NATURE INDUSTRIES: US ENVIRONMENTAL FICTIONS AFTER FORDISM, 1971-2011

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This dissertation recontextualizes literary, critical, and popular models of nature in contemporary American fiction, and argues that the transformations in the post-Fordist economy reframe environmental concepts and their uses in a new light. Scholars in the environmental humanities have long recognized that understanding changes in the political economy are a key way to understanding our ideas and representations of the natural world. These ideas serve as metaphysical models that relate individuals to society and to the broader world described by the sciences. However, much environmental criticism only goes so far as to historicize, either arguing that images of nature are wholly determined by structures and institutions of power, or, by privileging certain ideas of nature as absolute, critics lay claim to an imagined oppositional, but no less normative, space outside of society. *Nature Industries* intervenes in this dilemma by drawing on pragmatist and cultural studies methods to reconstruct the experience of American life in the aftermath of Fordism. Constructing this historical conjuncture enables interpretive practices which foreground the diverse political articulation of environmental figuration.

The title is a play on Horkheimer and Adorno's 1944 essay on "the culture industry," which announced that cultural production had been subsumed into monopoly capitalism. Following culture, nature has undergone a similar loss of perceived

autonomy. From the affective to the biogenetic, informational to the atmospheric, post-Fordist technologies and economies intervene in the world at scales that previous vocabularies struggle to describe without the help of fiction. Contemporary capitalism not only produces new natures—new combinations of nature and culture, or new "natural-history"—but, given the ecological consequences of industrialism, environmentalists too are forced to intervene in ways that would give pause to previous generations of conservationists. Rather than announcing the "death of Nature," as the fictionalized Immanuel Kant does in the final moments of Mary McCarthy's *Birds of America* (1971), we encounter a proliferation of natures, each with their own political valence, and each mobilizing a different set of social and natural referents in the public sphere.

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The world… lives on itself: its excrements are its nourishment.

Friedrich Nietzsche

The more relentlessly socialization commands all moments of human and interhuman immediacy, the smaller the capacity of men to recall that this web has evolved, and the more irresistible its natural appearance.

Theodor Adorno

Certainly, for us, there has never been an alternative to the world, but always an alternative within the world.

Antonio Negri

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: ENVIRONMENTAL CULTURE AFTER FORDISM

> Narrative means telling a story about something, like the world spirit, or Europe, man, the West, culture, freedom, class struggle. It is the story of some big thing like that, in which you can place your own story.
>
> Richard Rorty[1]

> What is often being argued, it seems to me, in the idea of nature is the idea of man; and this not only generally, or in ultimate ways, but the idea of man in society, indeed the ideas of kinds of societies.
>
> Raymond Williams[2]

> Nature holds in place a multitude of conflicting, ever shifting meanings that are nonetheless potent ideological pivots.
>
> Stacy Alaimo[3]

In his lectures on Beethoven's 6th symphony, Theodor Adorno concludes that the 1808 pastoral was "an image, therefore, not of the world, but of an interpretation of the world."[4] This Hegelian insight—that art is an image of an interpretation, and that both the interpretation and its picturing are acts embedded in historical contexts—is shared by both the continental tradition and American pragmatism. As Nicholas Brown argues, apropos of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "particular meanings only subsist within the medium of the universal;" hence, the continual need for immanent modes of critique and

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[1] Richard Rorty, "After Philosophy, Democracy," *Take Care of Freedom and the Truth will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 34-45, 43.

[2] Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature," *Culture and Materialism* (New York: Verso, 2005), 67-85, 71.

[3] Stacey Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), 8.

[4] Theodor Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 11.

redescription.[5] Nature, whenever it appears in literature or *as* literary form, always comes bearing a certain set of ideals or promises; it carries certain values, prescribes norms, and produces thought models and affective shapes which are contemporary with the given (if contested) movement and composition of society. It constitutes an "unstable universality" through which individuals and societies imagine themselves and their world.[6] This project is about the differential ways that American literature has constructed this unstable universal during one of the most transformational periods in US history. It argues that contemporary interpretations of Nature (as it is variously figured as environment, ecology, or biology) must be understood in their historical relation to post-Fordist production.

Raymond Williams famously writes that "the idea of nature contains… an extraordinary amount of human history." Few are surprised by the assertion that ideas of nature change over time, but the question of *how* remains: "it is not primarily ideas that have a history," Williams writes, "it is societies. And then what often seem opposed ideas can in the end be seen as parts of a single social process."[7] Carolyn Merchant, whose 1989 book, *Ecological Revolutions*, was a foundational text in the field of environmental criticism, argues that ideas about nature "arise from changes, tensions, and contradictions that develop between a society's mode of production and its ecology, and between its

[5] Nicholas Brown, "Close Reading and the Market," *Literary Materialisms,* eds. Mathaias Nilges and Emilio Sauri (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2013),145-168, 146.

[6] Saul Newman, *Unstable Universalities: Poststructuralism and Radical Politics* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007).

[7] Williams, 78.

modes of production and reproduction."[8] Her premise is correct. However, her prescription now contains a historical irony that Williams would appreciate. Merchant suggests that the mechanistic and storehouse model of the environment, which was dominant up through mid-twentieth century industrialism, *should be* replaced by a network-oriented model of ecology, characterized by a distribution of agency. Believing that by changing the organizational imaginary of social production we can bring post-industrial society in line with ecological sustainability—and, as an added bonus, *disalienate* ourselves in our relation to the world—Merchant was unable to foresee in 1989 how the digital and information industries of the post-Fordist "New Economy" would flourish in the following years by making use of horizontal and niche production models, as well as employing a romantic and naturalistic rhetoric of distributed, flexible, and creative networks. As David Brooks observes,

> Companies today, the mantra goes, have to think biologically. They have to create lean, decentralized, informal participatory systems. They have to tear down rigid structures and let a thousand flowers bloom. The machine is no longer held up as the standard that healthy organizations should emulate. Now it's the ecosystem. It's the ever-changing organic network that serves as the model to define a healthy organization, filled with spontaneous growth and infinitely complex and dynamic interconnections.[9]

One might dismiss this as a green-washing of the white-collar—or what Andrew Ross calls the "no-collar"—workplace, but it reflects a much broader mutation in the dominant organization of social production.[10] The last four decades have been defined by

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[8] Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989), 3.

[9] David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), 128.

[10] Andrew Ross, *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and its Hidden Costs* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

the shift away from the bureaucratic, mass-production oriented, manufacturing economy of early-and mid-century Fordism, which was tempered by Keynesian policies between 1930 and 1970, to the financially deregulated, informational, affective, and service-oriented industries of post-Fordism.[11] David Harvey describes this as a shift in capital from fixed to "flexible accumulation," while Antonio Negri describes it as a move from "mass labor" to "swarm labor" as new forms of "immaterial" production explode the measurability of labor and value.[12] Sociologically, this period has been characterized variously as "postmodernity," "liquid modernity," "risk society," "network society," "knowing capitalism," or simply, "the new capitalism."[13] Each of these descriptors attempt to link transformations in subjectivity and culture as *culture* increasingly becomes the mode through which capitalist relations (in both production and consumption) are reproduced. Brooks' colorful example illustrates how firms have absorbed what sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello call the "artistic critique" of "1968" by constructing a flexible, network-based imaginary of organization whose mimicry of "horizontal" and "playful" ecosystems rarely leads to more sustainable or

[11] Moishe Postone, "Thinking the Global Crisis," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 111.2 (2012): 227-249, 228; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (New York: Basic 1990); Nigel Thrift, *Knowing Capitalism* (London: Sage, 2005).

[12] Cesare Casarino and Antonio Negri, *In Praise of the Common: A Conversation on Philosophy and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minenesota, 2008), 125; see also, Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as Parable of Human Labor*, trans. Matteo Mandarini (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

[13] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Zigmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (London: Polity, 2000); Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992); Manuel Castells, *The Rise of Network Society: The Information Age* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (Cambridge: Yale, 2007).

environmentally-just social practices.[14] The appeal of short-term, risk-mitigating, adaptive creativity is more often than not subsumed into the ambience of austerity and the romantic entrepreneurialism of middle-class knowledge workers.[15] During the same period, neoliberal philosophers like Friedrich Hayek turned the frameworks of complexity and epistemic humility—much beloved by environmentalists—into naturalist justifications for unregulated markets.[16]

This dissertation situates US literary narratives of the environment within this broader socio-historical context of post-Fordism. Each chapter takes up an author or a pair of authors who address a potential vector of recuperation: (1) the death of nature; (2) energy crisis; (3) chaos/deregulation; and (4) geography as the naturalized locus of cultural memory. Each chapter also speaks to a particular genre: *bildungsroman*/the novel of ideas, realism, science fiction, and historiographic metafiction. As Williams puts it, "ideas of nature," are just as much "ideas of kinds of societies." Rather than reading—in paranoid fashion—texts as symptoms or "mere" reflections of material arrangements, I read them as actively constituting lived imaginaries of society that are necessarily complicit in the arrangements they critique.[17] Any critical gesture begins from

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[14] Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2005); Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008); Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron's 1995 *Mute* magazine essay, "The Californian Ideology" (archived at *imaginaryfutures.net*).

[15] Andrew Ross, "The Industrialization of Bohemia," *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and its Hidden Costs* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 123-160.

[16] Friedrich Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988).

[17] Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading," *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke, 2003), 123-152.

complicity, that is, from within. As the kind of societies we live in are subjected to internal and external pressures—for instance, under neoliberalism the environment becomes something internal to privatization while "disembedded" markets are projected outside society—the ways that nature is given narrative shape take on a new relevance in transforming who and what composes our society. My approach draws on the cultural studies practice of constructing *conjunctures* and the concept of *articulation*, which pragmatically links a text's social meaning to context without reducing it to that context. Before discussing the methodology and outline of this project in full, this introduction chapter explores environmental culture of Fordism and its aftermath.

In its post-Fordist moment, ecology risks becoming an imagined and aestheticized relation to what is otherwise the latest, flexible mode of self-discipline in the deregulated landscape of normalized contingency and precariousness. In the words of The Invisible Committee—the French radical group whose manifesto, *The Coming Insurrection*, struck fear into the heart of Glenn Beck and the French state: "Ecology isn't simply the logic of a total economy; it's the new morality of capital."[18] But perhaps even worse, ecology risks becoming totally emptied of content as it comes to stand in as a synonym for interactive organization *itself*—from academic conferences that have nothing to do with the environment to corporate branding of digital platforms. What was once an oppositional idea of nature has been, as Williams might argue, subsumed by the social process, as the emergent cultural formation becomes the dominant. This poses a

[18] The Invisible Committee, *The Coming Insurrection* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 78; the manifesto gained international attention long before the controversial arrest of the "Tarnac 9," members of a rural, anarchist collective of organic farmers, on charges of terrorism. Cf. Alberto Toscano, "Criminalizing Dissent," *Guardian* 28 January 2009, Web Accessed 31 May 2016.

challenge to eco-theorists who, like Merchant, place their hopes in mimetic and formalist solutions to environmental crises. On the one hand they argue that our images of nature are thoroughly historical and the product of class (patriarchal, racist, etc.) societies; on the other hand, they say we must shape our societies—and even our very thoughts—to be more like the new (normative) image of nature produced by current organizational imaginary. This is offered as a vision of the way nature "really is." Yet these efforts at "denaturalizing nature" generally leave the underlying naturalist premise intact; they substitute a new image for the old and expect it to perform the same function.[19]

However, the redescription of contemporary capitalism in ecological terms offers opportunities to emphasize the threatening and perverse—seemingly *unnatural*—qualities of ecosystems themselves. Writing the same year as Merchant, Felix Guattari describes the neoliberal remaking of New York City by a familiar species of algae:

> Just as monstrous and mutant algae invade the lagoon of Venice, so our television screens are populated, saturated, by "degenerate" images and statements… men like Donald Trump are permitted to proliferate freely, like another species of algae, taking over entire districts of New York and Atlantic City; he "redevelops" them by raising rents, thereby driving out tens of thousands of poor families, most of whom are condemned to homelessness, becoming the equivalent of the dead fish of environmental ecology.[20]

The ecological similes establish a relation between real estate developers as "another species of algae" and tenant "dead fish." The different processes—one economic and social, the other inter-species and environmental—produce similar results,

[19] For example, we might ask whether the existence or non-existence of "gay" penguins should have any relevance at all to "justifying" the existence of LGBTQ humans. Noel Sturgeon unpacks the implicit naturalism in moves like this in "Penguin Family Values," *Environmentalism in Popular Culture: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and the Politics of the Natural* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 120-148.

[20] Felix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, Trans. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (New York: Continuum, 2005), 29.

a few winners and a lot of losers, but at some level the metaphor ends. The analogy terminates in a material "existential territory" in which the displaced people and financial calculations cease being environmental *metaphors* and become *compositional* elements of the material environment itself. This move from metaphor to materiality can also be understood as a move "beyond" postmodernism. If postmodernism in literary criticism signaled the disappearance of the referent and the materiality of the signifier, we increasingly find ourselves in a culture in which the material effects of our actions seem to outpace the production and exchange of meanings.[21] At the same time, ecology as a normative image of "the good" (or preferable relations) is jettisoned in favor of ecology as a mere analogy for fluctuating relations in general—with the potential obverse effect of naturalizing (or rendering value-neutral) disastrous social inequalities—the metaphorical dead fish of those fluctuations.

The novel of New York City's financialized culture at the turn of the millennium is undoubtedly Don DeLillo's *Cosmopolis.*[22] Its epigraph is taken from Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert's "Report from A Besieged City," and reads: "a rat becomes the unit of currency."[23] In the besieged city of Herbert's poem, the representational unit of exchange value becomes material and temporary—ostensibly *edible,* given that the use value of rats can really only be derived from their meager source of food. The materiality of exchange

[21] One example here is the forty year delay between a rise in carbon dioxide levels and global warming. What we are witnessing today are the warming effects of carbon dioxide levels from the mid-1970s—prior to the rise of industrial contributors like China and India.

[22] Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (New York: Scribner, 2003).

