fact of history. However, the fact that a racial logic reasserts itself thematically suggests that the Afro-pessimist account of mass incarceration as a "race-*making* machine" also haunts her novel. *The Heart Goes Last* provides a case study, moreover, for understanding how and why these two narratives about mass incarceration are fundamentally antagonistic. They each center different macrostructural relations of aboutness, imposing different organizational logics upon the same underlying *fabula* or— to use Deleuze's terminology— "virtual" plane.

This antagonism may explain why Afro-pessimists have spent considerable energy working against the all too frequent attempts to analogize Blackness. As Jared Sexton and Elizabeth Lee write in "Figuring the Prison: Prerequisites of Torture at Abu Ghraib,"

> the Left licenses itself to pursue radical platforms against imperialism, which is to say abolitionist campaigns overseas, while allowing the historical condition of blacks, irreducible to the shifting objectives of empire (or Empire), to serve as little more than convenient metaphor: source of insight and outrage, but only insofar as the trouble is quarantined to the past (as lessons learned) or rendered on scales too small or too big to demand action (as either nagging residue or eternal national shame)." (1016)

Despite this *use* of Blackness as convenient metaphor, however, Wilderson insists with Eugene Genovese that the "Black experience in this country has been a phenomenon without analog" (qtd Wilderson 18). He explains that,

> Blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Real, for in its magnetizing of bullets the Black body functions as the map of gratuitous violence through which civil society is possible: namely, those bodies for which violence is, or can be, contingent. Blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Symbolic, for Blackness in America generates no categories for the chromosome of history, and no data for the categories of immigration or sovereignty. It is an experience without analog— a past without a heritage. Blackness is the site of absolute dereliction at the level of the Imaginary, for "whoever says 'rape' says Black" (Fanon), whoever says "prison" says Black, and whoever says "AIDS" says Black (Sexton)— the "Negro is a phobogenic object" (Fanon). (Wilderson 25)

Thus, like Sexton and Lee, Wilderson condemns all those who attempt to make Blackness serve as little more than convenient metaphor. For, it is precisely through this position of non-analogy that Wilderson develops his theory of ethical and political possibility. If every subject "is required to have analogs within the nation's structuring narrative, and the experience of one subject, upon whom the nation's order of wealth was built, is without analog, then that subject's presence destabilizes all other analogs" (25).

And, yet, one of the primary critiques waged against Afro-pessimism has been its supposed confusion between metaphorical and morphological Blackness. Annie Olalohu-Teriba, for instance, takes issue with Wilderson's interpretation of Fanon who theorized the "slave as contingently black, not 'paradigmatically black'" (n.p.). Afro-pessimists perceive a non-Black solidarity structuring the world and thus preventing the ontological possibility of Black life. "Were 'black' meant as a metaphor for the condition of total alienation from self," she reflects, "this might make sense. However, because the Afro-pessimist imaginary ties itself to a

morphological account of blackness, this leads us to a theoretical dead end" (Olalohu-Teriba n.p.). This confusion between metaphorical and morphological Blackness poses a kind of chicken and egg question: does the racial category "precede the historical order and the processes, both violent and mundane, which create" it? But Olalohu-Teriba's solution to this problem simply brings us right back to the neo-Marxist framework: "to think through the implications of contingency is to confront the reality that these racial categories— categories that Wilderson and Sexton treat as absolute— are actually unstable as evidence that something else is afoot. It is to see 'race' not as an anchor, but as a mystification conjured to weather crises of legitimacy" (n.p.). In fact, the chicken and egg problem that Olalohu-Teriba sets up only engages the "order of chronological succession" and not the "atemporal matrix structure" Lévi-Strauss described. Understanding Blackness as a historical thematization leaves us with no temporal paradox at all (though it would, admittedly, expand beyond a strictly morphological account).

I simply want to suggest that these debates over "metaphor" and "analogy"— which are themselves forms of duplication— reveal quite plainly how Afro-pessimists and neo-Marxists are very much in conflict over macrostructural relations of aboutness. After all, philosophers, linguists, and literary critics have all struggled to determine whether metaphor engages the logic of repetition or resemblance. This ambiguity explains how both groups simultaneously critique and engage metaphor— they are simply guided by the different principles of annunciation and illustration. While Sexton and Lee are concerned by the way metaphor trivializes the specificity and gratuity of anti-Blackness, Wilderson believes analogy comprises the very structure of civil society and thus expels Blackness as that which exists "without analog." But, recall once more Alexander's invocation of mass incarceration as "metaphorically the same" as slavery and segregation. Recall also the "fungibility" that defines Blackness according to Moten, Spillers,

and Hartman. Even Wilderson engages the logic of resemblance when he writes that "the slave is *paradigmatically* Black" (Prince writes that to say a textual unit "illustrates a theme… is equivalent to saying that [it] suitably resembles a paradigm case of" that theme). It is not metaphor itself that drives a wedge between neo-Marxist and Afro-pessimist frameworks, then, but rather their different understandings of how metaphor functions— either through repetition or resemblance as well as, of course, who and what such metaphors are thought to bring into relation.

Ultimately, then, the question I have been pursuing is not which heuristic best reconciles multiple conflicting narratives, but rather how certain relations of aboutness (and not others) can pose a fundamental antagonism within a given narrative itself or, at least, between its proximate versions (*sjužets,* or planes of "actuality" to summon Deleuze).[xxxiii] Indeed, neo-Marxists and Afro-pessimists do not clash over different essentialisms so much as different emphases. Both explanations for mass incarceration already attend to the intersections of racism and capitalism. For example, Wilderson's emphasis on the *irrationality* of "racial terror" and Sexton's focus on the "*gratuitous* (and not only instrumental) violence" of Black captivity do not so much deny the way mass incarceration has been economically *incentivized*. Rather, they argue that anti-Blackness is the more ontologically fundamental and (an)originary force that rationalizes (that is, both logically organizes and ethically justifies) capitalism. And, for their own part, neo-Marxists would agree that "the reconfiguration of the prison-industrial complex has, once again, as its structuring metaphor and primary target the Black body," but they would not necessarily admit that this marks a "renaissance of slavery" under late capitalism (Wilderson 22). For, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes in *Golden Gulag*, "The problem with the 'new slavery' argument is that very few prisoners work for anybody while they're locked up… the generally accepted goal

for prisons has been *incapacitation*" (21; original emphasis). And yet, as Wilderson argues so persuasively, this perspective incorporates race only to "reify the basic categories that structure conflict within civil society; the categories of work and exploitation" (22). His concern seems to be that, even as Marxists shed light on how mass incarceration functions as a mode of disposability governance, their own rhetorical structures and political desires render Blackness *analytically* or *narratively* disposable— which is to say, contingent or arbitrary.

Like the background/foreground structure of narrative that I explored in my last chapter through a close reading of Sarah Schulman's *People in Trouble*, these conflicting macrostructural relations of aboutness also engage a form of differential inclusion which entails disposability. While backgrounded elements are always *neglected*, however, the elements comprising plot or theme are usually *highlighted*. Indeed, events and motifs are necessary for the functioning of plot or the meaning of theme, but they are not necessary in and of themselves. These relations of aboutness differently configure these narrative details such that some will, at any given moment, either serve a sacrificial function or no meaningful function at all. Likewise, within large scale politics, racialized mass incarceration has also been caused by a set of more explicit and active forces than those which led to the coextensive neglect of people with AIDS and climate change. Despite the now popular use of the term "disposability" to encapsulate myriad socio-economic and ecological catastrophes, then, my analysis has challenged this homogenizing effect by focusing on the differentiations which underwrite this concept. My structuralist approach has aimed to understand, not only that disposability clearly manifests in various ways, but also *how* these differences manifest from specific narrative forms which unfold within specific historical contexts. I thus conceive these conclusions as something like a toolkit. Indeed, like my last chapter, I have ended with the historical ramifications of my narrative

theory. In chapter one, I reconceived the linearity of historical processes by focusing on the vibrant, bubbling, and entangled *contexts* out of which the genealogies of AIDS and climate activism have emerged. In this chapter, I turn away from shared contexts to consider how accounts of the same historical trajectory can become torn and conflictual. Thus, while attention to form can sometimes inspire or reconceive political solidarities, it may also simply offer an account of why reconciliation or consensus are strictly impossible.

"Narratives of Disposability: Race and Ecology in Contemporary Media"

By Katherine Thorsteinson

Chapter 3: Exhaustion as an Alternative to Endings in Nic Pizzolatto's *True Detective*

The sky is midnight blue. Crickets chatter while heavy boots step through mud. A match flares, extending toward an outline of branches. All at once the whole field catches fire and the screen fades to black. Then, in giant close-up, a camera lens adjusts focus and "REC" appears in bright red letters. So opens season one episode one of *True Detective,* followed by a protracted statement from Martin "Marty" Hart (Woody Harrelson) to two Louisiana CID officers about his former partner Rustin "Rust" Cohle (Matthew McConaughey). Marty still believes their attempted arrest and unlawful execution of Reggie Ledoux solved the 1995 ritual murder of Dora Lange, but a pattern of similar murders in 2012 reopens the case and draws both ex-detectives back in for questioning. From the very beginning, then, the narrative is framed as a meta-investigation: their statements initiate flashbacks to the original case seventeen years prior, reveal discrepancies that propel the contemporary police inquiry, and catalyze their eventual reunion to finally solve the mystery. These narrative layers are often contradictory and circular, throwing the status of "truth" into profound uncertainty. As Paul Sheehan and Lauren Alice observe, "the logic of the archetypal detective story— a primary and secondary narrative split between investigation and crime— [is] violated" (31). This conventional narrative split distinguishes order from chaos, good from evil, and restoration from corruption, which safeguards "the belief that precise and correct reasoning can solve the mysteries of the world" (Sheehan & Alice 31). However, in *True Detective*, the crimes are never completely elucidated, the investigation never achieves full closure, and the detectives are themselves targets of inquiry.

As this meta-thematic image of the videorecorder suggests, the show pursues an investigation of its own generic conventions.

If audiences are primed to pick up on these clues then the fire that opens this episode, "The Long Bright Dark," ignites a thematic relation between human and environment. When Marty and Rust find her, Dora Lange is ritualistically staged in a position of naked prayer. Large deer antlers are attached to her head and various pagan *twig* sculptures described as "devil's nests" or "bird traps" are littered around the nearby canopy tree. The crime scene is surrounded by smoldering bushes when detectives first arrive, and another officer tells them how a farmer discovered the body because "this cane field was not scheduled to be burned." Arson was clearly committed to *index* trouble, to draw an audience to this gruesome scene. Significantly, one of the most common examples of Peircean indexicality is how smoke signals fire. Unlike Charles Peirce's other sign modalities— iconicity and symbolism— indexicality relies on context to express meaning. Just as the videorecorder *clues* the audience in to a meta-investigation of genre, this smoke *signals* how stories can be told through setting or environment. In the following chapter, I consider how the environmental significance of indexicality inflects the show's investigation of its own generic conventions. After all, clues indexically relate pieces of evidence to investigative hunches. This indexical movement provides the narrative thrust in all detective fiction, one of the generic conventions *True Detective* puts under harsh scrutiny. As Marty explains, "You attach an assumption to a piece of evidence, you start to bend the narrative to support it." Such a critique prompts us to ask of indexicality: which environmental relations are real or significant, and which are mere smoke screens?

As *True Detective* puts its own generic conventions under the magnifying glass, it redirects our focus from the relation between an indexical sign and its object to the larger

ecology of meaning that sustains these relations. Surrounding and submerging this diegetic detective plot is thus another kind of narrative that emerges from the ecological and aesthetic arrangement of the show itself— in the greasy atmosphere of Louisiana's setting and through the juxtaposition of natural-industrial imagery. This is what Delia Byrnes describes as the show's "oily aesthetic" or what Casey Kelly calls the "toxic screen" in their remarkable close readings of *True Detective*. At least three narratives emerge from this ecological and aesthetic arrangement: petro-capitalism is brought into relation with toxic masculinity, as well as the repressed racial memories of Southern plantation slavery and US neocolonial war. For example, rather than plot the extensive historical connections between Southern plantation slavery and petro-capitalism throughout the Mississippi corridor, the show displays what Saidiya Hartman would call their shared "diffusion of racial terror" (4). Fred Moten describes this as the non-particulate, semi-atmospheric outpouring of anti-black violence (*B&B* xi).[xxxiv] This diffusion will therefore always exceed diegetic emplotment, even though there are plenty of historical connections to make between slavery and petroleum— two extractive and exploitative energy regimes which have driven the Southern economy. These oily narratives ultimately resist the function of "endings" inherent to diegetic plot which can enact disposability through foreclosing other possibilities.