[23] Zbigniew Herbert, "Report From a Besieged City," *The Collected Poems, 1956-1998* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 416-8.

value and use value is continuously brought to the foreground as Eric Packer, a young billionaire and asset manager, rides across Manhattan in his limo to get a haircut. Packer discusses Herbert's "rat currency" with his "chief theorist." "Stockpiling of dead rats called a global health menace," he muses, not unlike the removal of money from circulation. DeLillo deploys the rat to figure the contradictions of capitalism. The rat's *use value* lies in its materiality, for better or worse, as food; its rarity lies in its finitude (decay). As *exchange value*, the rat serves as a metaphor—a carrier from context to context—of other values, and a carrier that fails to adequately maintain its stable form due to its corporeality, or, alternately, by the ability of rats to breed uncontrollably.

Against the unstable background of biological vectors, Packer exalts the purity of the digital: "the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole."[24] The metaphysics of finance is the dream of pure and total representation, abstracted and de-situated from the material world it describes, reduced to a binary then infinitely multiplied. "All wealth has become wealth for its own sake," he is later told, "Money has lost its narrative quality the way painting did once upon a time. Money is talking to itself." The decoupling of the system of representing exchange from its ability to refer to anything other than itself *is* the speculative bubble—the Baudrillardian moment of simulation—in which, between the years of 1970 and 2004, the global market in derivatives went from zero to 273 trillion

[24] DeLillo, 24.

dollars.[25] Marx, of course, went to great lengths to describe the material and chemical properties of different metals which made them ideal carriers of exchange value.[26] In Harvey's influential account of postmodernism, the delinking of the U.S. dollar from the gold standard is the material condition for postmodern culture in general. He describes a post-historic condition in which nothing disappears or refuses to degrade, but is rather endlessly recombined in the service of pure accumulation, an intensification of the perennial drive of capitalism toward "universal fungibility."[27] In this context, speculative attitudes are placed in the service of flexible accumulation, foreclosing an authentically different relation to the future. "There's no more danger in the new," intones DeLillo's narration.[28]

Cosmopolis continues DeLillo's realist explorations of the postmodern condition and stages a crisis in a contemporary historical consciousness stuck between the hyper-production of new ("disruptive" products that ensure nothing actually changes) and the presence of the materiality through which we are bound to the past (and the planet). The subsumption of "the new" by market cycles was observed long ago by Walter Benjamin, however the neoliberal era is defined by what Mark Fisher calls "capitalist realism," in which the political failure to produce an authentic new results in the popular proliferation

[25] Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, Trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993); for derivatives figure, see Donald Mackenzie, *An Engine, Not a Camera: How Financial Models Shape Markets* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).

[26] Large portions of Marx's "The Chapter on Money" in the *Grundrisse* (Trans. Martin Nicolaus [New York: Penguin, 1973], 165-186) explicate the chemical properties of metals as well as the role of these properties in exchange—not just private exchange but colonial accumulation of mineral resources from tribal peoples.

[27] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (New York: Basic 1990).

[28] DeLillo, 8.

of apocalyptic narratives (e.g. eco-catastrophes).[29] Fisher argues that our inability to imagine a different future, other than through catastrophic speculation, contributes to the uneven catastrophes of a present without end. For Nicole Merola, the crisis is not the absence of a future but rather the failure of the past to properly become past. Merola argues that DeLillo "instantiates a melancholy form of political ecology," in which alienation from materiality—the social and ecological effects of "cyberfinance"—returns as the consciousness of the main character's murderer, Benno Levin. She draws on Kate Sandilands' concept of environmental melancholia as an inability to properly mourn for what has been lost; it operates as a "socially located embodied memory."[30] Like Sandilands, Merola understands the relation of melancholy to materiality as a relation to loss; however, as Levin's character suggests (and as I argue in chapter four), the inability to mourn *qua* melancholia may also be symptomatic of the continuing presence of materiality. Indeed, Levin's derangement suggests a *presence* of materiality in a world so suffocatingly interrelated that Packer is guilty—no matter what he does—on the basis of social location alone:

> Even if there's a fungus living between my toes that speaks to me. Even if a fungus told me to kill you, even then your death is justified because of where you stand on the earth. Even a parasite living in my brain. Even then…Even then the crime is real because you're a figure whose thoughts and acts affect everybody,

[29]Walter Benjamin identified the bio-affective origins of "shock" and argued that emerging consumer society instrumentalized the feeling for commercial ends, transforming it into endless novelty; see "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1968), 163; and "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *Reflections* (New York: Schocken, 1978), 158. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009).

[30] Nicole M. Merola, "*Cosmopolis*: Don DeLillo's Melancholy Political Ecology," *American Literature* 84.4 (2012): 827-853, 847; Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands, "Melancholy Natures, Queer Ecologies," *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 331-358.

> people, everywhere. I have history, as you call it, on my side. You have to die for how you think and act. For your apartment and what you paid for it. For your daily medical checkups. This alone. Medical checkups every day. For how much you had and how much you lost, equally. No less for losing it than making it. For the limousine that displaces the air that people need to breathe in Bangladesh. This alone.[31]

There is undoubtedly something of contemporary, posthumanist, material ecocriticism in Levin's rant, down to the "narrative agency" of toe fungus and brain parasites.[32] A bit of derangement in one's materialism can be a good thing. Leaving aside Levin's metaphysically questionable sense of justice—he enrolls history to justify his crime and to obscure his own material location—the rant is an example of Bruce Robbins' "sweatshop sublime" which animates many turn of the millennium biopolitical critiques of globalization.[33] By aesthetically linking diverse practices, processes, objects, and circulations, Benno Levin collapses the gap between representation and materiality, a collapsing gap which Packer also recognizes. "There's a common surface, an affinity between market movements and the natural world," he says from the air conditioned back

[31] DeLillo, 202.

[32] Serpil Oppermann, "From Ecological Postmodernism to Material Ecocriticism: Creative Materiality and Narrative Agency," in *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

[33] Bruce Robbins, "The Sweatshop Sublime," *PMLA* 117.1 (2002): 84-97, argues that this sublime offers an aesthetic for linking vast chains of production and consumption in the global economy. He cautions that "Kant's analytic of the sublime… flattens out the complexity and difference of Third World society to suit a First World standard of ethical rationality," citing Spivak's argument that well-intentioned boycotts of the Bangladeshi garment industry "blindly protects northern jobs and markets." For Levin, Bangladeshis become an anonymous third party whose abstract suffering is used as a tacit justification for murdering Packer who, in Levin's imagination, is both a symbol and prime mover of the system; instead of destroying a social category or economic relationship, he is merely killing a man.

seat of his limo; "An aesthetics of interaction."[34] What Packer speculates as a new aesthetic, Levin experiences as a deepening material condition and as a flattening of his own agency. As Richard Kerridge argues, DeLillo's writing often "polarizes the private terrain of the self against the vast, untraceable networks of the world," behind which "lurks a sinister totality."[35] *Cosmopolis* stages two competing perspectives as a single moment in the present conjuncture of capitalism. The resolution terminates both in (1) a failed effort at aesthetic transcendence as ironic detachment—to more adequately represent and thus intervene in the world—on the part of the financial manager; and (2) a failed effort at attaining the literal consciousness of an overwhelming environmental materiality, one that binds or imbricates the disaffected "underground man" of the twenty-first century in ever more complex and deepening ways—so deep that nothing seems real, and that the only way "out," or to make a difference, is through a violent assertion of the Real in a crime fundamentally incapable of redeeming the systemic criminality in which he feels himself enmeshed.[36]

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[34] DeLillo, 86.

[35] Richard Kerridge, "Small Rooms and the Ecosystem: Environmentalism and DeLillo's *White Noise*," *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (London: Zed Books, 1998), 182-195, 190.

[36]In Levin, DeLillo could be said to give his readers a dark interpretation of Georg Cristoph Tobler's famous aphorisms on Nature, falsely attributed to Goethe in the inaugural issue of *Nature* (4 November 1869). See: T.H. Huxley, "Goethe: Aphorisms on Nature," *Nature*, Web Accessed. 2 April 2016:

> NATURE! We are surrounded and embraced by her: powerless to separate ourselves from her, and powerless to penetrate beyond her. […] That which is most unnatural is still Nature; the stupidest philistinism has a touch of her genius. […] We obey her laws even when we rebel against them; we work with her even when we desire to work against her.

For too long, postmodernism has been understood—by both its endorsers and critics—as breaking free from the materiality of the referent, or alternately, from the historical moment in which "history" itself is being rewritten. Teresa Ebert argues that rather than breaking free, abolishing, or losing the referent, what we find is its pluralization: the numbers of referents proliferate beyond the ability of the sign to contain it. "In place of a single referent," Ebert writes, "a network of referents" has replaced the "'Fordist' relation of adequation between signifier and signified… suitable for early industrial capitalism whose main features were Taylorism in management and the assembly line in production."[37] If postmodernism was a rebellion against the reign of aesthetic realism and modernist abstraction, it was a challenge to representation not unlike the wildcat strikes of Detroit autoworkers (e.g. League of Revolutionary Black Workers) against official representation by UAW or the Turin autoworkers revolting against FIAT and "organized labor."[38] Informed here by readings of Marx's *Grundrisse*, reference is understood as a material practice embedded in production.[39] Social

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This melancholic bit of German idealism (or is it materialism?) rears its head in Freud's essay, "On Dreams," when one of his patients recounts her brother's hospitalization. After reading "Goethe's essay," her brother—deep in his studies—screamed "Nature! Nature!" before cutting off his genitals. "On Dreams," *The Freud Reader*, Ed. Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1989), 142-171, 160.

[37] Teresa Ebert, *Dialogues on Cultural Studies: Interviews with Contemporary Critics*, eds. Shaobo Xie and Fengzhen Wang (Calgary: University of Calgary, 2002), 48.

[38] Nicola Pizzolato, *Challenging Global Capitalism: Labor Migration, Radical Struggle, and Urban Change in Detroit and Turin* (New York: Palgrave, 2013); Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit, I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution* (Cambridge: South End Press, 1999).

[39] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse,* trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1993); Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse,* trans. Harry Cleaver (New York: Autonomedia, 1991);

production is recognized outside its usual locations as the Fordist-Taylorist factory gives way to the emerging "social factory"—in the home, on the street, and in the kitchens and bedroom. As knowledge, communication, and digital labor replace domestic manufacturing, undoing traditional separations between workplace and domestic sphere, and between waged productivity and creative virtuosity, the sensibilities associated with these forms of production assume a new economic and cultural dominance similar to the industrial logic that Marx observed becoming dominant in the agricultural nineteenth century.[40]

> With the emergence of cyber-technologies—which have brought with them new management techniques, such as plural organization and team management, substituted the post-Taylorist flexible workplace for the old Taylorist management, and opened up the labour force to women, African-Americans, Latinos, and other marginalized groups—the mode of representation based on the adequation of the signifier to signified has become historically irrelevant. One of the features of the new cyber-technologies is hypertextuality and pluralization of the sign. The sign—which in Fordist industrialism worked to a very large extent on mostly a single level—has suddenly become subject to various forms of doubling and self-referentiality.[41]

Novels like DeLillo's *Cosmopolis* (2003) and more recently, Teddy Wayne's *Kapitoil* (2010) and Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013), register the financial hegemony of New York City, bringing into relief the crises of material relations, referentiality, and speculation, that Guattari outlined in 1989.[42] Pace Merchant,

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[40] McMaster Humanities, "Playing Three Dimensional Chess in the Age of Empire: Michael Hardt on the Poors, the Multitude, and the Commons," *YouTube*, 28 April 2014 Web. Accessed 23 January 2016.

[41] Ebert, 48.

[42] Teddy Wayne's *Kapitoil* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010) explores the relation between financial algorithms in oil futures speculation and political violence in the main character's home of Qatar; Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2013) explores the way companies shield themselves from the financial risk of climate change and other instabilities they generate.

however, Guattari does not posit a new image of nature that performs the same totalizing function of the old one; for Guattari, it only makes sense to speak of multiple ecologies, or at least three: environmental ecology, social ecology, and mental ecology. Rather than positing Ecology as a master signifier capable of reconciling all subordinate discourses (capable of realizing "good" fantasies while simultaneously eradicating "all of the fantasies leading to the objectification of women, immigrants, the insane, etc."), he proceeds in a pragmatist, anti-representational manner, re-affirming Gregory Bateson's premise that "there is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds."[43] In the context of "Integrated World Capitalism," he argues, one must have the conceptual tools to recognize that the semiotic chains that enable economic dispossession bear a transversal relation to environmental ecologies. When the post-Fordist restructuring of social relations deliberately employs biological metaphors and ecological imaginaries it not only obscures material relations beneath a romantic aura, but actively mutates our conception of nature in that it begins to resemble the emergent regime of production. "The more relentlessly socialization commands all moments of human and interhuman

[43] In "Regimes, Pathways, Subjects," *The Guattari Reader*, ed. Gary Genosko (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 95-108, Guattari describes his approach as a thorough-going "pragmatics":

> The schizoanalytic perspective… I am proposing will make only very limited use of dialectical or structuralist approaches, systems theory or even genealogical approaches… In my view, all systems for defining models are in a sense equal, all are tenable, but only to the extent that their principles of intelligibility renounce any universalist pretentions, and that their sole mission be to help map real existing territories (sensory, cognitive, affective and aesthetic universes)—and even then only in relation to carefully delimited areas and periods (97).

immediacy," writes Adorno, "the smaller the capacity of men to recall that this web has evolved, and the more irresistible its natural appearance."[44]

Catherine Malabou identifies a post-Fordist transformation in the domain of cognitive neuroscience. The bureaucratic image of the brain has been replaced with a neuronal image of the brain, and consequently, a new image of the individual as a highly malleable node in a flexible network. In *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* Malabou situates the shift in descriptions of the brain within the context of post-Fordist organization. Drawing on Boltanski and Chiapello, she observes that "neoliberal ideology today itself rests on a redistribution of centers and a major relaxation of hierarchies." In a period in which "the hierarchical principle is demolished" and organizations are restructured to maximize connections, reactivity, and singular projects, Malabou asks: "How could we not interrogate the parallelism between the transformation of the spirit of capitalism (between the sixties and the nineties) and the modification, brought about in approximately the same period, of our view of cerebral structures?"[45] The brain as central planner is replaced by the brain as network of distributed, agential neurons, a description that resembles the dominant organizational imaginary of enterprising firms. "This is how the forms of capitalist production accede to representation in each epoch," write Boltanski and Chiapello, "by mobilizing concepts and tools that were initially developed largely autonomously in the theoretical sphere or in the domain of basic scientific research. This is the case with neurology and computer science today," they continue. "In

[44] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 358.