Instead, these alternative narratives emerge through "visual enthymemes" of oil's slow violence (Kelly 39), replicating the narrative form of petrochemical toxicity itself. This narrative form is saturated, slippery, and sticky just like the emergent ones I discuss: sexist gaslighting, colorblind racism, and the corrosive spread of American imperialism. Mel Chen uses the term "racial mattering" to describe when "an inanimate but migrant entity such as industrial lead can become racialized" through a semantic schema (160). My own project takes inspiration from

hers but, while she considers “lead as a cultural phenomenon over and above its material and physio-medical character" (160), I focus on how material forms imbue their own— and are not merely imputed with— racialized narratives (recall, similarly, the structure of “theme” in the Afro-pessimist imaginary which I discussed last chapter). For example, Delia Byrnes and Stephanie LeMenager both argue that petroleum challenges traditional modes of representation because it saturates modern American life and hides by dematerializing as capital (93; 124). Casey Kelly also underscores the difficulty of representing toxicity: toxins are invisible, the timeframe between exposure and the onset of symptoms is unpredictable (Pezzullo), the relations of cause and effect are unknown (Barnett), our capacity to communicate pain is limited (Scarry; Sontag), and we are reticent to examine how daily comforts are implicated with toxic chemicals.

Whiteness and colorblind racism exhibit a similar kind of pervasive invisibility. As Arlie Hochschild says in her ethnographic study of Louisiana Tea Party supporters, "Race seemed everywhere in the physical surroundings, but almost nowhere in spontaneous direct talk" (20). In the racial regime of today, “discrimination is mostly subtle, apparently nonracial, and institutionalized” (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich 191). The ideological anchor of this color-blind racism “is as slippery as the practices it supports” (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich 191). That is, just like the oil and molasses which have shaped its regime of global racial supremacy, the concept of whiteness is also “slippery and elusive" (Kincheloe 162). In *The Future of Whiteness*, for example, Linda Martín Alcoff returns again and again to the impossibility of eliminating whiteness as she calls us instead to *shift* what whiteness means. But inexhaustible fluctuation is precisely the narrative form whiteness takes, as this very pretense of a better *kind* attests. Similarly, Byrnes maintains that one of the gravest consequences of oil’s invisibility is this “uncanny ability to disarm critique” (93). The elusiveness of oil and other toxic chemicals thus

mirrors the enigma of whiteness which, as Sara Ahmed explains, takes the narrative form of saturation. White bodies become invisible as they continually "sink" into their surroundings (*QP* 160). Like oil, whiteness and its residual colorblind racism are incredibly difficult to capture.

As many critics of racial dog-whistling have lamented, these stories cannot be pinpointed on the level of diegetic plot but rather emerge as a sticky or slippery residue. To hear these stories, we must expand our definitions of narrative beyond sequence. Instead, narrative might be organized through what Moten calls "ensemble" or what Deleuzian theorists call an "assemblage." Many embrace the concept of assemblage precisely because they imagine it poses formal and temporal alternatives to narrative. Jasbir Puar, one of the leading voices of assemblage theory today, frequently invokes "narrative" as a bad word,[xxxv] sometimes defining it reductively as a "static referent of start point, end point, [and] climax" (*TRtM* 56). But as Gérard Genette elucidates, "simply picking out [narrative] positions does not exhaust temporal analysis, even temporal analysis restricted to questions of sequence" (39). Likewise, for Mikhail Bakhtin, narrative manifests primarily as "chronotope" (literally, "time space") which names "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (84). "Time," in narrative, "thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 84). Most significantly, he emphasizes, these chronotopes "are the organizing centers for fundamental narrative events... The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative" (250). But nothing about the chronotope demands sequence. In fact, Bakhtin's inspiration—Einstein's Theory of Relativity— realizes a whole myriad of space-time arrangements.

Object-oriented ontologists have picked up on these insights to think about the relationship between narrative and objects (which are simply arrangements in/of spacetime). Describing La Monte Young's musical technique of just intonation, Timothy Morton writes that we hear "the piano as object… [Its] Strings… have been liberated from telling a human story. They tell their own story, pronounce their own doom" (*Hyperobjects* 167). But, if objects tell their own stories, narratives are also a kind of object in his view. "A process," he explains, "is simply an object seen from a standpoint that is 1+*n* dimensions lower than the object's dimensionality" (Morton *Hyperobjects* 72-73). In *True Detective*, Rust's "flat circle" theory of spacetime reveals a similar relationship between objects and narrative: "In this universe, we process time linearly forward. But, outside our spacetime, from what would be a fourth dimensional perspective, time wouldn't exist. And, from that vantage, could we attain it, we would see," he demonstrates by crushing his beer can, "our spacetime would look flattened like a single sculpture, matter would be in a superposition of every place it ever occupied." Narrative may be one way objects manifest and, at the same time, we can think about narrative itself as a kind of object.[xxxvi]

In this chapter, I bring these arguments about object-narrative to bear on *aesthetic* objects. This might seem a rather thick-headed return to close reading but, as Fred Moten implores, "*Let's* just *agree to be stupid for one another*!" (qtd in Nelson, np). Far from the humanist hangover that Franco Moretti decries in his promotion of "distant reading," close reading might *more* properly account for the independence and intransigence of objects. And, while I respect Heather Love's attempt to reclaim the "text" through her own "close but not deep" methodology, I suggest that objects are themselves very *very* deep. It is an error to think that "human use of objects is what gives them ontological depth, frees them from their servitude

as mere slabs of present-at-hand physical matter," Graham Harman explains, "objects themselves are already more than present-at-hand. The interplay of dust and cinder blocks and shafts of light is haunted by the drama of presence and withdrawal no less than are language or lurid human moods" (*TB* 16).[xxxvii] Likewise, our close reading practices might be more finely attuned to the "manifestations of the eye and ear that raise the too deep question of the ontological status of the poem itself" (Moten 90). In other words, I engage in a close reading methodology attuned to the not-quite-human frequencies of aesthetic and ecological arrangement.

We glimpse this ontological depth in *True Detective* through Rust's synesthetic visions, which are the result of intensive drug-use from his former years as an undercover cop. He notices non-causal patterns that connect the murder of Dora Lange with the general ecology of Louisiana, somehow pointing his investigation in the right direction (*figures 1 and 2*). His ecological sensibility frequently conflicts with Marty's more conventional investigative practices, and together they exemplify two divergent close reading approaches: object-oriented[xxxviii] versus procedural respectively. I want to follow Rust's lead throughout this chapter, not to invent a new literary methodology, but to give a different inflection to the very old practice of close reading. This is simply to shift our questions from the "paranoia"[xxxix] of what lies behind or under the text, to the "ambience"[xl] of what emerges from the aesthetic object itself. This aligns with what Anna Tsing calls the "art of noticing on a damaged planet" and what Moten calls after Wittgenstein "noticing an aspect or aspect-dawning or aspect-seeing or... having a musical ear" (37; 90).[xli] Indeed, the narratives we project onto objects might be very different from the ones emerging from the objects themselves. This is also to say that aesthetic objects are "never exhausted" by their relations with humans or other objects (Harman 288).

Although our anthropocentric narrative of plastic forks prompts us to call them “disposable,” their own stubborn endurance tells a very different story.

(*figures 1 and 2*)

This perspective leads me to theorize the narrative form of oil— its saturation, stickiness, and slipperiness— to understand how *True Detective* avoids the logic of disposability. As all those consumed by the Exxon Valdez, BP Deepwater Horizon, and inevitable Keystone Pipeline spills can attest, oil is very difficult to make disappear. One exception, to repeat a now familiar image, is fire which redistributes the byproduct exhaust. Indeed, *True Detective* “exhausts” its own diegetic plot— fragmenting, faltering, and finally fading away— as these alternative narratives emerge from its oily aesthetic. We empathize with Rust as he laments this exhausting emplotment: "I don’t wanna know anymore – this is a world where nothing is solved" (1:5). On one level, then, the show “deals with paralysed resignation, with bewildered defeat, with detectives seemingly overwhelmed by their investigations…. [They] flounder, we flounder with them” (Coley 137). Through this diegetic exhaustion, the show critiques atomizing concepts like "perpetrator" and "victim," linear emplotments of cause and effect, as well as the epistemologies of exposure— all detective fiction conventions. Conversely, the saturation of industrial imagery,

the prevalence of disease and disability amongst characters, as well as the nonlinear investigation spreading from a single murder to transnational networks of oil capital, all *expose* us to ecological threat. In what follows, I untether narrative from plot points or sequence to focus instead on other aesthetic and ecological arrangements: the saturation, stickiness, and slipperiness of *True Detective*'s oily narratives. I then explore how the diegetic plot becomes exhausted by its own generic conventions and how this exhaustion manifests in the affective disposition of characters. Finally, I explain how this tension between diegetic and aesthetic/ecological narrative responds to the political exhaustion confounding the green movement today.

One narrative that emerges from the show's oily aesthetic is the relation between petro-capitalism and "toxic masculinity." Thomas Keith has described toxic masculinity as a consolidation of gender norms that "creates hierarchies favoring some and victimizing others" (2). Toxic masculine norms include the traits of homophobia, misogyny, emotional suppression, extreme self-reliance, and dominance. Many have noted how a sense of "aggrieved entitlement" has emerged from the confluence of this toxic masculinity and the increasing erosions of white male privilege under neoliberalism (Kimmel 125). This toxic masculinity is personified by both protagonists of *True Detective*, evidenced in their behaviors and their aesthetic representation. Several images in the opening sequence combine these protagonists with the petrochemical mise-en-scène which the show's creator calls a "third lead" (Pizzolatto). The result is a kind of cyborgian petro-patriarchy that refuses Donna Haraway's desire for a post-gender world. For example, the petrochemical towers growing out of Rust's neck simultaneously appear to be the metallic remainder of his corroding face (*figure 3*). Either way, the image recalls the erosions of white male privilege for workers under neoliberalism.

Later in the sequence, Marty's face is layered with the crisscrossing pattern of a congested interstate which creates a similar effect (*figure 4*). He is literally *driven over* by the cars that have forced petroleum dependence into the national infrastructure and that mark a bygone era of white masculine dominance in the American Fordist workforce. Of course, the massive highway construction that accompanied the rise of an American middle-class in the postwar period also initiated white-flight and patriarchal suburburbia. In this image, Marty looks like an écorché that exposes this dark history as the essential anatomy of white masculine America. Or, perhaps he appears to be mummified with the bandages that once propelled his consolidation of capitalist power and now threaten the ecological sustainability of the world at large. Either way, the image expresses a narrative of heteropatriarchal decay. While both protagonists also display toxic masculinity in their interactions with each other and the show's few female characters, this theme never fully emerges on the level of diegetic plot. Instead, these narratives about the rise and fall of white masculinity spill like oil from the show's visual aesthetic.


(*figures 3 and 4 respectively*)

In their travels throughout the chemical corridor, both detectives effuse this toxicity from their very bodies. The conjoined critique of toxic masculinity and petro-capitalism may not occur within the diegetic plot, but it sweats out from their pores nonetheless. Indeed, both actors are continually drenched in sweat as the humid atmosphere of the Louisiana bayous exerted its autonomy against the wishes of the show's makeup and production crew. Their greasy clothes, hair, and skin merge with the oily backdrop, camouflaging even while signaling true masculine grit. They further excrete other byproducts of industrial activity. Becoming attuned to his environment, Rust complains that he tastes "aluminum and ash" which are also two elements disguised in his name: Rust (aluminum) and Cohle (ash). Moreover, his own self-destructive behavior is coded through his consumption of these materials: beer drinking (aluminum) and cigarette smoking (ash). In his interviews with the 2012 lead detective on the reopened case, he drones on about his nihilistic vision of humanity while making little effigies out of these waste materials in a way reminiscent of the cult symbols scattered around the murder victims.

The car imagery recurring throughout this season also resonates with "Rust" Belt post-Fordist economic transitions which have sparked a recent masculine-populist movement across the nation. Henry Ford's automated assembly line system manned by auto-workers was established in Dearborn, Michigan near the turn of the twentieth century (Harvey 125). Under economic restructuring, many of these jobs have disappeared due to technological advancement and neocolonial offshore factories. Meanwhile, the petrochemical industries that fuel these cars continue to spread throughout the country, causing new health and environmental damage. Moreover, the interstate highways that fueled white flight and heteronormative suburban masculinity in the post-war period are increasingly deteriorating under new austerity measures and demographic shifts. By now a cliché for the noir detective genre, the show's three leads

(Rust, Marty, and oil) are frequently connected through the car they drive in their investigation. Take, for example, the final image of the opening sequence which depicts the detectives' bodies separated by their car (*figure 5*). This central position in the still signals its significance to the narrative and also implicates these detectives in what Timothy Morton might call the "petrochemical hyperobject" looming throughout the series as the true culprit for Lange's murder along with so many problems throughout this region, country, and— indeed— world.

(*figure 5*)

Following generic convention, this gas-guzzling vehicle is the primary site of reflection and discussion for these detectives. The corpus of Western thought and the conceit of masculine reason are thus implicated in the petroleum dependencies of the car itself, a car that literally fuels the diegetic plot of the detective narrative. *True Detective* uniquely engages this trope, however, by only filming "Hart and Cohle from outside the vehicle, filtered through the passenger- and driver-side windows" (Byrnes 100-101). Continually layered on top of these two men are the reflected images of "barren cypress trees, telephone poles that eerily resemble crosses" (Byrnes 101), and the petroleum skylines of the Louisiana landscape which slide over their faces as if replicating the consistency of oil (*figures 6 and 7*). The car is thus a site for their own cerebral reflections, but these are always mixed with the literal reflections of non- and extra-human

activity. These overlaid images demonstrate a truly ecological thought— one not bound by the subject-object, background-foreground distinctions that have structured Western masculine reason. Indeed, the aesthetic object appears to *literally* leach out an oily narrative about environmental agency.

(*figures 6 and 7*)

The second narrative I describe emerging from the show's oily aesthetic is the relation between petro-capitalism and Southern plantation slavery. For example, the very first scene of a burning cane field was also a recurrent practice in the history of slavery. Fields were burned both by farmers before harvest and by enslaved Africans in rebellion. Many argue that industrial agriculture was the origin of our Anthropocene era and the catalyst for transatlantic slavery. Fire is thus an instrument of ecological degradation and racial oppression, but also a tool for dismantling these systems. Indeed, fire is the great equalizer and oil is among the most commonly used combustibles. This ongoing trope is especially evident in the opening sequence where it consumes everything from natural landscapes, to character profiles, and even oil refineries as if the natural environment is acting in retaliation (*figure 8*). The spread of fire recalls similar consumptive and colonial patterns of capitalism, whether in its agricultural or petrochemical forms. While this connection between plantation slavery and petro-capitalism is not made on the level of diegetic plot, their shared industrial scenes are put into aesthetic

relation. Within this frame of vivid co-presence, their distinct historical chronologies disappear into the same puff of smoke.

Consider the literal puff of smoke in the very first still of this opening sequence—Richard Misrach's grainy photograph "Sugar Cane and Refinery, Mississippi River Corridor, 1998" from his collection *Petrochemical America.* A crop field takes up the bottom half of the frame; and, in the top half blooms an industrial plant as if growing from the soil once tilled by enslaved Africans (*figure 9*). “Through this juxtaposition,” Byrnes explains, “the image positions the petrochemical industry as the *inheritor* of the state’s violent economic legacies” (94; emphasis added). But it might be more accurate to say that the image *sticks* together the very sticky commodities of oil and sugar in the same literal and historical “field”— or what Gilles Deleuze would call “plane of immanence.” In this show’s oily aesthetic, such narratives are often stickier than they are sequential. Causality and even chronology collapse, as the image instead highlights an assemblage of shared practices: commodification, refinement, exploitation, extraction, and dependency. “Time is a flat circle,” Rust reflects in a later episode, “where everything we've ever done or will do, we're gonna do over and over and over again.”[xlii] Once more, Rust’s ecological attunement offers us a model of close reading the show.

(*figures 8 and 9 respectively*)

Other historical connections between plantation slavery and petrocapitalism are flattened in this oily aesthetic. Barbara Allen, for example, highlights how property ownership in southern Louisiana largely follows the French *arpent* system. To ensure each plantation owner had water access, land was distributed in long thin strips perpendicular to a stream or large waterway. French settlers initiated this system in the 1700s, but it continued with both the Spanish and American government after the Louisiana Purchase. The afterlife of slavery thus literally continues to grow from the practices and properties of industrial agriculture. Moreover, as petrochemical corporations began purchasing these former plantations to build their facilities, the narrow strips of the *arpent* system financially discouraged them from providing the necessary "safe zones" mandated by the environmental protection agency (Allen 7–8). As Byrnes points out, this particular historical connection between plantation slavery and petro-capitalism is evidenced by the proximity of residential and industrial activity in another image of the opening sequence: Misrach's "Home and Grain Elevator, Destrehan, Louisiana, 1998." In the photograph, a modest single-story house is "dwarfed by a behemoth industrial building, the overwhelming visual dominance of which virtually subsumes the home" (Byrnes 97). The prevalence of disability among characters in the show— all of whom are poor or Black— signals how petrochemicals now target the same groups once oppressed under slavery.

Indeed, Misrach's photo series vividly reveals how oil refineries and feedstock plants are housed in former plantation homes along the Mississippi River, which are still surrounded by predominantly African American communities. Robert Bullard has described the resulting prevalence of illness amongst these impoverished communities as "environmental apartheid" (102). Furthermore, various Superfund toxic waste sites in and around New Orleans were

flooded by *Hurricane Katrina,* at least one of which was submerged underwater. As a result, hazardous materials leached into the surrounding environment and increased the incidence of related illnesses. But sometimes the connections between plantation slavery and petro-capitalism emerging from these images are even more complex and hazy. Near the end of the opening sequence, for example, Misrach's "New Housing Construction, Paulina, Louisiana, 2010" appears on the screen. A lonely white house protrudes from the fog, seemingly abandoned mid-construction (*figure 10*). There are "no signs of life, habitation, or activity" (Byrnes 102). Moments later, Marty's wary face is superimposed upon the vacant homes and everything becomes engulfed in flames. In Byrnes's moving interpretation, the two vacant structures evoke "the empty promise of community rebuilding in coastal Louisiana following Hurricane Katrina" (102). During this period, the Chemical Corridor experienced both negligent governmental efforts to rebuild and a general devaluation of property.

But, as many have explained, Hurricane Katrina was not strictly a "natural" disaster. Our dependence on fossil fuels has contributed to climate change which has in turn increased the likelihood and severity of weather-related natural disasters. Moreover, Chester Hartman and Gregory Squires argue in *There is No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster* that the impact of the hurricane was extremely uneven across race and class lines. Not only has petro-capitalism emerged out of the legal and economic practices established under plantation slavery, but the disastrous effects of petro-capitalism have also entangled with other legacies of plantation slavery whether in housing, workforce, or government aid demographics. This non-linear non-diegetic narrative is expressed through aesthetic arrangement and proximity as if leaching out from the photo-filmic object. Significantly, global warming is Morton's most frequent example of what he calls a *hyperobject*— something so "massively distributed in time and space" that it

exhibits this kind of non-linear inter-objective causality (*Hyperobjects* 1). How better, then, to express these entanglements of plantation slavery and petro-capitalism than through the narratives that leach out from the aesthetic object? Diegetic emplotment simply cannot capture the complexity of hyperobjects.

(*figure 10*)

The third narrative I describe emerging from the show's oily aesthetic is the relation between petro-capitalism and US neocolonial war. Significantly, these interventions have historically laid claim to, or made use of, toxic chemicals: nuclear weapons, napalm and Agent Orange, white phosphorus, depleted uranium, or the never-ending thirst for oil itself. Like these interventions, Marty and Rust engage in various covert jungle incursions which all fail to solve the underlying crime of Dora Lange. Their tours through overgrown bayous are reminiscent of Vietnam War films like Francis Ford Coppolla's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) or Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986). For example, when Rust decides to penetrate a meth ring undercover without CID approval, the ongoing drug war between black and white dealers breaks out into a skirmish which they compare to "Mogadishu." Emulating news footage of U.S. military interventions into civil conflict, aerial film from a police helicopter depicts the housing projects like "a battlefield

populated by warlords and insurgents" (Kelly 51). Later, en route to Reggie Ledoux's deep bayou hideout, Rust says that the place reminds him of his father "talking about Nam." Ledoux's hunting jungle outpost is covered in paramilitary camouflage while fortified by "trip wires, landmines, and improvised explosive devises," prompting Kelly to describe the property as "a Viet Cong military encampment" (51).

Indeed, the show is saturated with imagery of impenetrable jungles, war-torn ghettos, clandestine police actions, guerilla compounds, outlaw soldiers, indiscriminate violence, drug trade, and chemical warfare. But, in *True Detective,* neocolonial war is significantly restaged within the United States itself. When they find Ledoux wearing a gas mask and carrying a machete, Rust describes him as a "monster." This single image collapses the distinctions between the agents of Western law and postcolonial insurgents: "the gasmask an inference to the savagery of chemical warfare (i.e., Agent Orange, napalm) and the machete a crude symbol of guerilla warfare" (Kelly 51). On another occasion, home and abroad are indistinguishable when Rust grumbles that "there was never anything here but jungle." The South is consumed by the overgrown and then decimated landscapes of US expansionist wars. Moreover, the location of the final showdown with cult kingpin Errol Childress is in Fort Macomb. As Jens Bjering and Isak Holm explain, "The fortress was built in 1822 as a defense against a repetition of the British invasion of Louisiana in 1815 and was reused by both Confederate and Union forces during the Civil War" (719). The Vietnam War is brought back to the site of these two most formative wars fought on and for American soil. The show thus puts the national and global "Souths" into overlapping proximity.

These, then, are three narratives that emerge from the show's ecological and aesthetic arrangement: petro-capitalism is brought into relation with toxic masculinity, as well as the

repressed racial memories of Southern plantation slavery and US neocolonial war. On the one hand, I have demonstrated how stories may leach out from aesthetic objects. On the other hand, my demonstration has translated these stories into explicit description. This methodology thus becomes a critico-theoretical form of what Macarena Gómez-Barris calls the *extractive zone*: "the colonial paradigm, worldview, and technologies that mark out regions of 'high biodiversity' in order to reduce life to capitalist resource conversion" (xvi). In other words, my methodology exhausts the aesthetic object by extracting its resources for narrative. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World,* Anna Tsing confronts a similar paradox as she attempts to find "what manages to live despite capitalism" (viii). Her central example is the matsutake mushroom which grows most abundantly throughout human-disturbed forests such as heavy logging in Oregon or various nuclear events in Japan. She ultimately immerses us in the not-quite-capitalist economies of the mushroom such as trophy gathering, gifting, and pleasurable sensation even as capitalism continually appropriates these alternative value systems (Tsing 122-123). I similarly attempt to locate those unincorporated, latent, or non-diegetic stories that emanate from objects. Likewise, I appropriate or extract these stories into the realm of human perception.

While my methodology extracts narrative possibilities from the show's aesthetic and ecological arrangement, many audiences will find the diegetic plot of *True Detective* utterly exhausting. Significantly, the "swampy, organic configuration" of Marty and Rust's investigations replicate the Louisiana bayou setting I have analyzed (Coley 150). Rob Coley describes the show's narrative form ecologically as "submerged in a time of 'swarming […] primeval oceans' and 'clustered ponds of ooze'" (150). Unlike traditional detective stories, the evidence they collect does not help them home in on an individual culprit so much as it frustratingly expands the scope of their investigation. "We didn't get 'em all," Rust grumbles in

the final episode. “We ain't gonna get 'em all,” Marty reassures him, “but we got ours.” Indeed, the human institutions they work within and against, “whether religious, juridical or familial, are natural and infinitesimal features of planetary vitality” (Coley 150). When Rust and Marty finally catch their perpetrator at the end of this season, the case has already spread from a single murder to transnational networks of religious organization, political interest, drug trade, and oil capital.