[45] Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* Trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 41.

the past, it was true of such notions as system, structure, technostructure, energy, entropy, evolution, dynamics, and exponential growth."[46] This "naturalization effect" is accomplished through metaphors that align biological and social conceptions of the self with the current institutional arrangements.

In effect, the dominant metaphors of neuroscience speak the language of flexibility, the forced "freedom" that Richard Sennett identifies in *The Corrosion of Character* and *The Culture of the New Capitalism* as the ethos of atomized individuals struggling to find affirmation in a period when the "discontinuous reinvention of institutions" leaves them without firm footings, life projects, or skilled employment.[47] Malabou rescues the concept of *plasticity* from its drift into a tacit justification of limitless flexibility, arguing à la Marx that we make our brains but not in the conditions of our own choosing; the goal should be to change the conditions of neurological becoming. "Plasticity, in effect, is not flexibility," writes Marc Jeannerod, founder of the Institute for Cognitive Science in Lyon; "let us not forget that plasticity is a mechanism for adapting, while flexibility is a mechanism for submitting."[48] These "necessary but flawed metaphors," in Joseph Tabbi's estimation, not only bind us to particular research programs, they mark us as belonging to a historical moment and specific conjuncture of interests and imaginations. "The mind is a mirror; a projector; a computer; an economy; it

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[46] Boltanski and Chiapello quoted in Malabou, 41.

[47] Richard Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism* (New York: Norton, 1998); *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

[48] Marc Jeannerod, "Forward," *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), xiv.

is a self-creating ecology, a wheat field blown by a correspondent breeze," writes Tabbi: "Malabou […] knows that *we* are the ones who possess the minds that make metaphors."

The environmental historian Donald Worster traces a parallel development in the field of ecology. "Every generation," Worster argues, "writes its own description of the natural order, which generally reveals as much about human society and its changing concerns as it does about nature."[49] Arthur Tansley's field-defining concept of the ecosystem, for instance, was influenced by Freud's theory of libidinal energies and the model of the electric circuit.[50] In his 1935 article, "The Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts and Terms," the British biologist posed the concept of the ecosystem to challenge the prevailing ecological descriptions such as "quasi-organisms" that emerge through succession into "climaxes;" he challenged the rhetoric of a "biotic community" that contains both plants and animals; and above all, he challenged Jan Smuts' "holism," which had projected a hierarchical colonial order into organization of the cosmos.[51] Yet, Worster maintains that "Tansley's ecosystem, unlike the Romantic style of ecology, dovetailed nicely with the agronomic and industrial view of nature as a storehouse of exploitable material resources."[52] Where the Romantic view combined organicism and Platonic ideals with the rural, "Arkadian," ethos of home economy, the ecosystem emerged to rationalize descriptions of species interaction according to the logics of

[49] Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 292.

[50] Stephan Harrison, Steve Pile, and Nigel Thrift (eds.) *Patterned Ground: Entanglements of Nature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 56.

[51] A.G. Tansley, "The Use and Abuse of Vegetational Concepts and Terms." *Ecology* 16.3 (1935): 284-307.

[52] Worster, *Nature's Economy*, 304.

modern industrial management. In both views, nature *qua* ecology is described as a homeostatic arrangement in which relatively stable relationships between species obtain within climax succession. Not unlike Freud's subjects or electrical circuits, detours and disturbances of energy flows and population (biodiversity) levels would, with proper care, eventually return to a balance. This "central planner" vision of nature combined enlightenment rationalism (technocratic management) with romantic humanism (ideals of community), which was supplemented by writers like Aldo Leopold.[53] These perspectives not only shaped conservation policy in that the balanced image provided a territorialized norm to strive for (or maintain), but it also corresponded with the cultural narratives of nature with its utopian ideals of harmony, authenticity, and reconciliation. These ideals complemented the Taylorist imagination of the managers and the "leisure" requirements of workers alike—the latter of whom desired worldly engagement un-fragmented by the division of labor. Writers like Leopold developed aesthetic and ethical theories of conservation to supplement, and arguably eclipse, the bureaucratic work of policy in Washington D.C. Worster finds this model of ecosystem coming under attack in the nineteen-seventies by what he calls "the ecology of chaos."[54]

Rather than looking at wholistic systems, evolutionary biologists rose to prominence in the field bearing individualistic and species-reductionist accounts of environmental change. This new competitive account, which stressed that apparent stability was built on continuous disruption, displaced "mutualism and cooperation" as

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[53] Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949).

[54] Donald Worster, "The Ecology of Order and Chaos," *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 156-170.

the basis for understanding ecologies. The new ecologists adopted individualistic Darwinian outlooks. Worster quotes one who argues that "what look like community properties [of ecosystems] are in fact the summed results of all these bits of private enterprise." What they dislike about the old model are its political implications; namely, the requirement of collective decision making, and social management of human land and resource use. If there was never anything resembling a balance or relative stability, there can be no baselines and thus no coherent programs for directing human efforts. "A nature characterized by highly individualistic associations, constant disturbance, and incessant change may be more ideologically satisfying," Worster writes, in a time when an "entrepreneurial ideology" is on the rise. "We live, they insist, in a non-equilibrium world;" he continues: "Populations rise and populations fall, like stock market prices, auto sales, and hemlines."[55] Historian of science Thomas Söderqvist praises the mathematical sophistication of the evolutionary ecologists, who are now armed with chaos theory and discourses of complexity, but finds a political motivation in their calculation: "They are individualists," he writes, "abhorring the idea of large-scale ecosystem projects. Indeed, the transition from ecosystem ecology to evolutionary ecology seems to reflect the generational transition from the politically conscious generation of the 1960s to the 'yuppie' generation of the 1980s."[56]

This articulation of free market (or "wise use") politics with the emerging chaos-oriented constructions of ecology produces a new idea of nature in line with the deregulatory fantasies of the professional-managerial class. As in Malabou's example of

[55] Worster (1994), 165.

[56] Söderqvist quoted in Worster (1994), 166.

neuroscience, peripheral and relatively autonomous fields are capable of generating new descriptions, new metaphors, which become articulated to the dominant imaginaries of technocultural capitalism. A nature romanticism founded on stability and harmony is traded for a nature romanticism founded on chaos. As Heidi Scott observes, "landscapes are [now] thought to be composed predominantly of species mosaics wrought by chaos and chance rather than communities united by synergy and mutualism."[57] More than being "merely aesthetic," these imaginaries form the terrain in which political battles over science, technology, and economy are waged. The discovery of "chaos," typified by Edward N. Lorenz's famous 1972 paper, "The Butterfly Effect," struck at the heart of predictability as the basis of social planning and insurance under what remained of the welfare state.[58] And yet the romance of the chaotic contains its own symmetry—it somehow always finds its way back into the mathematical order of psychedelic fractals—which made it appealing to the libertarian-left counterculture of the sixties. While the prospect of a "postmodern science" offered a new basis for romantic anti-capitalism, it also corresponded to the emerging governmental logic of neoliberalism whose image of the world requires continuously active, risk-taking, and entrepreneurializing, individual subjects.

This entrepreneurial image of the world prides itself on disruptive development while at the same time believing that free competition will produce balanced or harmonious markets. "Constant innovation, constant change, constant adjustment have

[57] Heidi Scott, *Chaos and Cosmos: Literary Roots of Modern Ecology in the British Nineteenth Century* (University Park: Penn State University, 2014).

[58] Edward N. Lorenz, "The Butterfly Effect," *The Essence of Chaos* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1993), 181-184.

become the normal experience in this culture," argues Worster. "We have so far forgotten that life can be otherwise that we have come to accept as natural much of the chaos, uncertainty, and disintegration we find in our institutions and communities."[59] Worster voices the perennial complaint in the maelstrom of modernity—figured by Marx, Engels, and, of course, the late Marshall Berman—in the phrase, "all that is solid melts into air." As climate change troubles the metaphor of air as something without substance or effect, not even our figures of the immaterial are safe. Gilles Deleuze, for instance, describes the contemporary capitalist firm as *gaseous* in its structure, and Anna Reading argues that we need to bring rhetoric of the Cloud back down to earth.[60] When the romantic ethos is mobilized in the interests of technocultural capital, we need to reexamine the ways in which ideas of nature are being materially and metaphorically transformed in the contemporary "changes, tensions, and contradictions" between our mode of production and its ecology.

What is at stake here, is the *relation* between the scientific discourses of the environment and the environmental imagination, as the latter is culturally produced and circulated. Dana Phillips finds an affinity between Merchant and Worster in that both approach "the truth of ecology" in ways that are "romantic and literary." Both go looking to find, in the natural sciences, metaphysical justifications for their critiques of society. "The 'ecology movement,' as Merchant conceives of it," Phillips writes, "is relatively uninterested in the things that interest professional ecologists, such as determining the

[59] Worster, 179.

[60] Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (1992): 3-7; Anna Reading and Tanya Notley, "The Materiality of Globital Memory: Bringing the Cloud to Earth," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 29.4 (2015): 511-521.

ratio of diversity to stability in correlation with area."[61] He is, of course, partly correct. But assuming that a description of interactions between field mice and parasites is anything like the same thing when someone speaks about an "ecological way of being" (to use a cliché phrase) is to miss the whole point. The "ecology movement" is speaking about *kinds of societies* and the *kinds of people* who would live in those kinds of societies. The environmental imagination, in this sense, might be better understood alongside what C. Wright Mills called the sociological imagination, except that, to its credit, the environmental imagination includes a great deal more nonhumans in "the social."[62] Phillips' stated target is the "naïve realism" of nature writers, as well as the unhelpful and caricature-driven debates between constructivists and anti-constructivists. His post-disciplinary language of Latourian naturecultures, while an advance in some ways, elides important differences that other pragmatic approaches would appreciate. Namely, that people may be using the vocabulary of ecology for different *purposes*, and that these *purposes* are part of historical conflicts both within the social *over* the social, and both within nature *over* nature.

If we simply read the environment *in literature* as a set of representations that either do or do not correspond to what the natural sciences currently tell us about the world, it greatly diminishes what texts can tell us about our historical relations within the world. Adorno argues that "metaphysical categories are not merely an ideology concealing the social system; at the same time they express its nature, the truth about it,

[61] Dana Phillips, *The Truth of Ecology: Nature, Culture, and Literature in America* (New York: Oxford, 2003), 116.

[62] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination, 40th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

and in their changes are precipitated those in its most central experiences."[63] It is central to how people make sense of their experience in the world. Narratives contain ideas of nature that bear what Guattari calls a *transversal* relation to how individuals understand themselves in society, how they imagine that society, and the relation of that society to the non-human (though no less historical) environment. Rather than accepting or rejecting certain images of nature as true or false based on their correspondence with yet other descriptions of the world, we may instead read them as expressing a truth about contemporary experience as it is articulated in the present conjuncture.

In the twentieth century, environmentalism promised to reform societies so as to produce sustainable and even *beneficial* relations between human habitations and the more-than-human environment. But Ecology as a *movement* inherits the mantle of past world-historical projects that promised cosmological revolution on top of social transformation. One might call this a *surplus reconciliation*. Its adherence to what Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams call a "folk politics," imagines a grand reconciliation of the self with the world by abolishing the complex differentiations and Weberian disenchantments of modernity—whether in divisions of labor, technology, knowledge, geography, gender, race, or desire.[64] According to Norman Cohn's influential study of late-medieval millenarian movements, Nature was figured as an egalitarian world in harmony with God while church-monarchic hierarchies were an unnatural aberration of the fall into history which eternity, brought about by revolution, would disrupt.[65]

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[63] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Trans. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2002), 231.

[64] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future* (New York: Verso, 2015).

[65] Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

Rousseau secularized this radical vision with his concept of natural man and, consequently, a romantic past (or colonized other) came to be held as a norm from which to critique social inequality without taking into account the incongruity of that norm with historical evidence. The young "romantic" Marx secularized this estrangement by locating the formation of the subject within in the labor process whereby the worker is alienated from both a coherent social experience and from the world of nature, which becomes alienated through the same process.[66] Communism would be a re-integration of humanism and naturalism, culminating not in the end of history, but its authentic beginning. Western Marxists like Herbert Marcuse and the Frankfurt School informed the New Left with this "humanistic" Marx in their analyses of mass culture. However, the countercultural longing for immediacy eventually became what Murray Bookchin terms "lifestylism," which, for environmentalism, meant an anti-political retreat into various strains of millenarian deep ecology; at the same time, "lifestylism" provided the very model of niche production that would enable its recuperation as "green consumption" and valorized flexibility under post-Fordism.[67]

It is a well-documented irony that up until quite recently, otherwise science-skeptical environmentalists would only accept ecology precisely because it delivers an image of the world consistent with the wholistic, soft, integrated, flexible, and free model of society that the trans-Atlantic countercultures were struggling to create in the sixties. For Hannah Arendt, "an ideology differs from a simple opinion in that it claims to

[66] Karl Marx, "The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," *The Marx-Engels Reader,* Ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 66-125.