What are the relations, then, between this exhausting plot and my extractive methodology? For one thing, we need not only approach the show’s visual enthymemes through an object-oriented methodology but may also do so for the diegetic plot. This is to insist with Coley that television dramas like this one “do not simply represent but actively perform ‘the social relations, flows, and feelings that they are ostensibly ‘about’’” (137). Unlike the “explicitly proenvironmental melodrama” or the “social problem plotline” which tend to rely on linear diegesis, for example, Kelly insists that the show’s convoluted and open-ended narrative structure offers "an environmental *frame*” (45; emphasis mine). “Like many challenges to capitalism,” he argues, “the potential limitations of explicitly proenvironmental texts are that they can be absorbed and reframed to support the underlying ideologies that support the toxic economy" (Kelly 45). Instead, the convoluted narrative structure foregrounds ecological entanglement and exerts our rational hubris toward exhaustion. The show thereby "suggests that embracing the stickiness of petroleum— allowing it to penetrate oneself— is the only way of achieving the queer intimacy necessary to critique the United States's love affair with oil" and its liberatory promises (Kelly 45). Petroleum “sticks” to the show as a recurring image and ever-present backdrop, but this “stickiness” also describes a narrative mode distinct from sequential diegesis— one better able to express the stories of oil. The meanings and effects of “exposure”

are at the crux of this distinction. On the one hand, exposure is an epistemological problem: exposing the "truth" about these toxic landscapes merely exacerbates political exhaustion and thus apathy. On the other hand, exposure is an ontological problem: toxic exposure changes the composition and definition of embodied life from which politics emerge. Founding both the conventional detective genre and the contemporary green movement, the former inflection of exposure is expressed in diegetic plot. In contrast, my reading of *True Detective* embodies the latter inflection. But even diegetic plot is one feature of the whole aesthetic object and can itself emanate alternative object-narratives.

Exhaustion has been frequently, though not so schematically, theorized across a variety of critical fields. Perhaps most notably, Karl Marx explained how the physical exhaustion of labor-power constitutes both the *ends* and *end* of capitalism. He writes in *Capital*, that the extension of the working day in capitalist production entails the "premature exhaustion and death of [its] labour-power" (265). This tendency towards exhaustion is also true of natural resources, evidenced by Marx's analogy that capitalism shortens the "labourer's life, as a greedy farmer snatches increased produce from the soil by robbing it of its fertility" (265). Noticing how this logic of exhaustion subsumes both labor and natural resource, Jason Moore develops the concept of "work/energy" to extend Marxism into an ecocritical project. According to Marx, capitalism is a set of relations through which the "capacity to do work" is transformed into value. In his own formulation, Moore adds that both human and extra-human natures are imbued with this capacity, whether "capitalized— as in commodified labor-power via the cash nexus— or… appropriated via non-economic means, as in the work of a river, waterfall, forest, or some forms of social reproduction" (14). But since capitalism depends on "the production of surplus value, the absorption of surplus-labour" (Marx 265), exhaustion marks both its limit and objective.

Surplus capital continues to rise as ecological surplus falls, a tendency towards exhaustion that constitutes “an irreconcilable contradiction between the project of capital and the work of the natures that make that project possible" (Moore 114-115). Exhaustion is thus the point at which dialectical and logical contradictions meet. The work/energy capacities of human and extra-human natures are simply not boundless and so capital is eventually forced to bear a greater share of its own costs.

For this reason, exhaustion may not always involve “an obvious withering of ‘vital forces’” (Moore 68). More frequently, “exhaustion manifests in the inability of a given production complex to yield a rising stream of unpaid work” (Moore 68). Before their utter physical exhaustion, then, laborers may work-to-rule, strike, or engage in all-out class struggle. Before certain crop varieties become extinct, their cultivation may be rendered obsolete by soil erosion, nutrient depletion, or wild fires. Moore suggests that this gap between the limits of capital and survival offers us some hope (111). Gilles Deleuze also writes of exhaustion more hopefully than the term might usually connote. He opens his essay “The Exhausted” with the ambivalent statement, "Exhausted is a whole lot *more* than tired" (3; emphasis mine). In one sense, Deleuze is distinguishing levels of extremity between exhaustion and tiredness. But in another sense, he is pointing to the paradoxical way that exhaustion actually creates possibilities even while wearing others down. As he explains,

> The tired no longer prepares for any possibility... he therefore cannot realize the smallest possibility... But possibility remains, because you never realize all of the possible, you even bring it into being as you realize some of it. The tired has only exhausted realization, while the exhausted exhausts all of the possible. (Deleuze “The Exhausted” 3)

This distinction between tiredness and exhaustion recalls Moore’s distinction between the limits of capital and the limits of survival— there is a space of hope between both. But whereas Moore

is concerned only with the near-exhaustion of our world's materials, Deleuze is interested in the complete exhaustion of our world's possibilities. There is an "inexhaustible series of all these exhausteds" and, at the same time, it is only through the exhaustion of all possibilities that a truly new order of possibility can emerge (Deleuze "The Exhausted" 8). For Deleuze, exhaustion is thus a continual project of world-making.

In a way that reflects many of my arguments about *True Detective*'s visual aesthetic, Deleuze describes an "Image" as what emerges from the total exhaustion of word and object.[xliii] Speaking of the way Samuel Beckett "exhaust[s] the possible with words," Deleuze describes "a metalanguage… in which the relations of objects are identical to the relations of words" ("The Exhausted" 6). In Beckett's theatre, words can no more be reduced to signification than can objects. Words do not realize the possible, but rather "give to the possible its own (precisely exhaustible) reality" (Deleuze "The Exhausted" 6). Exhausted of representational meaning, words become objects. But even these word-objects must be exhausted for the image to emerge. The image "disengages from its object so as to become in itself a process— a possible event that doesn't even have to realize itself in the body of an object any longer" (Deleuze "The Exhausted" 18). Similarly, the oily narratives that emerge from the show do not belong *within* or *to* a particular word, or object, or even visual frame. They rather emanate like Deleuze's image from a general ecological and aesthetic arrangement.

As I have already explained, however, these oily narratives must be extracted from *True Detective*'s ecological and aesthetic arrangement. This extraction of the image onto the diegetic level involves what Deleuze calls "dissipation" ("The Exhausted" 11). That is, the image is "inseparable from the movement through which it dissipates" as it merges "with the detonation, the combustion, the dissipation of [its] condensed energy" (Deleuze "The Exhausted" 18; 11).

Image-dissipation describes the object-oriented methodology I have been developing throughout this chapter— words and objects take on the same ontological depth and independence, then exhaustively leach out an inexhaustible number of images, and immediately dissipate as they arrive for diegetic extraction. "Such is the revelatory power of the Image in its immediacy before discourse turns it into a concept" (Walter A. Davis 36). As it so happens, Deleuze likens this image-dissipation to “a cloud or some smoke”— a trope wafting throughout the examples in this chapter (Deleuze “The Exhausted” 18).

The problem of political exhaustion is paramount to the green movement today. Building off the work of Moore and Tsing, for example, Haraway decries the way “we are ensorcelled in despair, cynicism, or optimism, and the belief/disbelief discourse of Progress" (*SwtT* 51). On the one hand, optimism in our technocratic fixes to ecological catastrophe conspires with capitalism by simply improving the *efficiency* of our “natural resource” exploitation. On the other hand, resignation also conspires with capitalism by extending its reach and hegemony. As Fredric Jameson famously put this latter point, “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. We can now revise that and witness the attempt to imagine capitalism by way of imagining the end of the world” (“Future City”). Haraway’s insistence that we “stay with the trouble” is an attempt to mediate these two extremes, as she promises that "another world is not only urgently needed, it is possible” (51). This problem of political exhaustion is especially oppressive in the Louisiana setting of *True Detective,* thoroughly recorded by Hochschild in her ethnographic study of Tea Party supporters, *Strangers in Their Own Land.* Hochschild seeks to reconcile what she calls the "Great Paradox": why do the people who would seem to benefit most from “liberal” government intervention abhor the very idea?

In particular, her analysis focuses on how these voters think about the state's environmental crises. For, Louisiana has literally been saturated by oil leaks and industrial pollution. There are nearly 400 miles of low, flat, subsiding coastline, and a football field-size patch of wetland is lost every hour. It is threatened by rising sea levels and severe hurricanes, which the world's top scientists connect to climate change, while overfishing threatens the ecologic and economic stability of the entire gulf coast. Hochschild also points to the state's higher rates of obesity, substance abuse, trauma-related deaths, and cancer. Her interviewees lived these statistics intimately— their labor brings them into the petrochemical plants/oil rigs/fisheries, their hunger brings them to hunt/plant the land, and their homes bring them to the fields/bayous that have become dumping grounds for toxic waste. It should not be surprising that everyone she interviewed wanted a cleaner environment. And yet, everywhere she confronted both "great pollution and great resistance to regulating polluters" (21). To reconcile this paradox, Hochschild rejects the commonplace liberal disparagement that these people have been duped into voting against their interests and rather "discovers powerful forces— fear of cultural eclipse, economic decline, perceived government betrayal— which override self-interest, as progressives see it" (np).

Hochschild skirts around the topic of race— going so far as to say that red state poverty "transcends race"— and rather distils these anti-government sentiments into three issues: 1) government curtailment of religious faith, 2) hatred of high and progressive taxes, and 3) loss of honor which is exacerbated by disrespect from the Left. Although she does not engage the matter of race in her analysis, Hochschild offers a non-paternalistic approach to such views on the Right— understanding them not simply as the result of cultural hegemony or stupidity, but as a nuanced and morally structured ecological thought. We might very well call this perspective a

"deep South deep ecology." The police, perhaps more than any other organization, take on this loathed task of government intervention. Rust's nickname, "The Taxman," links him to another of the most invasive government bodies. And, as Bryan Wagner has shown in *Disturbing the Peace*, these far reaching powers of intervention have historically enabled the government to enact violence against the poor and people of color. Indeed, Rust claims in one scene that officers of the law have the power to "kill with impunity." In *True Detective*, the police's failure to fully resolve Dora Lange's murder or to "drain the swamp" on neoliberal collusion between churches, petro-industry, and their own department points to the inadequacy of the interventionist measures that are often demanded by the green movement and yet so resisted by the subjects of Hochschild's study.

This political exhaustion they often describe also shows up in the affective disposition of characters populating *True Detective*'s petrochemical mise-en-scène. Indeed, Rust's suggestion that we all "walk hand in hand into extinction" expresses some of the fatalistic and radically anti-human tenets of the deep ecology movement. *True Detective* thus brings this anti-social posture of the deep ecologists to the social realities of the Deep South, but the show offers Rust's nihilistic vision as only one option amongst rich political bio-diversity. As I have demonstrated, the show refuses the hegemony of any one narrative or perspective as the convoluted plot spirals outwards to incorporate any number of "leads." This exhausting diegetic plot also opens up many hopeful possibilities, however, as the Deleuzian notion of exhaustion attests. Through my extractive object-oriented methodology, for example, an inexhaustible series of narratives emerge as they dissipate: petro-capitalism is brought into relation with toxic masculinity, as well as the repressed racial memories of Southern plantation slavery and US neocolonial war. Ultimately, then, the image-dissipation that Deleuze describes can offer us a fresh reading of

political exhaustion. Perhaps this exhaustion of the political is precisely what we need to imagine— even if momentarily— a new order of possibility beyond or between the cracks of capitalism and its means-ends utilitarian framework.

"Narratives of Disposability: Race and Ecology in Contemporary Media"

Conclusion

The preceding chapters have each sketched a distinct means by which disposability operates in narrative. Chapter one explained how the background/foreground binary discriminates between the relative meaning, value, and power of narrative elements. The ethical stakes of this binary have been revealed by the history of AIDS inaction and environmental neglect— two sites of collateral damage in America's "progress" narrative. In her descriptions of background setting, Sarah Schulman draws these sites together and thus renders AIDS "wastes" coextensive with actual trash, placing both within a literal and figurative "atmosphere" of apocalypse. This monstrous background frequently impinges upon the foregrounded elements and main action of *People in Trouble* such that her very narrative ultimately collapses from exhaustion. I then applied these insights to the actual histories of AIDS and climate activism, demonstrating how both movements emerged from the same socio-political context and challenged the same aesthetic principles underlying their neglect. I thus suggested reconceiving historical process, not simply as the forward movement of foregrounded elements, but also as the powerful firmament of backgrounded *contexts*. In contrast to the examples I offered in my introduction which revealed how narratives can fully exclude or eliminate certain elements (like the fork dropped into a garbage can), this chapter focused upon a form of differential inclusion or what I also called "absent presence." Likewise, my second chapter also explored a form of differential inclusion. However, while backgrounded elements are always *neglected*, the macrostructural relations of aboutness that I considered in chapter two usually *highlight* their disposable elements (a difference also reflected in the more active, conscious, and explicit forms

of racialized social control wielded through mass incarceration as opposed to the forms of policy neglect and corporate greed which exacerbated AIDS and global warming).

I demonstrated how plot and theme each *require* events and motifs respectively even though these elements are never necessary in and of themselves. Moreover, a narrative element that offers some utility to plot may not do so in the same way, or even at all, for theme. Thus, depending upon which structuring operation and organizing logic one engages, a different configuration of means and ends will emerge. Those narrative elements which are configured as the means to a larger end (or perhaps irrelevant to that end altogether) are at risk of oversight and outright abandonment, especially in subsequent retellings. Margaret Atwood is centrally concerned with the narrative politics of duplication in *The Heart Goes Last* (which is, significantly, a novel version of her e-serial). Throughout, Atwood stages a conflict between plot and theme, each variously struggling to appropriate or redirect the other. As I evidenced with a close reading of this conflict and through an overview of narrative theory, plot and theme both engage different forms of what I called "duplication" (for lack of a better word). The former works through a system of repetitions whereas the latter works through a system of resemblances. Each, moreover, pertains to a different kind of referent: "events" and "motifs" respectively. As a result, Atwood evinces how disposability is attendant upon these two forms of duplication. And, she situates these concerns over narrative disposability within the context of mass incarceration (an institution many abolitionists have described as an example of racialized disposability governance). For, it turns out this conflict between theme and plot maps directly onto that between Afro-pessimists and neo-Marxists who invoke these respective frames to explain the history of racialized mass incarceration. The all too easy elimination of race from the neo-Marxist perspective (evidenced by the whitening of mass incarceration in Atwood's novel)

results from the different kind of referent and organizing logic with which it engages. In this second chapter, then, I turned away from shared historical contexts to consider how accounts of the same historical trajectory can become torn and conflictual. Thus, while attention to form can sometimes inspire or reconceive political solidarities (between AIDS and climate activists for example), it may also simply offer an account of why reconciliation and consensus are strictly impossible.

Chapter three turned to "exhaustion" as an affective response to these kinds of narrative and political impossibility. Readers of Schulman and Atwood also likely find themselves experiencing this exhaustion as both authors continually disrupt their own narrative possibilities. And, this experience is mirrored by the political exhaustion of their own characters. In chapter three, though, I turn to exhaustion as a narrative alternative to "endings" (which produce disposability in what they foreclose). I consider how HBO's *True Detective* fails a sense of closure in two ways. Firstly, based on the premise of a single murder, the narrative eventually spins out of control as it gathers transnational networks of religious organization, political interest, drug trade, and oil capital. Thus, while the case technically "closes" after the death of Errol Childress for detectives and audiences alike, Rust and Marty are dissatisfied with this conclusion. For, their very investigation into the murder of Dora Lange opened an inexhaustible number of pandora's boxes which are never ultimately resolved. Indeed, the final episode's *deus ex machina* seems to end the narrative out of exhaustion more than any sense of real closure. Audiences are thus likely to experience the same feelings of exhaustion expressed by both detectives (evidenced by the gratuitous conspiracy theories, fan-fiction alternatives, and Easter-egg analyses which proliferated online). Most importantly, the show's visual aesthetic clearly links these entangled legal crimes and ethical offenses to the overarching problem of

petrocapitalism. Indeed, this "petrochemical hyperobject" looming throughout the series is exposed as the true culprit for Lange's murder along with the prevalence of disease and disability amongst other characters, the continuing racial legacies of slavery and colonialism, as well as the violent effects of toxic masculinity. This "oily aesthetic" or "toxic screen" amounts to the second way that *True Detective* challenges closure though exhaustion. For, at least three narratives emerge from this ecological and aesthetic arrangement: petro-capitalism is brought into relation with toxic masculinity, as well as the repressed racial memories of Southern plantation slavery and US neocolonial war. Within this non-diegetic realm, then, a potentially endless number of new narratives may emerge as images, thus challenging the very possibility and expectation of closure inherent to narrative form.

With this last chapter summary, then, I now "close" my dissertation with a coda. There are just a few further points which may be gleaned from this project as a whole. In particular, I promised in the introduction to deal with the status of history and ethics within my formalist approach to disposability. It may seem strange, for example, that I have taken such pains to place my examples of disposability within their historical contexts given that I have centrally claimed this phenomenon is *trans*historical. It may also seem strange, moreover, that I have focused so exclusively on contemporary examples of disposability given my insistence that disposability is not unique to this period. However, just because disposability is a constitutive part of narrative and is thus transhistorical (especially since I do not limit narrative to the realm of human thought and action), does *not* mean that this phenomenon always occurs with the same regularity, intensity, or effects. Indeed, I have emphasized the very different ways that narrative may entail disposability— each spanning degrees of differential inclusion to outright exclusion— which will also manifest differently according to historical context as well as to whom or what is being

most affected. I have thus introduced differentiation within the already homogenizing language of "disposability" which has been so widely applied to our contemporary crises. Moreover, I have offered contemporary examples throughout my chapters only because I have attempted to remain focused on those which are most ethically significant to us.

Nevertheless, a close reading of *Antigone*, written in or before 441 BC, should demonstrate more conclusively how disposability is in fact a transhistorical phenomenon. The dénouement to Sophocles's three Theban plays, *Antigone* unfolds through a set of binaries: life versus death, spirit versus matter, doing versus allowing, the political State versus the state of nature, to name only a few. Given these themes, most critics have conceived the play as alternately an ethical treatise about the duties of mankind (Hegel's *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*; Lacan's *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*), an exploration of the limits to sovereign power (Žižek's *Antigone*), or a proto-feminist statement about the power of willful women (Butler's *Antigone's Claim*). In contrast, I return to the question of materiality that the play itself revolves around: the ontological possibility and ethical stakes of disposing of bodies. Opening this tragedy, Antigone explains to her sister Ismene how their brothers Polyneices and Eteoclês have killed each other in a bid for the throne following the death of their father and half-brother Oedipus. King Creon has subsequently claimed power, burring Eteoclês with full honors while leaving Polyneices for "carrion birds to find as they search for food" (4-5). Breaking the King's commandment and disregarding her sister's concern, Antigone buries Polyneices— a crime for which she is banished to the "wilderness" and "lock(ed)… Living in a vault of stone" (46). Creon ensures that "She shall have food. As the custom is, to absolve the State of her death" (46). "[I]f she lives or dies," Creon explains, "[t]hat's her affair, not ours: our hands are clean" (46). But his sense of righteous innocence deteriorates as Antigone's death inspires a domino

effect. First her betrothed Haimon commits suicide, then his mother Euridice follows, and finally Creon pleads to join his family as well (uncle to Antigone, father to Haimon, and husband to Euridice). The sheer quantity of these deaths may obscure how they are differently administered and memorialized throughout. But, as if entombing the play at start and finish, the deaths of Polyneices and Antigone are rendered distinct. In the words of Creon's advisor and seer, "The one [is] on a grave before her death, the other, Dead, [is] denied the grave" (61-62). Each occupies a liminal space between life and death, exemplifying how Creon governs through a logic and tactic of disposability. The play is, after all, centrally about the disposal of these bodies— a drama constructed around both the disappearance of outcasted citizens as well as the stubborn endurance of their bodies and legacies against the King's preferred historical chronicle.

Indeed, narrative is inextricably connected with the ethical and political stakes of disposability in this play. No deaths are performed on stage but are instead related anecdotally, such that the physical absences of Polyneices and Antigone are felt as ghostly presences which in turn dictate subsequent events. *Antigone* thus explores the ethical imperatives and political possibilities of disposability, but the play also interrogates how this phenomenon is fundamentally connected with story-telling. This was the central thesis of my dissertation: disposability is not *only* a set of governing practices unique to modern politics, but also a constitutive aspect of narrative. On the one hand, narrative can capture the movement of an object from presence to absence without which a "disposal" would not definitively occur. On the other hand, narrative also sustains the ambiguous relation of agency involved in such disposals whereby disappearances can be *made* to happen simply by *stating* they did. Both points may be observed in Creon's pronouncement:

> Eteocles, who died as a man should die, fighting for his country, is to be buried with full military honors, with all the ceremony that is usual when the greatest heroes die; but his brother Polyneices, who broke his exile to come back with fire and sword against his native city and the shrines of his fathers' gods, whose one idea was to spill the blood of his blood and sell his own people into slavery— Polyneices, I say, is to have no burial: no man is to touch him or say the least prayer for him; he shall lie on the plain, unburied; and the birds and the scavenging dogs can do with him whatever they like. (14)

Here, Creon conjures Polyneices only to kill him again. Recounting his former presence, Creon can *evidence* Polyneices's subsequent disappearance. Without this story, Polyneices's death would be a non-event and his lack of burial would thus hold no meaning politically, spiritually, or otherwise.

It is also through this story that Creon can claim agency over a non-action: leaving Polyneices to decompose above the ground. Later, Creon repeats a similar magic trick only in reverse when he surrenders responsibility for Antigone's death which is both obscured by the walls of her tomb and delayed by his gift of food. Creon may thus exchange allowing for doing and doing for allowing, whatever is most politically efficacious at the time. Likewise, with disposable cutlery, it might be my fault for throwing the plastic away (I am thus the moral agent), or it might be the fault of our consumer culture for producing this plastic (the fork thus takes on agency as a material that asks to be thrown away— marketed as such, but also easily breakable, lightweight, and unattractive). Clearly the concept of disposability cannot settle on the site of blame. Narrative, when understood as *a sequence of events*, thus captures the transfiguration implied by the word "disposal." Unlike other aesthetic forms and phenomena, narrative performs, or perhaps simply traces, this slippage from presence to absence. Likewise, when understood as the *frame* for such a sequence of events, narrative also structures the ambiguous agency inherent to the term "disposal." To raise an age-old question, does narrative merely describe or also determine these events? Indeed, it is this very confusion between what

Gérard Genette has called "story" and "narrative" respectively that has caused me to hesitate here over the words "perform" and "trace" (27). Creon also stumbles upon this dilemma when he attacks Teiresias for warning him about the play's tragic end. Creon imputes agency and thus moral responsibility onto Teiresias for a conclusion they are both apparently powerless to subvert. Narrative theory can thus explain *what* disposability is as well as *why* it is so wrought with ethical and political implications.[xliv]

And, yet, while the source of this very real-world problem can be traced back to our story-worlds, disposability also reveals the ontological limits constructed within and by narrative. Even the most powerful narratives, spoken by the most powerful narrators, cannot wield their tyranny over all the objects they seek to make their subjects. Against King Creon's intended desecration, these objects assert their independence, endurance, and dignity. The bodies of Polyneices and Antigone do not truly disappear. They wreak havoc on his kingdom and determine the play's tragic end. Likewise, our narratives are responsible for the processes of waste and neglect which have caused tremendous ecological catastrophe. But this claim is not the same as suggesting that the world and its crises are figments of our imaginations. Ultimately, then, I do not contest the fact that modernity arose out of mass genocide and consumption, nor that neoliberalism could be best described in Elizabeth Povinelli's words as a new "economy of abandonment." But such phenomena also clearly predate this history. I claim that disposability is, essentially, the conceit of non-existence. When I throw away a plastic fork, it does not disappear in its own right, but simply ceases to matter in my story. In the words of Jane Bennet, such items become "*vibratory*— at one moment disclosing themselves as dead stuff and at the next as live presence: junk, then claimant; inert matter, then live wire" (5; emphasis added). This science fictional and/or supernatural discovery (reflecting some of the genres with which I have

most engaged) has been described by Timothy Morton as "Realist Magic"— offering a truce between those in post-structuralism who imagine the world as a kind of fabrication of human mental, textual, or performative activity with those in new materialism who praise the independence and intransigence of objects in themselves.