[67] Murray Bookchin, "Deep Ecology, Lifestyle Anarchism, and Postmodernism," *Anarchism, Marxism, and the Future of the Left: Interviews and Essays, 1993-1998* (San Fransisco: AK Press, 1999), 115-142

possess either the key to history, or the solution for all the 'riddles of the universe,' or the intimate knowledge of the hidden universal laws which are supposed to rule nature and man."[68] Ecology as a metaphysics of the social and natural begins to look like other twentieth-century political ideologies in that it seems to promise more than it is capable of delivering: environmental sustainability is no guarantee of political harmony, nor is political harmony a guarantee of personal happiness, nor does personal fulfillment or political harmony guarantee sustainability.[69] As the projections of climate change have begun to sink in over the last decade, these aspirations may have been tempered by more practical concerns like infrastructure, extraction, and justice for affected communities. To adapt a phrase from Stuart Hall, it is an ecology without guarantees.[70] The millenarianism might be taking a back seat to more intensified and generalized political engagement. While this is a good thing in my opinion, it raises a question: how are critics to square the aspirational narrative visions of movements and literatures—narratives that build metaphysical images of the world, even if in grand opposition—with the *deflationary* recognition that such constructions are historically situated and composed of necessarily limited vocabularies?

Richard Rorty addressed this dilemma throughout his life's work by calling for a postmetaphysical culture. In his famous autobiographical essay, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids," he speaks to this tension between the institutional discourses of public

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[68] Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt: 1968), 159.

[69] This is another way of phrasing what Guattari means by positing three ecologies: environmental ecology, social ecology, and mental ecology (which are open processes that do not necessarily reconcile or resolve as in traditional dialectics (52).

[70] Stuart Hall, "The Problem of Ideology—Marxism without Guarantees," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10.2 (1986): 28-44.

solidarity and the aesthetic vocabularies of private fulfillment. Growing up in the anti-Stalinist left and democratic socialist milieu of his parent's generation, Rorty struggled to square his political commitments with his private, "snobbish," interests in the wild orchids of the eastern United States. He discovered in himself a troubling Platonist urge to, quoting Yeats, "hold reality and justice in a single vision." By reality, Rorty means the "numinous" and ineffable "Wordsworthian" experiences he had in the woods; by justice, he means "what Norman Thomas and Trotsky both stood for, the liberation of the weak from the strong."[71] The problem with this single vision, he argues, is that it is deeply metaphysical and asks too much of politics, the natural sciences, and of poets. For this kind of Platonist it is not enough to assert one's beliefs and values; the descriptions of the universe must conform to those values if it is to be acknowledged as Truth. In its place, Rorty argues for a postmetaphysical culture in which people no longer seek to "discover," in the descriptions of the natural world, *external* confirmation of our tastes, values, and beliefs, about ourselves and society, but rather understand these descriptions—and, more importantly, their uses—as "made."

> A poeticized, or postmetaphysical, culture is one in which the imperative that is common to religion and metaphysics—to find an ahistorical, transcultural matrix for one's thinking, something into which everything can fit, independent of one's time and place—has dried up and blown away. It would be a culture in which people thought of human beings as creating their own life-world, rather than being responsible to God or "the nature of reality," which tells them what kind it is.[72]

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[71] Richard Rorty, "Trotsky and the Wild Orchids," *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 3-20, 7.

[72] Richard Rorty, "Toward a Postmetaphysical Culture," *Take Care of Freedom and the Truth will Take Care of Itself*, Ed. Eduardo Mendieta (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 46-55, 46.

The decline of what Rorty calls "redemptive truth," that is, "a set of beliefs which would end, once and for all, the process of reflection on what to do with ourselves," must be accompanied by the rise of a "literary culture," consisting in "non-cognitive relations with other human beings, relations mediated by human artifacts such as books and buildings, paintings and songs" which "provide glimpses of alternative ways of being human."[73] To call the descriptions of the natural sciences "reality" and demand that our literary and cultural production conform to that image, is merely to substitute one set of historical conventions for another. Nelson Goodman considers it a "delusive goal." "We have seen that even the most realistic way of picturing amounts merely to one kind of conventionalization," Goodman writes. On top of this, "the idea of making verbal descriptions approximate pictorial depiction loses its point when we understand that to turn a description into the most faithful possible picture would amount to nothing more than exchanging some conventions for others."[74] Which domain of the sciences would we turn to, for instance, in order to prove or disprove Walt Whitman's democratic vision in *Leaves of Grass*? The effort would appear ridiculous. Rorty's deflation of redemptive truth gives greater importance to the role of literature and the "strong poet" in democratic societies, while freeing the sciences to do their work without having to supply society with ultimate visions of reality.

Yet many misunderstand Rorty's neopragmatism as calling for the kind of free-floating, disconnected, and solipsistic refusals of "reality" that accompanies other

[73] Richard Rorty, "The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture," *The John M. Olin Center for Inquiry into the Theory and Practice of Democracy*, 8 November, 2000. Web Accessed 30 May 2016. PDF.

[74] Nelson Goodman, "The Way the World Is," *The Review of Metaphysics* 14.1 (1960): 48-56.

caricatures of postmodernism. The reality that is referred to in all of these caricatures is the one described by the natural sciences through mathematics, which is of course, the current and most-agreed-upon, intersubjective and institutional, consensus about which descriptions are most useful for application and further research. Following John Dewey's "weak naturalism," Rorty writes that "the activity of uttering sentences is one of the things people do in order to cope with their environment,"[75] and that our vocabularies "have no more of a *representational* relation to an intrinsic nature of things than does the anteater's snout or the bowerbird's skill at weaving."[76] This approach does not separate humans from the world but rather foregrounds the multi-sensory embeddedness of our lives in the material spaces, encounters, institutions, and affects that cultural geographers have termed the "non-representational."[77] Rorty adopts the network metaphor of contemporary ecology to illustrate the pragmatist point that representations are acts within the world they negotiate: "We need to stop thinking of words as representations and to start thinking of them as nodes in the causal network which binds the organism together with its environment."[78] If this sounds similar to Teresa Ebert's Marxian account of the "pluralization" of the sign under post-Fordism, this is because economic globalization and the technoculture have foregrounded the particularity of locations and contexts from which people share accounts and contest descriptions of the world. A

[75] Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1982), *xviii*.

[76] Richard Rorty, *Truth and Progress* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 48.

[77] Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Noel Castree, *Nature* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

[78] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), *xxiii*.

Deweyan pragmatist would not have been surprised by this development, whereas a *disappointed modernist* would get the apocalyptic high of despair at the loss of the absolute and the loss of community recognition that accompanies it.[79] Lawrence Grossberg distinguishes an engaged, and pragmatic, cultural studies from the diminished world and accompanying affects of much postmodern theory.

> The failure of postmodern theory is not that it has no notion of macrostructures but rather that it has no way of theorizing the relations between different levels of abstraction, between the microphysics of power and biopolitics (Foucault) or between the child in the bubble and the simulacrum (Baudrillard). Similarly, the failure of postmodern theory is not that it denies a reality behind the surfaces of everyday life but rather that it always forgets that there are many surfaces of everyday life and that reality is produced within the relations amongst these surfaces. The factory (even in the Third World) is as much a surface of our lives as is television.[80]

Rather than cultivating a detached skepticism about all frames of reference, a distrust of surfaces, or an equally totalizing anti-totality, cultural studies pragmatically uses theory to make "mattering maps," understanding that "not all surfaces are articulated or present or even effective in the same ways."[81] As Rorty is fond of saying, no one is a relativist in practice. Our attachments are necessary conditions for asserting preferences and building critique, which performs the "negative" gesture of unmasking the asymmetrical power-relations in a given arrangement by exposing a text's complicity within that arrangement. One must first make the map to do the work of critique. Critics

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[79] "On my view," Rorty writes, "James and Dewey were not only waiting at the end of the dialectical road which analytic philosophy traveled, but are waiting at the end of the road which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling" (1982), *xviii*.

[80] Lawrence Grossberg, "History, Politics, and Postmodernism: Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies," *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Eds. Morley and Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 151-173, 166.

[81] Grossberg (1996), 167.

of critique like Rita Felski argue that critique can be as much about the critic performing a detached knowingness in an effort not to appear naïve. In this regard, Felski is prefigured in literature by David Foster Wallace's critique of irony and its acidic effect on culture: cynicism is now preferable to naïve belief.[82] Yet if we understand irony as simply the exploitation of a gap between meanings and critique as really just an exploration of limits and possibilities, there is no need to stop. This debate is primarily about the historical context of interpretive and humanistic practices. Bruno Latour, for instance, has been the major figure to eschew critique in favor of "assembling" networks. He astutely observes that in recent decades the "hermeneutics of suspicion" has blended into to a popular paranoid imagination that distrusts all authoritative claims to knowledge. This is especially troubling in the case of climate change. In "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?," Latour singles out his own field of science studies as contributing to this development. He concurs with Boltanski and Chiapello that "the new spirit of capitalism has put to good use the artistic critique that was supposed to destroy it," and pushes their argument further:

> If the dense and moralist cigar smoking reactionary bourgeois can transform him- or herself into a free-floating agnostic bohemian, moving opinions, capital, and networks from one end of the planet to the other without attachment, why would he or she not be able to absorb the most sophisticated tools of deconstruction, social construction, discourse analysis, postmodernism, postology?[83]

An excellent question, albeit a bit late. For quite some time, Marxists have argued that what is called postmodernism in aesthetics was the dominant cultural mode of post-

[82] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2015); David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 151-194.

[83] Bruno Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225-248, 231.

Fordist capitalism, while critics like Peter Sloterdijk, Slavoj Zizek, and Paolo Virno, have analyzed the recuperation of cynical distance and the mobilization of affirmation alike.[84] Curiously, Latour situates "capital" alongside opinions and networks as that which can be moved "without attachment." Perhaps he is engaging in hyperbole, but it is familiar hand-waving motions like these which obscure the fact that capital is an attachment—a relation—not merely an object, and that one's ability to move it is constrained by a variety of other institutional (shall we say) entanglements. Giving up critique does not free us from the conditions of intellectual (and other) labors, whether assembling or disassembling. We might add Latour's own actor network theory (ANT) to the list of ideas and methodologies seemingly ready-made to aestheticize whatever regime of digital maker-culture emerges next. At the level of theory, the image of the world it produces is not unlike that of logistics, which sees workers, computers, materials, infrastructure, consumers, weather, money, *and the models that represent the relation between these things*, as equally-existing objects on a single managerial plane. However, as Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift argue, approaches like ANT have the benefit of expanding the conception of the political so that "politics is no longer limited to humans and incorporates the many issues to which they are attached," and that "[passive] objects become [political] things… when matters of fact give way to their complicated entanglements and become matters of concern."[85] This ontological expansion of the

[84] Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason,* Trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Slavoj Zizek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York: Verso, 1989); Paolo Virno, "The Ambivalence of Disenchantment," *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics,* Eds. Virno and Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 13-36.

[85] Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Arts of the Political: New Openings for the Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 105.

political is a necessary move for environmental critics in the pragmatist effort of "making things public," that is, engaging publics that are affected bodily or aspirationally by environmental harms.[86]

Latour's question asks us to situate the humanities' "most sophisticated tools" within the contemporary moment of instrumentalized suspicion and industries of doubt. However, should we not do what Latour himself suggests and turn our anthropological lenses toward the hybrid-ontological vocabularies of these new sociologists? In *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, Grossberg argues that ANT "treats everything as a network while denying contexts." "While ANT might be taken as a kind of hyperempiricist and generally depoliticized formation of cultural studies," he writes, "I see it as an investigation of a set of assemblages, which has yet to locate itself conjuncturally."[87] In the same way that Latour locates the languages of "critique" within a particular historical context, Grossberg argues that "affirmationist" approaches like actor network theory must work to situate themselves within the conjuncture, both in their objects of analysis and their ontological description of the world. This concept of the conjuncture, in the Gramscian tradition of cultural studies, is not a dubious attempt to "go meta," as Timothy Morton argues, but rather an effort to immanently locate particular discourses within institutions, and within contemporary geo-historical and cultural configurations of global capitalism. In one sense, the difference between historians and ontologists is an old one. Back in 1932, Adorno argued that ontologists (i.e. Heidegger) are always trying to escape

[86] Bruno Latour, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public," *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

[87] Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 304.

the historicity of their claims by appealing to first philosophy; one can approach history by way of ontology or approach ontology by way of history. To foreground both the *historicity* of natural world and the *historicity* of the ideas of nature in the human (historical) imagination, Adorno introduced the "idea of natural-history."[88] This dialectical formulation emphasizes *becoming* (of both terms) rather than the spatial "boundary-blurring" of ontologically-specific domains in the Latourian "natureculture." "The ontological need," Adorno writes, "can no more guarantee its object than the agony of the starving assures them of food."[89]

As Michael Zimmerman and others have illustrated, Heidegger's own critique of "productionist metaphysics" sought to carve out a spiritually nationalist space between American Fordism and Soviet Communism.[90] This helps us to locate it within the interwar conjuncture of Weimar conservatism and other critiques of modernism. Returning to our original example, Merchant seeks to update *storehouse nature*—with its bureaucratic rationalization of the environment, and spatial divisions of nature and culture, each mediated as much by mass-consumption as much as by concerns over representation and authenticity—by replacing it with *network nature*—in which the previous spatial division is collapsed into "natureculture," as new techno-economies

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[88] Theodor Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History," *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*, Ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 252-270.

[89] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2003), 65.

[90] Michael Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

intervene in the world at unprecedented scales, and as historical questions of description melt into a material-discursive ontology. This locates her within the conjuncture of American post-Fordism. Merchant first diagnoses this conflation of form and value (machine universe: bad), but then later endorses it (network universe: good). The great critical gesture of unmasking turns out to be the unveiling of the next big product. For Merchant, and many others, Nature is understood as a form that embodies the particular historical values and practices of a society, and conversely, values that critics believe societies *should* have. The message, unfortunately, always arrives late.

"Material ecocriticism," argues Hannes Bergthaller, "is not about the replacement of a false ontology with a true one. Rather, it offers a *redescription* of the world from a new observer position."[91] If we rejected every idea or representation of nature that is found to be somehow complicit in capitalism (or anything else we don't like), we would be left with nothing. Or rather, we would be left with a theoretical "view from nowhere." As Cornel West puts it: "We cannot isolate 'the world' from theories of the world, then compare these theories of the world with a theory-free world. We cannot compare theories with anything that is not a product of another theory. So any talk about the 'the world' is relative to the alternative theories available."[92] Merchant's project was precisely to understand how ideas of nature are produced and transformed within the historical tensions and dynamics of socio-ecological reproduction—in this, it demands repetition—however, her "true" nature was emerging alongside the image of the new economy.