Beginning with the same premise— a structure's manifestation *for us* is not the same as that structure's existence *in itself*— poststructuralism and OOOism reach diametrically opposite conclusions: the former is moved to doubt what lies beyond human-access whereas the latter is encouraged all the more to trust, not only the powerful intransigence, but also the magical dynamism of what lies beyond our reach. I thus want to give new shading to the ontological binary being/non-being. Humans do not have the power to entirely (re)shape the world, but the narrative powers we do have are clearly earth-threatening. I also counter those who approach the topic of disposability as only a reigning paradigm of modernity or neoliberalism, contending instead that we must approach social justice questions— not only with the historicizing impulses of Marx or Jameson— but also by understanding the political efficacy of form itself and, in this case, narrative. However, my goal has been precisely *not* to gut these crises of their political urgency— a danger attendant upon all projects that work toward basic (and thus transhistorical) principles.

Instead, I have analyzed how different kinds and contexts of disposability determine these ethical stakes. I would now like to consider the additional possibility that analyzing disposability may displace politics from the realm of human affairs into the very fabric of Being itself. While narrative traces the continual *presence* of an object as it comes into new relations, disposability marks the point(s) at which other once-related objects *withdraw* from this narrative frame. In this view, disposability seems to be a rather harmless phenomenon— simply a matter

of when and how an object might "pop up its head" into or out of relations with others. Such is the view of many object-oriented ontologists including Harman and Bryant who describe ontology as the "democracy of objects." But this view simply reverses the mistake of poststructuralism, this time abolishing the realm of meaning rather than that of being. Meaning and value exist just as surely as objects do, however, even if we may forever dispute *what* is to be valued, *how*, and *why*. Indeed, this very disagreement provides evidence, not only that meaning and value *exist*, but also that they *matter*— a circular argument, to be sure, but it turns out that the pudding is actually in the proof. Here, I would like to posit that meaning emerges from the present-at-hand relations between objects (the mallet acquires value as a tool for Dasein, Dasein acquires value as a worker of tools). And yet, as Harman writes, "since every relation can also be regarded as an entity," we return again to the intrinsic connection between meaning and being. That is, the value that emerges from a present-at-hand relation can be re-described from another angle as an entity's ready-to-hand existence (e.g. a mallet-Dasein object).

The direct corollary, according to Simone de Beauvoir, is that existence is also the basis of value. As she writes, "Before existence there is no more reason to exist than not to exist. The lack of existence can not be evaluated since it is the fact on the basis of which all evaluation is defined. It can not be compared to anything for there is nothing outside of it to serve as a term of comparison" (de Beauvoir 15). As Harman similarly writes, "the world is jam-packed with entities" so "there is no room for 'nothingness' in ontology" (11). One may simply focus *either* on an object (being) *or* the relations between its parts (meaning). In contrast to those who claim OOOism erases questions of ethics and politics, then, I believe these relations of meaning and value emerge precisely from the ontological fabric of our world. We may not be able to find an ontological foundation for specific normative pronouncements or evaluative hierarchies (which

was precisely the metaphysical error of Fascism and Fascist sympathizers like Heidegger— to confuse meaning with being), but ontology can help us to explain why ethical relations like care, duty, and debt exist at all. This is also to admit, however, that ethics and politics are not solely the prerogatives of human society. Indeed, Harman suggestively invokes politically significant terms such as "strife," "rift," "war" and even "crisis" to describe the relation between presence and withdrawal that I frame in terms of "disposability." For example, a table supporting a stack of books can be envisioned (perhaps strenuously) as a relation of "care" in Harman's neo-Heideggerian sense[xlv] just as much as an activist's concern for the oppressed (though this concern surely *manifests* in different ways and the latter may be more important to us *as* humans). To be sure, this is not to say that we *as* humans or *as* conscious Dasein (a title which might extend more easily to other sentient creatures) are not compelled to care more for oppressed humans and other Dasein. It simply means that, from the perspective of the many other objects inhabiting the world, there is nothing *ontologically special* about the care we share with other humans. The reasons why we are more ethically beholden to other humans (if, indeed, we are— a claim which is certainly up for debate in many circles of eco-criticism) would instead have to be pursued anthropologically, biologically, historically, politically, or through some other ontic-level investigation.

Introduction Notes

[i] For example, in *Imagining Extinction*, Ursula Heise reveals her "central thesis… is that however much individual environmentalists may be motivated by a selfless devotion to the well-being of nonhuman species, however much individual conservation scientists may be driven by an eagerness to expand our knowledge and understanding of the species with whom we co-inhabit the planet, their engagements with these species gain sociocultural traction to the extent that they become part of the stories that human communities tell about themselves: stories about their origins, their development, their identity, and their future horizons" (5).

[ii] He writes that a specter is "neither living nor dead, present nor absent... It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death. It requires, then, what we call... hauntology. We will take this category to be irreducible, and first of all to everything it makes possible: ontology, theology, positive or negative onto-theology" (Derrida 63). Derrida's equivocation between death and absence here evinces his confusion between the realms of being and meaning. The conceit of non-existence *for us* must not be confused with true non-existence *in itself*. For, if we confuse absence with death, we confirm a form of anthropocentric idealism that has been responsible for actual mass extinctions and genocides. This is how disposability wreaks its havoc: the conceit of non-existence obscures, justifies, and intensifies the material processes of actual destruction. We are thus faced with a difficult task: we must understand how disposability wreaks havoc through its claim to having already done so and yet we must not confirm or extend this claim at the ontological level. We must see through Derrida's apparition.

[iii] While my perhaps too-easy equivocation between "object" and "structure" may strike many as inappropriate, Harman himself describes OOOism in his book *Tool-Being* as "a renewed theory of *substantial forms"* (2; original emphasis). Again, in his sequel *Guerilla Metaphysics*, he writes that objects "are not ultimate materials, but autonomous *forms*, forms somehow coiled up or folded in the crevices of the world and exerting their power on all that approaches them" (*GM* 19).

[iv] There is nothing ontologically special about a clock in this regard since, as Harman writes, this "drama of philosophy plays out in all objects" whether real or sensual, human or not (*Tool-Being* 135).

Chapter One Notes

[v] As Jane Rosett explained in her interview for Ann Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings*, "Too often people mark the beginning of AIDS activism with the founding of ACT UP. But by then, generations of [people with AIDS] had died fighting for their lives" (181). One of the earliest organizations, the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), was established in 1982. But, frustrated with the organization's inability to enact quick and comprehensive political change, several founding members left in the mid to late 1980s to work with ACT UP. Another early organization, the Kaposi's Sarcoma Research and Education Foundation was founded in 1982 and was then renamed the San Francisco AIDS Foundation in 1984— a transformation that reveals the coming-into-being of "AIDS" as a medical and political category. The People with AIDS Coalition (PWA Coalition / PWAC) was founded in New York City in 1985, and the National Black Leadership Commission on AIDS, Inc. was founded in 1987. Other activist groups formed with and after ACT UP, including the Community Research Initiative on AIDS (CRIA) in 1991 and the National AIDS Housing Coalition in 1993. I do not seek to further cement reductive histories about AIDS activism by focusing exclusively on ACT UP. Rather, I will demonstrate how their particular brand of creative and often campy direct-action tactics were informed by a new environmental awareness about global climate change and ozone depletion. ACT UP also plays a significant biographical role in the political and artistic life of Sarah Schulman who authored *People in Trouble*— the novel in which I will situate these arguments.

[vi] I do not suggest that awareness about global ecological crisis *began* in the late 1970s or 1980s. As far back as the 1950s, newspapers and popular magazines featured issues on climate change. Even President Lyndon B. Johnson mentioned the term in a message to Congress in 1965. Moreover, the first image of Earth taken from space in 1968 prompted many people to reflect on the planet's striking beauty, vulnerability, and singularity. However, Jamieson notes several scientific discoveries and political transformations throughout the late 1970s and 1980s that signal a marked shift in public concern about global ecological crises such as climate change and ozone depletion. Scientists increasingly viewed the Earth as a single interconnected system and, "with the development of computerized climate models, it became possible to glimpse the consequences for the Earth of anthropogenic carbon emissions. Change was happening so quickly that the human impact on the planet was now on the same scale as that of geological forces" (Jamieson 2). According to Jamieson, moreover, "The arrival of the Reagan administration in 1981 was a wake-up call" because all of his "initial environmental appointees were radical anti-environmentalists" (28). "A typical story from that time," he explains, "is that when GISS scientist James Hansen's research showing that the world had warmed was reported on the front page of the *New York Times*," the Department of Energy canceled his research funding (28). Climate policy "was not going to be made on Reagan's watch, and research money was not going to be wasted on the environment when it could be spent on the military" (Jamieson 28). Furthermore, "While the possibility that human action could deplete stratospheric ozone had been discussed and debated since the early 1970s, the 1985 discovery of the Antarctic ozone hole, which no model had predicted, shocked people around the world. This discovery showed how subtle changes in the atmosphere can produce surprising, unintended consequences that can threaten the prospects for life on earth" (Jamieson 31). The 1988 election year reinvigorated the shared sense of climate concern that had been repressed under Reagan. " The Democratic platform promised to address the "greenhouse effect" while the Republican candidate, George H.W. Bush, promised to counter the greenhouse effect with "the White House Effect" and declared himself the "environmental president" (qtd. in Jamieson 31). "On December 6, 1988," notes Jamieson, "the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 43/53 on the 'Conservation of climate as part of the common heritage of mankind'" (33).

[vii] 1982 was also the year that "AIDS" was first coined, coming to replace the terms "WOGS" and "GRID."

[viii] However, while 1988 might have signaled the moment when America finally acknowledged the global scope of ecological catastrophe, this awareness had already been developing within the international community. The United Nations (UN) held its first conference on the environment in 1972 when it established the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). In 1979, the UNEP collaborated with the World Meteorological Organization to host the first World Climate Conference. The World Climate Programme emerged from this conference and then held a series of increasingly high-profile meetings throughout the 1980s, concluding by 1985 that "the rate and degree of future warming could be profoundly affected by governmental policies" (qtd. in Jamieson 29). This 1985 meeting gave birth, in turn, to the Advisory Group on Greenhouse Gasses, whose mandate was to "initiate if necessary, consideration of a global convention" (qtd. in Jamieson 30). The UN General Assembly had created the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1983. In 1987— the year ACT UP was founded— the WCED issued a report titled *Our Common Future* which "was regarded by many as a manifesto for

the world to come" (Jamieson 3). The Montreal Protocol was also signed that year— a global agreement to protect the stratospheric ozone layer by phasing out the production and consumption of ozone-depleting substances. In the following year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was created "to provide objective, policy-relevant information about climate change to decision-makers around the world" (Jamieson 3). The IPCC published voluminous consensus reports throughout the 1990s and 2000s, "reflecting the growth of scientific knowledge about the seriousness of the threat" (Jamieson 3). Jamieson marks "the beginning of a truly global environmental movement" in 1992 when "the largest gathering of heads of state ever assembled met at the Rio Earth Summit and more than 17,000 people attended the alternative NGO forum" (3).

[ix] This image of marine debris coincidently emerges in Harman's description of object-withdrawal. "Like the giant squids of the Marianas Trench," he writes, "tool-beings are encountered only once they have washed up dead on the shore, no longer immersed in their withdrawn reality" (Harman *Tool-Being* 4-5). Schulman's apocalyptic beach wastes convey a similar message about how the binary of presence and withdrawal shapes the environmental and human crises of neglect she highlights in her novel.

[x] Recall this ambiguity as a hallmark of disposability: if the concept imputes a sense of material agency— that objects have a "disposition"— it also conjures images of dead and useless matter— that objects are "at our disposal."