[91] Hannes Bergthaller, "Limits of Agency: Notes on the Material Turn from a Systems-Theoretical Perspective," *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 37-50, 49.

[92] Cornel West, "Nietzsche's Prefiguration of Postmodern American Philosophy," *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic, 1999), 188-212, 193.

Rather than posing a new, seemingly trans-contextual, aesthetic norm of nature (or vocabulary) that artists, critics, and activists are supposed to mimic, one would instead immanently contextualize ideas of nature, regarding them as ways of imagining and producing the environment through literary and cultural narratives. It would require us to examine ideas of nature "in the making" as *constitutive* of post-Fordist and neoliberal societies, and constitutive of what might supersede them. Ideas of nature cannot be thought of as being in simple structural opposition to the society they critique, nor are they completely determined by them as in a Foucaultian "discursive regime;" rather, these ideas of nature are articulated in specific material contexts and circulate within the world they claim to represent. They are, like Beethoven's pastoral, images of historical interpretations of the world.

Methodology: A Cultural Studies Approach to Environmental Humanities

In his 1998 introduction to *Writing the Environment*, Richard Kerridge describes the "new environmentalist cultural criticism" as a move beyond science and geography into the humanities. "The ecocritic," Kerridge writes, "wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear, to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part-concealed, in a great many cultural spaces." "Ecocriticism," he continues, "seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis."[93] Kerridge's description locates the ecocritic in the middle of things. Ecocriticism does not provide the critic a methodology by which she might stand outside society and be in touch with the ultimate nature of reality (or ultimate

[93] Richard Kerridge, *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, Eds. Richard Kerridge and Neil Sammells (London: Zed Books, 1998), 5.

reality of nature); neither can ecocriticism fully endorse grand theories which seek to displace humans as the producers of their own discourses in the name of anti-anthropocentrism. The critic remembers Edward Said's notion of "traveling theory;" interpretations of particular works and situations are divorced from their original context to become "theory," and then become institutionalized, shape practices, and for various reasons are later rejected or given up, often in the name of the very concepts and practices they made possible in the first place. The first task of the critic, it would seem, is to recognize that at any historical moment, what appears as the dominant and emergent ideas have developed in relation to one another; each represent human efforts to understand and change a particular context. Some, like residual ideas, persist even after, or perhaps *on account of*, their failure. In this section, I describe the cultural studies concepts of articulation and conjuncture that I take up and which shape my ecocritical approach to the project.

Articulation is a theory of linking relations across contexts that allows one to both "track environmental ideas and representations," and to "evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis." A text is coherent only in relation to something else (usually another text), and one can only speak of usefulness in relation to a context or situation. In other words, how a particular dimension or context of the environmental crisis is understood will determine whether or not a text is coherent or useful as a response. This means that the "work" a novel does—whether aesthetic, ideological, entertaining, informing, or serving as the basis for non-literary activity—may differ from context to context, from one decade (or period) to the next. "Articulation links this practice to that effect, this text to that meaning, this meaning to

that reality, this experience to those politics," writes Lawrence Grossberg. "And these links," he continues, "are themselves articulated into larger structures."[94] Jennifer Daryl Slack considers articulation to be "one of the most generative concepts" of cultural studies, in that it breaks with the various structuralist determinisms without rejecting a consciousness of historical constraints in which people make history.[95] As a way of relating culture to politics that understands both as mutually determined, articulation is the process of recognizing the unevenness of this determination and the specificity of the connections. As such, it is "the production of identity on top of difference, of unities out of fragments, of structures across practices;"[96] even "links between concepts"[97] can take historical significance.

For examples of articulation at work in this dissertation, we can turn to chapters three and four. In "Life Finds a Way," I take up the political and environmental uses of complexity and chaos theory to compare how a similar idea of nature can be articulated to very different politics in an era of deregulation. In the case of Michael Crichton, chaos and vitalism serve to substantiate arguments against public regulation and control of industry; for Octavia Butler, her affirmation of life in the face of chaos is a pragmatic response to a condition of economic precarity and racism in a not too distant future. In chapter two, my reading of John Updike's *Rabbit is Rich* details the subtle shift in the

[94] Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 54.

[95] Jennifer Daryl Slack, "The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies," *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies,* Eds. Morley and Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 112-127, 112.

[96] Grossberg (1992), 54.

[97] Slack (1996), 119.

discourse of the novel toward a speculative relation to the future. It is a subjective shift, generated by small-scale economic transactions and discussions of the energy crisis, which will become an objective component of the emergent neoliberal economy under Reagan and the rampant speculation that led to the financial crisis of 2008. Thinking these developments through the concept of articulation allows one to see, as Stuart Hall puts it, "how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse and… how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects."[98] As my account of environmental culture and Fordism in this introduction illustrates, these articulations are neither random nor wholly determined.

Stuart Hall adapted the concept of the conjuncture from Antonio Gramsci and turned it into a practice that informed work at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (or "Birmingham School"). For Gramsci, the conjuncture refers to the political complex of forces, institutions, and imaginaries (education), which make up the national-popular at a given historical moment. For Hall, conjuncture contains all of Gramsci's definition, but is slightly abstracted so as to become a broader practice of humanistic and social scientific inquiry: conjuncture is how various contexts (and contextualizations) are related and is also the *act* of relating. As Grossberg explains, there are various ways that humanities and social science researchers approach the study of contexts: there is Marxist historicism, Foucaultian "discursive apparatuses," and the "situated knowledges" of pragmatism and feminism, to name the most influential. While each of these efforts to frame and explain contexts is useful, none can provide a full or total account on their

[98] Stuart Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation," *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies,* Eds. Morley and Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 131-150, 141.

own. One needs a way of accounting for why particular contextual inquiries are taken up at different times by different people or groups, and their effects; in other words, the conjuncture is an account of how the context shapes the inquiry (and how the inquiry is itself articulated politically). Hall's conjuncture describes "the complex historically specific terrain of a crisis which affects—but in uneven ways—a specific national-social formation as a whole."[99]

A recent example of this is Zamora and Behrent's, *Foucault and Neoliberalism,* a collection which argues that Foucault's selective reference of neoliberal philosophers, his amorphous concept of power, and more importantly, his own turn toward the self as a project, has provided a left-wing supplement to neoliberalism in the Anglo-American academy and in the radical portions of the left which have effectively given up on making claims on the state.[100] The Birmingham School's inquiries into subcultures, for instance, were never simply celebrations of "resistance," they were always concerned with how unequal economic relations might be reproduced through what we might now call "Foucaultian" practices of symbolic (or "cultural") contestation, even by the working poor.[101] In a similar way, ecocritics might wish to interrogate how culture- and class-specific ways of "being ecological" reproduce inequality and evade questions of national or state politics by shifting the focus to the cultivation of one's being rather than towards the economic conditions and concentrations of private power that constrain technological

[99] Grossberg (2010), 41.

[100] Daniel Zamora and Michael Behrent (eds.) *Foucault and Neoliberalism* (London: Polity, 2015); see also, Kaspar Villadsen and Mitchell Dean, "State Phobia, Civil Society, and a Certain Vitalism," *Constellations* 19.3 (2012): 401-420.

[101] The canonical example is Paul Willis' *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

development and environmental policy.[102] "Cultural studies," Grossberg writes, "starts by recognizing that the context is always already structured, not only by relations of force and power, but also by voices of political anger, despair, and hope."[103] These voices are what lend social reality its active and open quality, and cultural studies can be understood as a form of desiring-production which intervenes in the ongoing construction of that reality. For Hall and the Birmingham School, their conjuncture was (and arguably still is) the neoliberal modernization of Margaret Thatcher, in which organized industrial labor was broken up, state institutions privatized, and "society" replaced by "individuals."

For examples of conjunctural reading in this dissertation, we can turn to chapters two and five. Chapter one argues that Mary McCarthy's *Birds of America* addresses the impasses of left-cultural criticism at the limits of Fordist organization of nature and culture. The distinctions and consumer practices of mass and high-culture are modeled on "wilderness reserve" pattern of scarcity and private experience. McCarthy's declaration of the death of Nature, for instance, at the moment when the US environmental movement achieved national visibility was, for her, not only the death of a certain conception and historical experience of the natural world, but also of a certain conception and historical experience of *culture*, which was being called into question by the Paris events of 1968. Chapter five argues that William T. Vollmann's re-writing of North American history in *The Ice-Shirt* (part one of the Seven Dreams series) and *Imperial*, are a response to the economic consolidation of the continent under NAFTA. Vollmann links

[102] An example of this is Lisa Sun-Hee Park and David Pellow's *The Slums of Aspen: Immigrants vs. the Environment in America's Eden* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

[103] Grossberg (2010), 44.

contemporary financial and state practices (e.g. racialization, militarization, and rationalized precarity of agricultural labor) as the present configuration of a much longer history of conflict over land, resources, and bodies, by empires whose aspirations were written in the desires of charismatic and unknown individuals alike. Vollmann's metafictional historiography foregrounds the act of narrative and memory-making, which, I claim, contributes to Nancy Fraser's three-fold conception of justice in the new era of transnational capitalism.

My conjuncture is the United States since 1971, and the way that writers have taken up images of nature and the environment to naturalize, challenge, defamiliarize, or affirm, capitalist modernization during a period when the disastrous environmental effects of this development have become a permanent feature on the horizon of modernity. Each chapter addresses an environmental discourse that is potentially a site (or vector) of recuperation—the death of nature, energy crisis, chaos/deregulation, and geography as destiny—and corresponds to a particular decade. My choice of texts are driven by the need to "meet people where they are," and they are lots of places. McCarthy's late fiction spoke to both national audiences and literary-political circles; Updike's depiction of energy anxieties captured a sense of national feeling and received the National Book Award; Crichton's *Jurassic Park* has become one of the most iconic science-fiction film franchises, while Butler's *Parable* novels assert the stakes of African-American imaginaries in the present and future; finally, Vollmann's status as high-literature is complemented by his field-work and journalistic efforts to chronicle inequality (economic, gender, sexual, racial, and national) around the world. His embedded practices—which I neither have room to list nor explicate—attempt to

incorporate ethico-political practices of lived engagement into the literary form of some of his most dense "complicated" works, modeling, in effect, what it means to construct "knowable worlds." Literature, and novels in particular, construct worlds in which we simultaneously recognize and are distanced from our own. By linking images of society and nonhuman nature through the consciousnesses of individuals, novels allow us to decide which conventions should be changed and which are worth preserving.

Chapter two, "The Common World and the Shadow of Nature: Mary McCarthy's *Birds of America*," discusses McCarthy's self-described "perverse" environmental politics in the context of her opposition to the war in Vietnam and her experience in the 1968 Paris uprisings. Through this *bildungsroman* and novel of ideas, McCarthy explores the limits of the wilderness ethos, and the end of a metaphysical politics for which nature functions as a universally recognizable domain in which the good, the true, and the beautiful are reconciled. Similarly, the novel explores the limits and uses of culture through a critique of the public museum. Central to my argument is Hannah Arendt's concept of a common world, which I draw from a careful reading of her recently published letters with McCarthy. What the main character experiences as a disenchantment of both nature and culture is the recognition that the Fordist model of mass consumption is exhausted and that the Arendtian common world has yet to be built. As a member of the New York Intellectuals, a group of influential critics who are not known for having an interest in environments outside the urban experience of Jewish immigrants, McCarthy's late fiction dramatically reframes the relevance of their arguments for contemporary readers.

Chapter three, "Energy Futures: John Updike's Financial Petrofiction," discusses Updike's award-winning portrayal of the 1979 energy crisis in *Rabbit is Rich* (1981). Updike's iconic character, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, rides out and tenuously benefits from the crisis as the recent inheritor of a Toyota dealership. Experiencing the oil crisis, along with President Carter, as a crisis of national futurity, the aging Rabbit turns to speculation in currency and in the housing market. This turn towards speculation, I argue, anticipates the rise of Reagan-era neoliberalism and the emergence of set of arrangements that culminated in the financial meltdown and subprime mortgage crisis of 2008. Through a close reading of the characters' sales (and interpersonal) strategies, I examine how the dialogue creates what economist Christian Marazzi calls "structural information deficits" which produce a speculative relation to the future for the subject, a relation that is mobilized through institutional insecurity. Updike's realism depicts a set of emotional responses generated by the energy crisis, which become normalized under neoliberalism, and work to prevent the imagination of long-term solutions to the energy and environmental problems of petromodernity.

Chapter four, "Life Finds a Way: Science Fiction's Deregulatory Fantasies," takes up Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* and Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels to examine how the environment imagined as cosmos works to naturalize theories about society. This chapter explores the ambivalence of the discourses of chaos and complexity. For *Jurassic Park,* chaos and complexity serve Crichton's "double narrative." The novel's external narrative depicts the catastrophe as the consequence of a lack of public regulation and the evasion of international law by corporations; simultaneously, the narrative within the park celebrates chaos as it explodes the limits of "control" and regulation. In Butler's

world, the social provisions of the U.S. government are all but non-existent, and the young narrator composes a new spirituality based on universal instability as she travels and rebuilds community life in a privatized, near-apocalyptic society. For the marginalized and "disposable" populations of the novel, the affirmation of precarity is a pragmatic means for transforming social conditions. This chapter illustrates the way that similar ideas of nature can be articulated to a different set of uses and political commitments.

Chapter five, "Reterritorializing North America: William T. Vollmann's Environmental Memory," turns to historiographic metafiction to argue that contemporary environmental writers are pushing the genre past its postmodern "origins." Through Vollmann's novels *The Ice-Shirt* (1992) and *Imperial* (2009), I argue that his writing reconstructs what ecocritic Lawrence Buell calls "environmental memory" for North America during a new age of transnational capital. I draw on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the territory and the work of political philosopher, Nancy Fraser, to examine how Vollmann's metafiction exposes the "frames of justice" underlying transnational disputes over recognition and redistribution. By foregrounding memory as an act of production, this chapter argues for the importance of literature and culture to contemporary struggles for environmental justice at the national and international scale.

Fordism, Nature, and its Discontents

Terry Eagleton argues that even when literature deals with the most minute and empirical-particular details of life, it nevertheless addresses itself to the universal. He writes that for Marx, "universals are actually part of the furniture of the world, not simply

convenient ways of viewing it."[104] Without a universal abstraction like "labor," for instance, capitalism would not be able to function. Similarly, humans are individuals "by virtue of their participation in 'species-being,'" Eagleton writes, "the process of individuation is itself a power or capacity of this common nature." Even when the novel engages in "ideological" depictions of the world, through its form it can still enable readers to unpack and call into question the relation between individual experience and the universal categories that make up social life. To paraphrase Rorty, it exposes us to different experiences and ways of being human, which is all we have. Paul Goodman argues that "Man [sic] is the animal [sic?] who makes himself and one who is made by his culture." This making is the object of the humanities: "Literature repeats the meaning and revives the spirit of past makings," Goodman writes, "by using them again in a making that is occurring now."[105] It is not just particular content that matters—what image of Nature, the Human, and Society is being offered—but the form, which links it to historical organizations of production and enables a range of possible interpretations. The circulation (e.g. production, consumption, distribution, and exchange) of novels takes place alongside other forms of social production which simultaneously produce ideas of Nature as part of the furniture of our world. This is why, I argue, one cannot study changing concepts and narrative figurations of the environment without relating it to production (in general), hence the title *Nature Industries*.

In the opening pages of the *Grundrisse*, Marx criticizes cultural narratives that situate (or begin with) an individual in nature without historical reference to socially-

[104] Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 8.

[105] Paul Goodman, *Speaking and Language: A Defence of Poetry* (New York: Random House, 1971), 160.

mediated production. He compares them to Daniel Defoe's fictional *Robinson Crusoe,* calling them "eighteenth-century Robinsonades."[106] One of the troubles with Defoe's narrative is that it offers a fantasy of man in nature that relies on ahistorical abstractions of both categories. The culturally-specific knowledge and attitudes that Crusoe carries with him, the conditions that brought him to the island, and the colonial relations with Friday, are all bracketed to become a "just so" story of the origins and development of production as entrepreneurial individualism. The naturalism of the scene—an island wilderness—serves to naturalize the actions, events, and the main character. Defoe's "naturally independent, autonomous subjects" formed the later basis of Rousseau's concept of the social contract, and subsequent economic theories of Smith and Ricardo.

Against this view of production in the "absence" of society, Marx argues that production is written into our bodies: "no production [is] possible without an instrument of production, even if this instrument is only the hand." The hand of an eighteenth-century sea merchant is different from the hand of a hunter-gatherer, an assembly-line worker, or a post-industrial organic gardener in the rust-belt; they each produce their food in historically-specific ways that entail a different relation to the self and the body. "Hunger is hunger," Marx writes, engaging the fantasies of natural man; "but the hunger gratified by cooked meat eaten with a knife and fork is a different hunger from that which bolts down raw meat with the aid of hand, nail and tooth. Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption."[107] Marx illustrates production through acts of consumption and, more importantly, foregrounds the historical subject

[106] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse,* Trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 1993), 83.

[107] Marx (1993), 92.

that is produced between these two moments. Without situating the historical subject within a historical arrangement of material production, one will endlessly re-enact the "Robinsonade" confrontation of nature and culture (e.g. natureculture), reinforcing the originary abstractions of Defoe and naturalizing the historical subject which relates the two (equally historical) categories. Marx's criticism of Defoe illustrates not only that literature reflects the ideas of the times, but actively produces the universalities which become the furniture of our existence. Literary narratives are capable of becoming the basis for other forms of non-literary discourse as they mobilize social imaginaries of nature and the environment within the activity of production.

Antonio Gramsci was interested precisely in what kinds of subjects are produced within the modern regimes of production. In his writings on "Fordism and Americanism," he described the alienated relation to experience in the modern factory. For Gramsci, this involved the industrial repression of "animality" and, indeed, the inspiration for Ford's assembly lines came from the disassembled animal bodies in the Chicago stock yards.[108] To separate the abstract labor from the particular laborer, the Taylorist assembly line disarticulated the movements of body parts from their bodies and mental life from action. "Industrial factories used the body, forcing it to leave the soul outside of the assembly line, so that the worker looked like a soulless body," writes Franco Berardi. "The immaterial factory [of post-Fordism] asks instead to place our very souls at its disposal:

[108] Antonio Gramsci, "Americanism and Fordism," *Prison Notebooks*, trans. Hoare and Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971): 277-320; Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 46.

intelligence, sensibility, creativity, and language."[109] For both manual and mental laborers to reproduce themselves, we require not just space and time for leisure consumption, but engagements with alterity that allow for a reterritorialization of our senses, our bodies, and our desires. This has sometimes generated classed conflicts between "active" and "contemplative" uses of the environment in national parks. Nature, as a non-privatized environment without permanent human industry, serves as a means and space for the reproduction of workers.[110] It is thus a site of struggle both as an environmental commons (species/speciation) and a material opportunity for worker autonomy and creation beyond the logics of both production and consumption.

In Peter Drucker's account, Fordism was "the organization of men, machines, and materials into one productive whole."[111] More than simply the idea of mass production, it was a wholistic and often nostalgic vision. Henry Ford sought to close the loop between production and consumption, raising wages in 1914 to a "utopian" five dollars per hour

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[109] Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy,* trans. Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009), 192.

[110] P.M. of the Midnight Notes Collective, links a desire for nature with intellectuals in "Strange Victories," *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War, 1973-1992* (New York: Autonomedia, 1992), 196:

> Nature as a means of reproduction is important for intellectual workers because the specialization and one-sidedness of their work generates psychological instability and requires periods of complete relaxation without jarring sensorial stimuli (noise, media, social contracts). Nature is the most efficient compensation for intellectual stress since it represents the unity of body and mind against the capitalist division of labor. Extensive consumption of nature has traditionally been an element of the reproduction of intellectual workers. (It started with Rousseau, then came the Romantics, Thoreau, the early tourists, Tolstoy, artists' colonies in the Alps, etc.). The ecological movement responds directly to the class interests of the intellectual sector of the proletariat.

[111] Peter Drucker, *The Ecological Vision: Reflections on the American Condition* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1993), 34.

so that his workers could become consumers of the objects they produced. As Drucker observes, Ford invented no product, but rather a form of organization, along with a social imaginary. Predicated on the nostalgic image of the American town, Ford's effort to stand athwart modernity ironically became the template of American (and global) modernization. This is the era of Heidegger's *Gestell*, or the environment gathered together into a "standing reserve," by modern technics. He and his fellow Weimar conservatives critiqued Fordist mass production and the promise of mass consumption. Heidegger's philosophy lent itself to the "reactionary modernist" project of National Socialism.[112] For Walter Benjamin, whose early politics fused both left and right-wing critiques of modernity, mass production is simultaneously the production of masses; it is a temporal cycle which can only be broken by a messianic or apocalyptic eruption of reconciled eternity—as a moment of redemption and rest—into history.[113] Displaced to the United States, Horkheimer and Adorno understood cultural production as a space of relative autonomy that had followed nature in being subsumed by cycles of accumulation. In their critique of Fordist "total administration," a once emancipatory Enlightenment reason reduces the natural world to a mathematical image ready-made for domination by the sciences and rendered "universally fungible" by the logic of exchange. Here, Nature

[112] Mary Nolan, *Visions of Modernity: American Business and the Modernization of Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

[113] Richard Wolin offers a critical genealogy of Benjamin's "critique of violence" and its fascist origins in his talk, "Apocalypse Now: Walter Benjamin and the Legacy of Jewish Political Messianism," *Back Door Broadcasting*, 5 June 2013, Web. Accessed 2 February 2016.

enters the entertainment complex; the only authenticity to be found is in high modernist gestures that acknowledge this loss as a material negativity which cannot be fully reconciled with its concept.[114] The social order of "men, machines, and materials," would remain internally antagonistic so long as it is organized as domination, predicated on the renunciation of the self against a falsely objective world, and demanding sacrifice in exchange for survival.

Nature was indeed becoming organized along the logics of modern management, which Hardt and Negri describe as "a synthesis of Taylorism in the organization of labor, Fordism in the wage relation, and Keynesianism in the macroeconomic regulation of society."[115] Under the Fordist-Keynesian regulation model of environmentalism, parks and spaces of public nature served, in theory, to conserve large-scale tracts of wilderness, and to offer a promise of human individuation. This public nature institutionalizes the synthesis of the environment as both resource and metaphysical inspiration. They are populist repositories of solitude and leisure where a person can reintegrate their senses after having been fragmented by the division of labor in the factory. This was the dream of Robert Marshall, scientist and head of the U.S. Forest Service under FDR. As a member of the socialist League for Industrial Democracy, Marshall advocated for *The People's Forest* against capitalist exploitation of the environment, first as a commons and second as the public's right to "pure aesthetic rapture."[116] His aesthetic defense of

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[114] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

[115] Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 242.

[116] Robert Marshall, *The People's Forest* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002).

wilderness offered a progressive, as opposed to a reactionary, version of modernism that sought to reconcile "a twentieth-century and a primitive world."[117]

Nature, in the modernism of the first half of the 20th century, stood in relation to industrial society as *negativity*—as the un-assimilated. It was the location of the primitive, the instinctual, of madness: a place of negative freedom capable of re-energizing modern subjects. As the transcendent Nature of the nineteenth century was replaced by the spatial regulations of the twentieth century, organicist conceptions of society and nature began to unravel and stand in opposition to one another. The reconciliation (or recombination) of society and nature was mobilized by writers across the political spectrum. Joshua Schuster argues that avant-garde poets responded to conditions of increased urbanization by affirming "regeneration through pollution."[118] For others, nature was not just plants and animals but a mythical space and force capable of personal rejuvenation—e.g. Babbitt's Thoreauvian excursion from his desk job—equally capable, as the Frankfurt sociologists understood all too well, of inspiring hyper-modern barbarism. Norman Podhoretz, for instance, attacked the beats as "Know-Nothing Bohemians" who "worship primitivism, instinct, energy, and 'blood.'"[119] It was an early critique of New Left irrationalism he would later share with other New York Intellectuals. If these artists were challenging the distinctions between nature and culture

[117] Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind, 4th Edition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 205.

[118] Joshua Schuster, *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015).

[119] Norman Podhoretz, "The Know-Nothing Bohemians," *Partisan Review,* 25 (1958): 305-318.

in order to produce new hybrids, they were also attempting to link up social aspirations with (or against) the developments of modernization.

For Anglo-Americans like the beats, Nature was also figured as colonized and racialized others. People who were believed to be closer to Nature by virtue of their poverty or outsider status were either treated as romantic figures to be emulated or unruly objects to be disciplined. The "Savage Reservation" in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, for instance, stands in stark contrast to the novel's biopolitically regulated, hyper-Fordist, World State, and yet it is impossible to imagine one without the other.[120] Henry Ford has replaced Christ as the epochal division of calendar time. Indeed, the idea of nature under Fordism is haunted as much by the industrial alienation of man from Nature as by the perverse and monstrous *hybrids* of man and Nature under the various large-scale social projects to organize "men, machines, and materials into one productive whole" (e.g. Fascism, Communism, and the "totally administered" Liberalism of the culture industry). It was the contradictory desire for techno-social integration and simultaneously the fear of total rationalization. These hybrids became figures that enabled criticism—both left and right—of the societies that produced them. The progressive programs of the New Deal, for instance, were haunted by specters of rural degeneracy, in which the animality that industrialism (and mass education) had abolished threatened to return. They were sites of normative contestation in which failed promises were exposed and where protest against indignity met affective appeals to pity. For the writers and filmmakers of the New Deal, Nature was the location where religious

[120] Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1932).

narratives played themselves out on Earth: mythical droughts, floods, pastoral harmonies, and apocalyptic dust bowls.[121]

Prior to the environmental dislocations and reconstructive projects of the New Deal, the Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 was a pivotal event with both environmental and cultural significance. The flooding of the Mississippi led to the modernization of federal government agencies; it also transformed property relations of sharecroppers and small farmers along the river, economically stripping many of what little livelihood they had. Its shock was even felt in Europe, where Walter Benjamin's radio addresses give some insight into its magnitude. Benjamin contrasts the river with modern modes of transportation as "a line on which you might think you could rely, just as you would on a boulevard, or a railroad line." However, this "continuously flowing" line expands, contracts, and wanders according to its "annual mood changes." The uneven movement of water deposits its traces in a sedimented history of "countless lakes, lagoons, swamps, and ditches."[122] At the heart of its industrial might flowed an unpredictable force of Nature, known only to those (perhaps) most familiar with its temperament. In order to save New Orleans, farmers upriver would be forced to destroy the levees and sacrifice their land. Half a million people were made homeless as over 100,000 square miles were flooded. Benjamin highlights the tragic story of one particular family, but is equally impressed by the industrial response to the crisis. Over 50,000 ships—even luxury boats—joined aircraft squadrons in a kind of total

[121] Steven Fender, *Nature, Class, and New Deal Literature: The Country Poor and the Great Depression* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

[122] Walter Benjamin, "The Mississippi Flood of 1927," *Radio Benjamin*, Ed. Lecia Rosenthal, Trans. Jonathan Lutes, Lisa Schumann, and Diana Reese (New York: Verso, 2014), 176-181, 176.

mobilization that would prefigure the Second World War. Yet this effort is unable to hold back the "raging elements of human cruelty and violence," he writes. "The dams that the law has built to contain [the Ku Klux Klan] have held up no better than the actual ones made from earth and stone."[123]

Benjamin's "The Mississippi Flood of 1927" describes an unpredictable Nature. The line of the river's flow serves as both a metaphor of the unevenness of history and as a material agent in that same history. One might read it as a figure of "divine violence" in Benjamin's political metaphysics. The flood stands alongside his radio addresses on the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and the destruction of Pompeii (which opens by discussing the monstrous hybrid, the Minotaur). Just as the Lisbon earthquake gave rise to the Enlightenment's own critiques of optimism and mastery—Voltaire's *Candide*, for example—the 1927 flood thematically, formally, and geographically expanded the Blues as a critique of North Atlantic modernity. As Cornel West argues, the Blues is an expression of the tragic-pragmatic consciousness developed in the economic and racial injustices of modern American life. The "tragic-comic" mode does not promise the kind of triumph and mastery like the techno-scientific enlightenment that emerged alongside global imperialist powers, but rather "Blues is about resistance" and "persisting" in the face of hardship.[124] As displaced African Americans spread the Blues from its geographic origins in the Mississippi delta to northern industrial cities like Chicago, artists who had written of labor in the delta carried that environmental memory to poorly electrified urban tenements. The memory of environmental hardships became allegories through

[123] Benjamin, 180.