[xi] Similar shifts in environmental consciousness may, of course, be historicized through other periods. For example, many literary critics (Timothy Morton included) have focused on the Romantic sublime and the Gothic personification of nature to make these points. According to Ursula Heise, like the recognition of global warming in the 1970s and 80s, the early nineteenth century marked a "seismic shift" in Western perceptions of nature. "In the face of the first wave of sustained industrialization around 1800," she writes, "a perception that had only occasionally surfaced in earlier centuries began to make itself felt as a new cultural dominant: the sense that humans were endangering nature on a grand scale, rather than the other way around" (Heise 6). Significantly, Emily Steinlight focuses on precisely this period in her study *Populating the Novel: Literary Form and the Politics of Surplus* wherein she observes a similar literary trend to the one I chart in the United States during the 1980s. In particular, she traces the emergence of biopolitical thought in the crowded scenes of nineteenth-century fiction. Rather "than dramatizing a conventionally Romantic tension between internal self and external society," she explains, "nineteenth-century texts radically rearticulate what it means to belong to a human aggregate" (2). Previously, political thought tended to presume that population increases correlated with social vitality. With Malthusian theories about the dangers of surplus life, however, the novel provided a new way to narrate human aggregation and waste as an unwieldy, uncontainable, and disruptive background. Sometimes novelists would even push this "already perceptible problem out of the background and into the foreground" by "making protagonists out of the human surplus disposed of in classic novels of formation" (169). Thus, to some extent, the novel form that Schulman adopts has always gestured to its own agential background settings.

However, Steinlight focuses purely on how this new configuration of *human* surplus came to dominate (bio)political thought. While Schulman represents human collectivities, mobs, and loiterers in the way Steinlight describes of the earliest novelists, she also extends these images of the extra-human "masses" to include descriptions of non-human trash and atmospheric warming in her background settings. Moreover, she and her peers uniquely brought these powers of the novel to bear on the neglected crisis of AIDS in particular. This generation of activist-artists thus exposed a different "contradiction within the category of the human" (2). For Steinlight, "A sudden destabilization or even repudiation of humanity appears to follow from writers' encounters with this concentrated human multitude" (2). Schulman, however, seeks not to understand how humans-in-general become estranged from humanity-in-general, but rather the specific way that people with AIDS were denied this humanity and how their organization *as* a human multitude offered them a political alternative to neglect. In this case, the multitude offers a corrective to the ambivalent category of the "Human." Moreover, the sense of self-estrangement Steinlight describes was, by the 1980s, being narrated through confrontations with our newly-realized enmeshment with the "natural" environment and its terrifying power over us, as well as our vulnerability to viral epidemic (especially when knowledge about HIV contraction was relatively unclear and widely misrepresented). In other words, by the time *People in Trouble* was published, it was becoming more and more difficult to draw a line between the individual and his or her environment, let alone with the human multitude.

So, if the novel has always served as a site of encounter and estrangement, then Schulman pushes this to the extreme. She thus demonstrates how the form is at odds with itself— divided between the richly described and densely populated background elements on the one hand, and the foregrounded main action that drives the plot on the other. Interestingly, Steinlight maintains that the cultural transformations of the nineteenth century emerged from discoveries in the natural sciences (Darwinian evolution), political radicalization (the demands for democratic government), and intense economic pressures (the emergence of industrial capitalism). These parallel the catalysts for our new environmental consciousness: discoveries in human-induced climate change, protests against the conservative face of American democracy, and neoliberal austerity measures. Ultimately, then, I do not maintain the historical *exclusivity* of my argument, but rather that certain historical moments develop (perhaps renewed) interests in certain forms that can reconfigure relationships to environment. This combination of social, economic, and scientific factors tends to reshape human experiences of space whereby elements of "background" (whether human surpluses or greenhouse gasses) come throttling into the "foreground." This conflict between background and foreground is, I believe, a constitutive aspect of all narratives (and, indeed, likely all aesthetic phenomena). As a form that seems to embrace this conflict, the novel has offered both nineteenth century writers and 1980's AIDS activists like Schulman the opportunity to stage the operations of disposability.

[xii] "Since everything is interconnected," Morton writes in *The Ecological Thought*, "there is no definite background and therefore no definite foreground" (28). In Schulman's novel, this interconnection is primarily revealed through the coextensive descriptions of AIDS and climate change. Likewise, Morton reveals how this "ecological thought" has emerged from a historical moment alert to climate change: "We can no longer have that reassuringly trivial conversation about the weather with someone in the street, as a way to break the ice or pass the time. The conversation either trails off into a disturbingly meaningful silence, or someone mentions global warming. The weather no longer exists as a neutral-seeming background against which events take place" (Morton *The Ecological Thought* 28).

[xiii] Steinlight makes precisely this point: "The mass assumes its unique status in cultural modernity as a paradoxical unbinding of community through its own concentration; sociality takes on a dissociative and implicitly agonistic character with the increased proximity of bodies in a common environment. A sudden destabilization or even repudiation of humanity appears to follow from writers' encounters with this concentrated human multitude" (2). "The surplus of humanity that Thomas Malthus imagined pressing against the limits of society thus unexpectedly became an enabling condition for literary narrative-- and indeed... for modern political thought. In revealing the accumulation of life perpetually surpassing society proper, fiction gave form to what can now be called the biopolitical imagination"(3).

[xiv] Jason Moore writes of "the nature/Nature distinction: most humans were part of Nature, and this designation worked through the new divisions of labor. An African slave was not part of Society in new capitalist order, but part of Nature – giving a post-Cartesian twist to Patterson's characterization of slavery as "social death" (1982). Most human work was not labor-power and therefore most humans within capital's gravitational pull were not, or not really, Humans. This meant that the realm of Nature – as ontological formation and world-praxis – encompassed virtually all peoples of color, most women, and most people with white skin living in semicolonial regions (e.g. Ireland, Poland, etc.)" ("The Rise of Cheap Nature" n.p.).

[xv] Focusing on narrative structure more explicitly, Woloch notes a similar "fault line where an individual ceases to command attention as a qualitatively distinct being and begins to be viewed as a quantitative unit, absorbed into a larger number" (5).

[xvi] The National Academy of Sciences report on climate change published in 1980, infamously "concluded by recommending a 'balanced program of research,' and specifically asserted that '[w]e do not believe... that the evidence at hand about $C0_2$-induced climate change would support steps to change current fuel-use patterns away from fossil fuels'" (Jamieson 27-28). "A fault line was beginning to emerge among those studying climate change. Some warned against a 'wait and see' approach while others advocated exactly that. Some saw the science as primarily supporting a case for additional research and funding, while others saw it as supporting a case for policy action" (Jamieson 28). A similar divide emerged in the medical science and health policy communities: Should doctors abide by traditional research ethics with careful testing before human trials, control groups taking placebo drugs, and a drawn-out process of FDA approvals before distributing to the public? Or, should these conservative measures be dropped in the face of mass-death and political urgency?

[xvii] According to Jamieson, "the policies of Reagan and both Bushes were remarkably consistent: do as little as possible on climate change, rationalized by casting doubt on the science and exaggerating the costs of action" (35). Cohen and Treichler both note how the very same wait-and-see tactic was deployed by the Reagan administration to avoid direct policy action in the AIDS epidemic.

[xviii] While proto- queer and ecocritical theories were certainly being developed throughout the 1960s and 70s if not earlier, most of this work failed to crystallize into a coherent movement and instead fell under the rubric of feminism, post-structuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, human ecology, pastoralism, or regionalism, among other fields. Teresa de Lauretis is credited with coining the phrase "queer theory" in 1990 during a conference on lesbian and gay sexualities held at the University of California, Santa Cruz (Halperin 339). In 1991, she further developed the term in a special issue of *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* in which she claimed that "queer unsettles and questions the genderedness of sexuality" (de Lauretis iii). Other landmark texts followed including Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*, and David Halperin's *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*. Prior to these publications, "queer theory" developed without a name and largely in isolation. Similarly, as Cheryll Glotfelty has noted, "One indication of the disunity of the early efforts [in ecocriticism] is that these critics rarely cited one another's work; they didn't know that it existed... Each was a single voice howling in the wilderness" (vii). Scholars began to work collectively and intentionally by the mid-1980s to establish ecocriticism as a genre, but it was not until 1990 that Glotfelty became the first person to hold an academic position as a professor of Literature and the Environment. So too, the principle professional association for ecocriticism and environmental humanities, The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), was not founded until 1992 at a special session of the Western Literature Association conference in Reno, Nevada.

[xix] As early as 1993, Clark was theorizing these connections between the AIDS crisis and ecological catastrophe in his essay "From Gay Men's Lives: Toward a More Inclusive, Ecological Vision." Here, he insists that "We must speak against any cultural narrow-mindedness which sanctions anti-gay/lesbian violence, which sanctions apathetic and even judgmentally punitive attitudes toward AIDS among gay men, IV-drug users, the poor, and third world peoples of color, and which also sanctions the exploitation and disposability of the earth" (Clark "From Gay Men's Lives" 350). "These groups of people," he continues, "and all too much of the biosphere as well are, if not invisible even in liberal analyses, treated as devalued, disvalued, and disposable. Disvaluation and disposability not only affect our gay and lesbian lives through anti-gay/lesbian violence and AIDS-apathy, but also continue to shape environmental attitudes as well" (Clark "From Gay Men's Lives" 350).

[xx] As Castiglia and Reed have maintained, "Whether in the landscape or at home, these arguments run, queerness is constituted not in space but in the body of the queer: in his or her inhabitation, in his or her gaze. When he or she goes away, according to this logic, the queerness disappears, leaving none of the traces that might constitute a place of memory" (Castiglia & Reed 75).

[xxi] Two articles in the 1993 issue of *UnderCurrents* also noted how the AIDS epidemic significantly shaped ideas about nature and emerging eco-critical theories. In "Selling Sex, Selling Nature," Sarah Kerr analyzed an advertisement for suntan lotion that brought rhetoric about "safe sex" to bear on "safe sun" practices. "The ad is aimed at a culturally specific group which has a certain common area of knowledge," she wrote: "in this case the knowledge that the phrase 'practice safe sex' refers to the severity of the AIDS crisis and the fact that the spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases can be prevented by using condoms" (Kerr 44). Explicitly, the message is that sun protection can prevent cancer but, implicitly, the message is also that unprotected sex "can give us sexually transmitted diseases" (Kerr 44). Kerr concluded that "nature and sex are so closely linked in our minds" (44), a contention that Bruce Erickson and Catriona Sandilands would make seventeen year later in their anthology *Queer Ecologies*. Likewise, Jane Horsley considered the ethics of biotechnology laws in "'Capitalizing on the Wealth Buried Deep Within Living Matter,' or Politics and Patents." After describing how scientists have produced and then patented "AIDS on demand in mice," she asked: "what constitutes the injustice… in animal patents? The genetic engineering of the mouse in the first place, or the subsequent monopoly enabling the 'inventor' to profit from, and exclude others from, the use of the 'product'?" (Horsley 37). Horsley ultimately emphasized how one ethical framework erected to ensure the safety and dignity of PWAs may have clashed with another ethical framework set up to condemn animal testing. In other words, the repudiation of human-centered animal hierarchies now axiomatic in eco-criticism was here being squarely situated within a context of AIDS inaction and, in particular, the resultant demands for more research at whatever the cost (such as cutting red tape in the Food and Drug

Administration or medical ethics boards). AIDS also featured in the first issue (1993) of *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*.

[xxii] She coined this phrase more than ten years later, still referencing the immune system, though now outside the specific context of AIDS. In *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, she writes that "Immune systems are not a minor part of naturecultures; they determine where organisms, including people, can live and with whom. The history of the flu is unimaginable without the concept of the co-evolution of humans, pigs, fowl, and viruses" (31). Her groundbreaking work in eco-criticism thus clearly bears the marks of the AIDS crises, even if her rhetorical focus has shifted away from this original site. Many historians of AIDS in America have observed this kind of amnesia as a widespread cultural phenomenon (See Schulman; Castiglia and Reed).