[124] MOCA, "Dr. Cornel West – Blues for Smoke," *YouTube* 26 October 2012, Web Accessed 31 May 2016.

which writers like Richard Wright and William Attaway contributed to the struggles for communism and racial equality in the industrial north.[125] In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, clichéd images of broken levees and "flowin'" people came back to life with a new urgency, flashing up from the past in a moment of crisis as a material-poetic reminder that events, as Benjamin argues, do not occur in a linear progression through empty time, but rather in a "time of the now" through which historical injuries might be recognized and redeemed.[126]

The environmentalism of the twentieth century emerged as a modernization project seeking to institutionalize and reconcile the individualist environmental imaginaries of the nineteenth century with progressive responses to regional hardships in Depression-era United States. The Civilian Conservation Corps, as Neil Maher convincingly argues in *Nature's New Deal*, bridged "Progressive and postwar politics by helping Franklin Roosevelt to forge his liberal New Deal coalition…[and] by raising support for the welfare state in every region of the country." "The Corps and its work projects," Maher writes, "appealed to foresters in the West, to farmers in the Dust Bowl and in the soil-eroded South, and to easterners who could now recreate in hundreds of

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[125] Richard M. Mizelle Jr., *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi River Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2014); Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Viking, 1941); William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge* (New York: Doubleday, 1941).

[126] *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*, Dir. Spike Lee (40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks, 2006), Film; Philip C. Konlin and Susan Swartwout (eds.) *Hurricane Blues: Poems about Katrina and Rita* (Cape Girardeau: Southeast Missouri State University Press, 2006); Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 253-264.

new state and national parks in their cities' backyards."[127] The range of environmental appeals, though geographically inflected, articulated diverse environmental needs and desires with the interests of the modern welfare state. In this context, the institutionalization of wilderness, in the form of federally protected national parks and as a legal concept, was an effort to reconcile the instrumental and the metaphysical "uses" of nature. Aldo Leopold's later account of the CCC restoration of marshlands, for instance, resembles arguments for abstract expressionism as a defense of freedom and a critique of instrumental, market utility.[128] "Thus always does history," Leopold writes, "whether of marsh or market place, end in paradox. The ultimate value in these marshes is wildness, and the crane is wildness incarnate."[129] The market appeal—or utility—of wild marshes, like art, becomes its uselessness, with the crane standing in for the artist as the embodied expression of freedom. Leopold's disavowal of the economic resembles the tendency that Pierre Bourdieu recognized in the art world, namely that the refusal of commercial interests becomes the selling point: wild marshes accrue cultural capital.[130]

Mid-century environmental writers like Aldo Leopold and Rachel Carson were scientific and public professionals who, for the sake of their audience, appealed to the folk environmentalism of their day. Leopold did this through the genre of field notes and

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[127] Neil Maher, *Nature's New Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Roots of the American Environmental Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11.

[128] David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[129] Leopold, 101.

[130] Pierre Bourdieu, "The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods," *The Field of Cultural Production*, Trans. Richard Nice (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 74-111.

personal journals while Carson became famous for deploying the pastoral and apocalyptic genre in her warning against the use of chemical pesticides. In a way, each disavowed their professional ethos in order to make their appeal, but only Carson was punished for it. Not only was she a woman, but her work directly challenged the chemical companies whose products were the material embodiment of progress. However, no one heightened and played with these contradictions more than Edward Abbey. His 1968 *Desert Solitaire* combines the outrage of a federal employee on behalf of the public good with the private, "romantic" project of self-creation.[131] Abbey turns the language of disability on its head to challenge the petro-normative, high-speed automobility of spectator-tourists, whose infrastructure was destroying not just the parks themselves, as places and habitats, but was laying the groundwork for intensified mining—often on indigenous lands—required by "democratic" mass consumption. A red-diaper baby, Abbey's anarchism came out of his experience as a soldier in World War II as much as it did from his assembly-line work at a television factory. His critique of Fordism from the location of the national parks articulates the contradictions that were there from the beginning—the bureaucratic rationalization of wilderness spaces and free individuals—to a radical politics that challenges mass consumerism and the war in Vietnam. My chapter on Mary McCarthy's *Birds of America* begins in this moment.

After hoisting a red handkerchief to meet the "crimson sunrise" on the morning of May Day, Abbey remarks that "the extreme clarity of the desert light is equaled by the extreme individuation of desert life-forms. Love flowers best in openness and

[131] Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: Touchstone, 1968).

freedom."[132] His concern with *individuation*—rather than *individualism*—is shared by thinkers like Gilbert Simondon, whose "machinic" vision of individuation became central to '68-ers like Deleuze and Guattari, and later, Bernard Stiegler.[133] Individuation implies a *becoming* in relation to a context in which distinctions and variations enable further individuation. Where the *soixante-huitards* demanded forms of individuation apart from (which is to say in and through) the desiring machines of pan-semiotizing capital, Abbey explores individuation on naturalistic grounds in and through a critique of image-based ecotourism and state-powered oil industries. The anarchic revolution of desire "did not take place;" rather, it was recuperated by the same market forces it was meant to explode.[134] Nancy Fraser argues that a similar reversal happened with second-wave feminism. "In a fine instance of the cunning of history," she writes, "utopian desires [of 1968] found a second life as feeling currents that legitimated the transition to a new form of capitalism: post-Fordist, transnational, neoliberal."[135] American environments have often served as the location to narratively produce and naturalize certain modern conceptions of the individual, sovereign subject. As in the work of Thoreau, however, they have just as often served to challenge that independence—Abbey's red handkerchief is a small sign of solidarity with those struggling distantly, in their own contexts, for their own forms of collective individuation. "Romanticism," he asks in his journal, "the search

[132] Abbey, 26.

[133] Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, Trans. Cecile Malaspina (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2016).

[134] Gregg Lambert, "Forward: Why the Revolution (of Desire) Did Not Take Place," *Who's Afraid of Deleuze and Guattari?* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008).

[135] Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (New York: Verso, 2013), 211.

for the intimate in the remote?"[136] The postwar US environmental imagination is a liberatory one of "openness and freedom;" at the same time this seemingly instinctual hostility toward "control" has left it open to becoming articulated with a deregulatory and individualist consumerism that is existentially poised against (or has given up on) the very kinds of large-scale state intervention needed to maintain those environments.

Jonathan Franzen's 2010 novel, *Freedom*, offers a realist depiction of this tension at work. Circumventing the parental authority of the state, the aging baby-boomer protagonist establishes—with the help of a billionaire and coal companies—a series of fragmented reserves for endangered bird habitat. The birds require a non-fragmented and non-arbitrarily cobbled-together habitat. Cumulatively, the individual plots add up to a lot of land. However, the lack of contiguous habitat dooms the birds and the project. In the pages of *Dissent*, Jeff Williams labels *Freedom* a "neoliberal novel" in that it embodies the capitulation to the "plutocratic imagination" in American politics, one that sees a Faustian bargain with monied interests as preferable to (and more "realistic" than) social democratic politics.[137] "Although Walter appears to be progressive," Williams writes,

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[136] Edward Abbey, *Confessions of a Barbarian: Selections from the Journals of Edward Abbey, 1951-1989*, Ed. David Petersen (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 119; in a 1951 entry written while on Fulbright at Edinburgh University he summarizes his politics:

> If the earth and the animal are valuable, then every earth-born man and woman, every animal, has an inherent right to a portion of this earth, to its produce, to its free air, its seas, sands, mountains, deserts and sunrises—this means some kind of socialism, social justice, economic democracy, decentralized, voluntary, cooperative; and a spacious commonwealth, with lots of room for all (birth control) in the Green Utopia. Here is something to fight for that will never desert me in my lifetime (6).

[137] Jeffrey J. Williams, "The Plutocratic Imagination," *Dissent Magazine* (Winter 2013), Web Accessed 28 May 2016.

"his reasoning follows much of the neoliberal creed: government is cumbersome and inefficient, social problems can be more effectively handled through private means than public ones." It is an illustrative example of Fraser's argument that an ostensibly radical focus on individual agency in one moment can become imbricated with the governing logics of the next. For Williams, Franzen's novel "renders liberal procedural solutions—solutions that were articles of faith during the heyday of the American welfare state—impracticable; we can only successfully solve problems through private means and individual action."

As Franzen's representative of late baby boomers, Walter Berglund embodies the tension between a "deregulatory" cultural freedom and the need to democratically regulate social-economic relations with a *nature* that can no longer be thought of as either subject to industrial management, nor as the free-wheeling and infinitely adaptive "other" of a repressive culture. The novel ends with Walter living alone, having taken up a crusade against domesticated cats who are responsible for the killing an estimated one to four billion birds per year. Cats are a homonym of Katz, as in Richard Katz, Walter's rock-star friend who slept with his wife, Patty, and contributed to their divorce. Readers are left questioning whether or not Walter has secretly killed his neighbor's cat and left questioning the psychological motivations of his past environmentalism. Rather than suggesting there can be a purely-motivated environmentalism, Franzen illustrates—to the dislike of many readers—that our involvements in the world cannot but be entangled. As Judith Butler argues, "no subject emerges without a 'passionate attachment' to those on whom he or she is fundamentally dependent (even if that passion is 'negative' in the

psychoanalytic sense)."[138] If, in his effort to illustrate this entanglement, Franzen *reduces* what could be a sociological criticism to a psychological profile, he will have accomplished the conservative move of treating structural problems as an issue of cultivating the proper attitude; however, his work on Karl Kraus suggests a more dialectical reading.[139] Neoliberal privatization expresses itself in a kind of cynical knowingness that accompanies a sad, and often defensive, opportunism, what Foucault called the entrepreneurial subject. On the left, this often takes the form of "a certain romantic attachment to the politics of failure [and] to the comfortable position of a defeated marginality."[140] The diminished sense of historical agency under "capitalist realism" follows from the atomization of the workplace and public sphere.

Lest we look with rose-tinted glasses at the Fordist-Keynesian "compact," C.L.R. James' 1950 outline of the diminished sense of freedom within that arrangement is instructive. "Under pressure of the labor organizations, the state actually proposes now no longer freedom but security," he writes. "Security for children; against sickness; better housing; for rural areas technical education and fixed prices; for full employment; for vacations and pensions… There can be no more striking contrast to the heroic frontiersman, trader, sailor and artisan striving to be a capitalist of the early days."[141] For

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[138] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 7.

[139] Franzen has been an outspoken critic of the way corporate-driven technologies like the internet and social media are "relentlessly capitalist," not only in their business models but in the modes of competitive individuation they produce; "What's Wrong with the Modern World," *The Guardian* 13 Sept. 2013, Web Accessed 28 May 2016.

[140] Fisher, 78.

[141] C.L.R. James, *American Civilization*, Eds. Anna Grimshaw and Keith Hart (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993), 106.

James, "individual freedom and freedom of association" had been displaced by a bureaucratic securitization in the interests of industry and the state. Whereas Europe accomplishes these aims through the "nationalization of industry," he suggests, America was doing so through "free enterprise." This American mixture of free market pathways to securitization prefigures Foucault's later critique of the emerging "biopolitical governmentality" in European and American thought.[142] However, James' Marxist humanism is better able to account for the refusal of individuals and groups to comport themselves as proper subjects, and is dialectical enough to recognize how the unfinished tasks of one generation can become the constraints of the next.

The waning of organized labor as a significant force between capital and the state was accompanied by the shift toward "cultural" politics and the micropolitics of distributed agency. In his defining work on twentieth century American political economy, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Harry Braverman argues that the displacement of the category of human labor power by nonhuman agency is a particularly *classed* consciousness.

> The human capacity to perform work, which Marx called "labor power," must not be confused with the power of any nonhuman agency, whether natural or man made… Only one who is the master of the labor of others will confuse labor power with any other agency for performing a task because to him, steam, horse, water, or human muscle which turns his mill are viewed as equivalents, as "factors of production."[143]

In 1974, Braverman anticipates the philosophies which will be developed alongside the emergent transformations of production. These philosophies lend

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[142] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-9*, Trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008).

[143] Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century, 25th anniversary edition* (New York: MR Press, 1998), 35.

themselves to members of the professional-managerial class whose education, training, and labor often involves the management and logistics of human resources, supply chains, and communication networks. The elision of class antagonism from this arrangement erases the struggle through which these networks are maintained. As Boltanski and Chiapello observe, the language of exploitation is jettisoned in favor of the language of inclusion and exclusion. None are excluded so that all may be exploited through their inclusion. If there is an environmentalism of the poor, there is surely an environmentalism of the professional-managerial class. It is the philosophy of a coordinator class, lending itself to interdisciplinary programs at universities which produce the next generation of those who will manage the labor of others, manage ecosystems, and learn to translate conflicts over power into technological problems to be solved by contingent policy arrangements and momentary financial interests. "The chronic instability caused by unexpected developments, permanent innovation, ever-changing possibilities and opportunities in the contemporary workplace, as well as in the wider environment, demands a specific skill of post-Fordian workers," writes Pascal Gielen. "They must continuously take advantage of changing opportunities and a kaleidoscope of options;" they are "mentally flexible," and "open to new circumstances and new ideas, in order to put them to work for the immaterial production process."[144] Massimo de Carolis develops a phenomenology of this opportunism:

> One of the most incisive effects of recent technological development has been to subvert this distinction between community and environment—first by rendering ever weaker the ties of the community, then by colonizing the environment in an ever more massive way, and finally by generating theoretical and practical

[144] Pascal Gielen, *The Murmuring of the Artistic Multitude: Global Art, Memory, and Post-Fordism*, Trans. Glare McGregor (Valiz, Amsterdam: Fonys, 2010), 24.