Chapter Two Notes

[xxiii] This elision between syntactic and narrative levels was a primary shortcoming of early structuralism. "Structurally," Roland Barthes writes, "narrative belongs with the sentence without ever being reducible to the sum of its sentences: a narrative is a large sentence, just as any declarative sentence is, in a certain way, the outline of a little narrative" (241). I contend that analyzing narrative aboutness puts the errors of this equivalence into stark relief. Conversely, for its own contributions on this subject, reader-response criticism has rendered any formal study of aboutness practically impossible. Beyond the fact that neo-Marxists and Afro-pessimists belong to different "interpretive communities," it is also possible and even desirable to grasp the *structural nature* of these different interpretations. For example, it seems that their primary divergence stems from emphasizing different relations of aboutness.

[xxiv] The nature of Waldo's death demonstrates Jocelyn's ability to transform contingent events into necessary ones through the function of plot. "He had an accident," she explains, "Don't look at me like that, it was a real accident, involving a soldering iron" (Atwood 165).

[xxv] As it turns out, Ed was not satisfied with the robotic model and intended instead to have her brain surgically altered to love him. The image of the disembodied head returns again when Charmaine reflects that "She's mostly just a body to him, and now he wants to turn her into only a body. She might as well not have any head at all" (Atwood 274).

[xxvi] This move has also been deployed by proto-afro-pessimists. As Frantz Fanon wrote in *Wretched of the Earth*, "a Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched when it comes to addressing the colonial issue" (5). A quarter of a century later, Cedric Robinson wrote in *Black Marxism* that the "'masses' whom Marx presumed would be 'seized' by theory were European male wage laborers and artisans in the metropoles of Western Europe, Britain, and the United States... Marx consigned race, gender, culture, and history to the dustbin" (xxviii-xxix).

[xxvii] While Black people may *identify with* or *experience* any number of these subject positions, Blackness is always violently excluded from them on an *ontological* level. The contradiction between abolitionist ideals on the one hand (creating a world where prisons are obsolete), and their rhetorical structures or political desires on the other hand (unacknowledged attachment to a world organized by civil society) thus centers on "the positionality of Black subjectivity" (Wilderson 21).

[xxviii] In this view, anti-Blackness is not the contingent byproduct of constant capital accumulation. Rather, constant anti-Blackness finds new expression within different historical conditions. Or, as Joy James writes, "the 'hyper-black'-as-prisoner *is* slave" (*New Abolitionists* xiii; emphasis added).

[xxix] As Wilderson continues, this is "so much so as to make narrative inaccessible to Blacks" ("Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption" n.p.). This aspect of his argument rests on the presumed equivalence between narrative and emplotment. "The narrative arc of the slave who is *Black," he explains*, "is *not an arc at all*, but a flat line, what Hortense Spillers (2003) calls "historical stillness" ("Afro-Pessimism and the End of Redemption" n.p.). I argue throughout this chapter that the organizing principles and causal processes theorized by Afro-pessimists like Wilderson are not, in fact, antithetical to narrative writ-large. Rather, Afro-pessimists emphasize the narrative bindings of theme over plot.

[xxx] As Fred Moten explains, "blackness is prior to ontology; or… blackness is the anoriginal displacement of ontology… it is ontology's anti- and ante-foundation" ("Blackness and Nothingness" 739).

[xxxi] In *Disturbing the Peace: Black Culture and the Police Power After Slavery*, Bryan Wagner details the historical, symbolic, and structural function of the police as a force of anti-Blackness. He observes how the modern assumption and organization of "police power" followed the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, when the site of racial control came under dispute. The racial sovereignty once bestowed upon white slave masters thus transferred into the hands of the state thereby confirming police power as an arm of anti-Blackness.

[xxxii] Ultimately, because apocalypse depends on this elimination of whiteness into a generalized condition of social death (which Wilderson names “Blackness”), race must function as the mechanism of its own disappearing act. And yet, Stan believes that “walls don’t build themselves” (Atwood 41).

[xxxiii] This distinction is between "imagin[ing] social turmoil through the rubric of conflict (i.e., a rubric of problems that can be posed and conceptually solved)” versus “the rubric of antagonism (an irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions)" (Wilderson *Red, White & Black* 5).

Chapter Three Notes

[xxxiv] Moten corrects those who might think this involves "the net movement of molecules from an area of high to one of low concentration, thereby signaling dilution" (Moten *B&B* xi).

[xxxv] In her most recent book *The Right to Maim*, for example, it is rare to find reference to narrative except as "exceptional progress narrative," "capitalist narratives of progress," "civilizational narrative," or "liberal missionary narrative."

[xxxvi] This is perhaps another way of saying that phenomenal objects are manifestations of noumenal objects but are also objects in and of themselves. In an interview with Verso Books, Morton critiques the truism that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." This kind of holism renders parts "expendable" and so he suggests instead that we think of wholes as less than the sum of their parts.

[xxxvii] With very different emphasis, Fred Moten has found in the writings of Frederick Douglass "a theory of value— an objective and objectional, productive and reproductive ontology— whose primitive axiom is that commodities speak" (*ItB* 11). Throughout this chapter, I trace the very different motivations for (though often very similar mediations on) object-oriented ontology in both critical-race and ecocritical theories.

[xxxviii] Coley calls this an "ecological mode of detection" which neither organizes reality from an external position of epistemological certainty nor resigns to the impossibility of really accessing the material world. Rather, "it begins from a situation of entanglement wherein the supposed distance between ontology and epistemology, between knowing and being, has itself collapsed" (Coley 139). He likens this ecological mode of detection to Karen Barad's contention that "knowing, thinking, measuring, theorizing, and observing are material practices of intra-acting within and as part of the world" (qtd. In Coley 139).

[xxxix] As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, "the methodological centrality of suspicion to current critical practice has involved a concomitant privileging of the concept of paranoia… In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything but a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naive, pious, or complaisant. I myself have no wish to return to the use of 'paranoid' as a pathologizing diagnosis, but it seems to me a great loss when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds" (125-126).

[xl] Morton coins the term *ambient poetics* to describe "a state of nondual awareness that collapses the subject-object division, upon which depends the aggressive territorialization that precipitates ecological destruction.... ambience persists in corrupted materialist forms, and... these forms are what Walter Benjamin would have called dialectical images, Janus-faced... On the one hand they offer a soothing panacea for capitalist and technocratic alienation... On the other hand, ambient images offer a sort of gate into another dimension, a dimension that turns out to be none other than the nowness that is... radically 'here'" ("Why Ambient Poetics? Outline for a Depthless Ecology" 52). Ambient poetics points out what the structuralist Roman Jakobson calls the contact or perceptual dimension, medium or environment in which communication takes place. By indicating that which in phenomenology is called the perceptual field, prior to any distinguishing of subject and object, ambient poetics troubles those processes of differentiation that are elemental to forming the subject. The aesthetic dimension proper should thus be distinguished from any ideology of the aesthetic" (52).

[xli] Significantly, Moten relates this reading practice back to the "fullness or richness of the semiotic in which Peirce was interested" (*In the Break* 97). For Wittgenstein, he explains, noticing an aspect was a "holoesthetic phenomenon or experience" (Moten *In the Break* 97). Meaning is not the effect of some relation between sign and signified— whether symbol, icon, or index— but rather emerges from "a kind of holism" (Moten *In the Break* 97). Giving the example of a poem, he writes that it is wrong to think of it as "some determined mode of interaction between elements— rather, we might want to think of the poem as the entire field or saturation, flood or plain, within which the page, sound and meaning, the live, the original, the recording, the score exist as icons or singular aspects of a totality that is, itself, iconic of totality as such" (Moten *In the Break* 97). *True Detective* similarly exhausts the

relations between sign and signified— the symbols scattered about crime scenes do not seem to represent anything, a police sketch is confused for the wrong man, evidence cannot index a straightforward "lead." Instead, we are immersed in a kind of life-world where various narratives emerge, vie for coherence, and then fade away. It is this general ecology of meaning, in which particular relations between sign and signified are even possible, that the show foregrounds.

[xlii] Moten asks us to think about this kind of collapsed temporality in terms of the "musical phrase" which he contrasts with "documentation." Music is anything but meaningless and it can move us to various modes of experience and thought. But, even while music involves the sequencing of notes or breaks, interpretation does not rely on the "singular and straightforward adequation of a linear temporality" (Moten 41). When listening to music, we "linger where dynamic totality interacts with serial puncturing" such that we experience the whole song or story in the moment of listening (Moten 41).

[xliii] Deleuze emphasizes that such images are most apparent "in television, a prerecorded voice for an image that in each case is in the process of taking shape" (Deleuze "The Exhausted" 10). Indeed, while my own object-oriented methodology can engage text and other kinds of media— exemplified by my approach to the show's diegetic plot— it is perhaps particularly suited to television and cinema. Both can express narrative through either diegetic plot or the ecological and aesthetic configuration of setting.

Conclusion Notes

[xliv] In addition to Teiresias's anticipatory message, the play also raises the issue of narrative framing through the rather conventional accompaniment of a chorus. The chorus in *Antigone* is comprised of Theban elders who take no part in the action of the play and have no power to alter its course. Like an omniscient narrator, they provide context for the events on stage, express the inner emotions of characters, as well as elucidate the moral and political lessons of the drama. The evaluative and omniscient function of this chorus thus filters the audience's perception of the play in a way that parallels Nora's retrospective retelling of her underworld experiences in *The Leftovers*. Through this triangulated narrative structure, characters continue to haunt the scene even after they are both physically and diegetically absent.

[xlv] My brazen and, I admit, fairly inappropriate use of the term "care" here will likely irk both traditional Heideggerians and OOOists (among others). The former thinkers believe that "care" names a specific capacity of Dasein to "take-other-beings-as." Dasein's Being-towards-death and Being-in-the-world necessitate this relation of care in a way that other beings do not. Likewise, in a bid to free Heidegger's theory of tool-being from this human-centeredness, the latter camp sacrifices "care" to the rubbish-bin of his other similar terms: "Throughout [*Being and Time*], one term after another appears at first to be fundamental to the analysis, only to be unmasked a few pages later as dependent on the deeper strata of 'care' or 'transcendence' or 'time'" (Harman *TB* 107). Here, Harman suggests that what Dasein experiences as "care" actually involves only one possible manifestation of an ontologically universal structure: the binary of presence and withdrawal. Within this view, care simply names one way to measure the relations between disparate beings (capital B or not). The Heideggerian emphasis on care thus obscures the full extent of Heidegger's philosophical discoveries: "Given the priority of human care for the referential system of equipment," Harman explains, "all arguments for the supremacy of tool-being would appear to be destroyed. The human entity now turns out to be the ground of possibility for all significance, and thus for the action or function of tool-beings as a whole. For this reason, it will be said that *Being and Time* is written from the standpoint of a latent subjectivism, and is therefore entirely at odds with the focus on equipment that I advocate. This subjectivist reading of Heidegger's most famous book remains surprisingly common" (*TB* 29). While Harman banishes the term "care" from his neo-Heideggerian project, he embraces "significance" despite similar human connotations. "As a matter of fact," he continues, "the tool-analysis does not rely in the least on any priority of the human standpoint. Heidegger's central insight is that the tool itself is bound up in a specific empire of functions, a system that takes its meaning from some particular projection, some final reference. Admittedly, the meaning of equipment is determined by that for the sake of which it acts. But I flatly contest the view that this *Worumwillen* is necessarily human. Tools execute their being 'for the sake of' a reference, not because *people* run across them, but because they are utterly *determinate* in their referential function— that is, because they already stand at the mercy of innumerable terminal points of meaning" (*TB* 29). Like Harman, I too have tried to elucidate a theory of meaning that does not rely on a human interpreter: meaning, I have argued, can be understood as the flipside of (and yet entirely irreducible to) being. Meaning is presence, being is withdrawal. But, while Harman is uncommonly liberal with his use of the terms "significance," "meaning," and "reference," he is just as conservative as the traditional Heideggarians with his use of the term "care." I do not, in fact, take issue with the human-specificity or sanctity of this term "care." It is very important to maintain the fineness and variety of our language. We might, then, want to preserve "care" to name the particular way that humans determine the "for the sake of" a reference. Nevertheless, I have chosen to stretch the term in this case to underscore how ethics (whether human-centered or not) emerges from the ontological fabric of our world just as other systems of relation do.

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