> paradigms capable of being applied indiscriminately to social reality no less than to the environment, that is, to nature.[145]

No field has both generated and interrogated more paradigms applying to both the social and the natural (and generated more controversy) than science studies.[146] Donna Haraway, for instance, writes that "if technoscience by our moment in history is 'nature' for us—and not just nature but nature-culture—then understanding technoscience is a way of understanding how natures and cultures have become one word."[147] While the field sometimes collapses the descriptive, the ontological, and the normative, in ways that may appear sloppy—or would appear to *produce* the very effect that Carolis describes—the purpose is to challenge the convention of classifying one set of conventional descriptions as *natural* and another set of conventional descriptions as *cultural* (or constructed). It is concerned with the "vast disparities of wealth, power, agency, sovereignty, chances of life and death" at stake in the sciences. Rather than demonizing technoscience, Haraway argues that her feminist approach affirms "technoscientific liberty, technoscientific democracy, [and] understanding that democracy is about the empowering of people who are involved in putting worlds together and taking them apart." In the era of climate change, and the search for new metanarratives that might enable large-scale social response, the role played by the sciences (for good or ill) in shaping narratives and social imaginaries deserves scrutiny. "Understanding the world is

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[145] Massimo De Carolis, "Toward a Phenomenology of Opportunism," *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Eds. Hardt and Virno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 37-52, 46.

[146] Andrew Ross (ed.) *Science Wars* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

[147] Donna Haraway, *How Like a Leaf* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 157.

about living inside stories," Haraway argues. "There's no place to be in the world outside of stories."[148]

The generalized opportunism Carolis describes is both a social experience and an institutional practice. C. Wright Mills claimed that "in every intellectual age, some one field of study tends to become a sort of common denominator of many other fields."[149] Whereas sociology became the default discourse of postwar liberalism, economists and social scientists increasingly turn to the natural sciences for descriptive and normative models. While this is not all bad, it can be understood as a turn which seeks to frame social and market relations as transparent reflections of natural needs. The neoliberal philosopher, Friedrich Hayek, does just this. In his collected lectures in *The Fatal Conceit*, Hayek asserts that natural "complexity" poses a fundamental limit to knowledge and argues against government regulation, public investment, or other forms of social intervention into markets.[150] By naturalizing the market, and thus the economics which speaks in its name, Hayek aims to render the concept of "social justice" quite literally contrary to nature. The commonly held belief that we should not "interfere" with nature easily translates to "we should not 'interfere' with the market." This naturalizing development is eloquently captured by Italian philosopher Paolo Virno, who offers a Latourian litany *avant la lettre* of the Italian "counter-revolution."

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[148] Haraway, 107.

[149] C. Wright Mills, "IBM plus Reality plus Humanism = Sociology," *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*, Ed. John Summers (New York: Oxford, 2008), 79-86, 85.

[150] F.A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991).

> How does the Italian culture of the 1980s resemble a manger scene, complete with donkeys, Magi, shepherds, holy family, and so forth—various masks for one single spectacle? One aspect is the widespread tendency to *naturalize* the various social dynamics. Once again society has been refigured as a "second nature" endowed with unnamable objective laws. What is different, and this is the really remarkable point, is that to everyday social relations are applied the models, categories, and metaphors of postclassical science: Prigogine's thermodynamics instead of Newtonian linear causality, quantum physics in the place of universal gravitation, and the sophistic biologism of Luhmann's systems theory instead of Mandeville's "fable of the bees." Historical social phenomena are interpreted on the basis of concepts such as entropy, fractals, and autopoiesis.[151]

Under the auspices of "de-centering the human," the scholarly turn toward methodological "grand theory" erases the struggles over the sites and interpretations of the environment and culture. By displacing "the human" the critic hides their own hand. Critics take up scientific models to study society and nature only to naturalize the social arrangements which produced those models (and metaphors). Timothy Brennan associates these styles of posthumanism with a new imperialism, in which the offspring (and exports) of US Cold War sciences displace the humanist imperatives of "the anticolonial century." "It maneuvers in a business climate and a media culture that assumes the supremacy of the natural sciences," he writes, "above all the managerial wing of the applied sciences."[152] Brennan describes these tendencies, which are familiar to the environmental humanities: (1) "[T]he tendency to posit randomness or irresolvable uncertainty when analyzing any nonlinear or complex system;" (2) "the tendency to posit autopoiesis in human and natural systems… that [organisms] respond to their environment in ways determined by their internal self-organization and are therefore

[151] Paolo Virno, "Do You Remember Counter Revolution?" *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics,* Eds. Virno and Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 241-260, 252.

[152] Timothy Brennan, *Borrowed Light: Vico, Hegel, and the Colonies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 225.

powerless to recognize anything outside their internal points of reference;" (3) "the redefinition of 'communication' so that it no longer means the intentional exchange of information but rather the biomechanical exchange of chemical or electronic signals;" (4) "the proposal that when human systems become so large that they cannot be controlled by planning;" (5) "the redefinition of the term 'environment' to mean a hybrid of the natural and human worlds, not only without priority but without distinction;" and finally, (6) "the postulate that 'life' may be defined as 'information.'"[153] Each of these tendencies corresponds to Braverman's account of the way human labor is decentered and reduced to another "factor of production," in a process seemingly without subjects (but certainly with winners and losers). Each corresponds to developments in post-Fordist technology and to redescriptions which naturalize the social relations inscribed in (and reproduced through) those technologies. Each of them implicates contemporary practices in the environmental humanities in their reproduction of classed outlooks on the production of the world.

By operating on the assumption that societies have "objective laws" that can be discovered the way we discover photosynthesis or the evolution of an eyeball, they quietly erase the sheer agonistic effort—what Rob Nixon calls the *slow violence* or, against this, one might pose the *long care*—that it takes for social arrangements to persist over long periods of time. Historical materialism, while arguing that class struggle constitutes an objective dynamic in the social order, acknowledges that things can be otherwise. Virno observes that, "in Germany and elsewhere ecologism inherited themes and issues from 1968, in Italy instead ecologism was born *against* the class struggles of

[153] Brennan, 224.

the 1970s."[154] For Brennan, this posthumanism unfortunately follows postmodernism as "an effort to salvage something liberating from an abject defeat." In the way that postmodernism "embrace[s] commodification as a form of transgression," and cedes the formation of subjects to a corporatized mass culture, posthumanism legitimizes alienation. "To disembody human skill and intelligence, to de-realize human will and effort, to unthink the human," he writes, "is the form of its sublime." It amounts to "a massively willed and historically determined effort to be done with will and history as human making."[155] While this sublime may be at home with deep ecology—whose critique is often so "deep" as to be practically useless—and may find a place in the managerial-entrepreneurial fetishization of market complexity and digital transcendence, nothing, it would seem, could be further from the project of cultural studies or from an environmental humanities concerned with making a different world in the context of neoliberalism and the Anthropocene. By building conjunctures, we can better understand how the uses of culture and the natural sciences construct environmental imaginaries, and better understand how those imaginaries are politically articulated.

[154] Virno, 253.

[155] Brennan, 232.

CHAPTER II

THE COMMON WORLD AND THE SHADOW OF NATURE: MARY MCCARTHY'S *BIRDS OF AMERICA*

> Nature is no longer the human home.
>
> Mary McCarthy, *The New Yorker*, 1969

> I'm not for throwing out nature. Somebody is throwing it out, not me. I'm against those people who are throwing it out—not out of the novel but out of life.
>
> Mary McCarthy, *The Listener*, 1970

In Mary McCarthy's novel, *Birds of America* (1971), the young American protagonist, Peter Levi, writes to his mother, Rosamund, and recounts the difficulty of living out his Kantian ethics as a student in a Parisian hostel. The year is 1964, and the categorical imperative has compelled him to spend his days painstakingly cleaning the fast-accumulating and foul-smelling waste in the communal toilet, even though the hostel employs a small cleaning staff. Peter is appalled at his "fellow residents" whose fecal traces are left everywhere:

> So far as I could tell from the evidence, the majority either didn't mind leaving traces of themselves or else didn't notice. They just went in, did their business, and exited, pulling the chain, without waiting to see whether the water flushed. But how was it possible not to notice the traces of the guy before you and, noticing, not to react? Could humanity be divided into people who noticed and people who didn't? If so, there was no common world.[1]

The recognition that there is no longer any transparent experience which might be called a common world is one of many instances in this *bildungsroman* where the main character loses his youthful idealism. From there, the reader follows Peter Levi's realization that Nature can no longer serve as the common, unquestioned ground for

[1] Mary McCarthy, *Birds of America* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1971), 156.

shared values, aesthetics, and knowledge.[2] As such, he's lost the comfort of a transcendent order capable of providing a set of norms that might stand as a critique of our fallen social existence. This is devastating for Peter, who is a young, white, middle-class, civil rights radical and nature enthusiast, and whose arguments against industrial modernization rest on romantic assertions of culture as a refuge against philistine mass consumerism. When Peter lies in his hospital bed, half-comatose from an infected swan bite, the specter of Immanuel Kant appears in his room to inform him, with all the finality of the last words in the novel that, "Nature is dead, *mein kind*."[3] This death of Nature, while a private revelation in Peter's life, corresponds to the historical events that occupied his every waking thought: the destruction of individual experience in both nature and art by consumerism (simulation) and the impending US war in Vietnam (annihilation). Nature was being killed both by its rationalized conservation and by its irrational destruction. The utopian promise of Nature as a ground for ethics hangs over the protagonist's efforts to articulate a cultural politics of the environment as they do for McCarthy herself.

I argue that the narrative loss of Nature as a common world is simultaneously a progressive recognition that a common world has yet to be constructed in the conditions of late Fordism. To support this interpretation, I read *Birds of America* alongside McCarthy's 1969 *New Yorker* essay, "One Touch of Nature," as well as the correspondence with her lifelong friend and interlocutor, Hannah Arendt, whose concept

[2] In this chapter, as throughout the dissertation, Nature is capitalized when I want to stress the metaphysical entity in question. The lower case is used to refer to lay nature, in the colloquial sense of the non-human environment or a quality of something. This is standard practice in the field of ecocriticism.

[3] McCarthy (1971), 344.

of the common world deeply informed McCarthy's own critique of mass consumer society.[4] In the imaginary of many left critics of the period, both culture and nature stood for negations of industrial capitalism. *Birds of America* puts these claims of autonomy to the test, and finishes by negating Nature itself. The final moment is catastrophically open. This final disenchantment becomes a moment of enlightenment as the hallucinated Kant delivers the protagonist from his immaturity. However, the communicative exchanges throughout the novel also prefigure the world it wants to create. The common world is not something that will emerge once everything else is cleared away or is laid to rest; rather, it is what will need to be produced through communicative, artistic, and political exchange in concert with others.

As a self-described "novel of ideas," *Birds of America* challenges the romantic anti-capitalism of many in the student left and emerging environmental countercultures of the 1960s who opposed the consumerism of postwar Fordism and the bureaucratic liberalism that managed it. By troubling the young protagonist's ideas about nature, McCarthy also challenges the ideas about culture championed by her milieu of New York Intellectuals. Throughout much of the 20th century, this famously influential group of leftwing anti-Stalinists, associated with journals like *Partisan Review*, *Dissent*, and *Commentary*, held what scholars have called an "Eliotic" or "Arnoldian" leftism, maintaining that high culture (whether classical or avant-garde) and democratic socialism are not mutually exclusive. In *Birds of America,* McCarthy subjects these ideals to "reality tests" and conversations that explore the range of an idea's claim on the actual.

[4] Mary McCarthy, "One Touch of Nature," *The Writing on the Wall and Other Literary Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1970), 189-213; Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, *Between Friends: The Correspondence of Hannah Arendt and Mary McCarthy, 1949-1975* (New York: HBC, 1995).

The chosen epigraph for the novel is a Kant quote she received from Arendt which reads: "to attempt to embody the Idea in an example, as one might embody the wise man in a novel, is unseemly…for our natural limitations, which persistently interfere with the perfection of the idea, forbid all illusion about such an attempt." McCarthy's project is to perversely prove Kant right on this score. In this "unseemly" novel, ideas face interference from limitations ranging from the natural to social to the psychological. "*Birds of America* is not a realistic novel," she writes, "It lies in a strange territory somewhere between a philosophic tale and a gruesome slapstick horror story even though at times it seems to have a common border with straight satire of contemporary life."[5] It has been described by McCarthy and her numerous critics as her *Candide*. McCarthy's weird genre reappropriates the eighteenth century novel of ideas to interrogate mainstream and radical forms of middle class idealism at the end of the 1960s.

According to Richard Ohmann, the US canon between 1960 and 1975 was defined by the personal and apocalyptic anxieties of the professional-managerial class. He places McCarthy alongside Joan Didion, Marge Piercy, Phillip Roth, John Updike, E.L. Doctorow, James Baldwin, Thomas Pynchon, and William Gaddis, as a writer who shares the PMC premise that "individual consciousness, not the social or historical field, is the locus of significant happening."[6] McCarthy stages a confrontation with the historical field through the transformation of an individual consciousness. Melvin

[5] Sabrina Fuchs Abrams, *Mary McCarthy: Gender, Politics, and the Postwar Intellectual* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 99.

[6] Richard Ohmann, "The Shaping of A Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960-1975," *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, Eds. Vincent Leitch, et al. (New York: Norton, 2001), 1877-1894, 1891.

Maddocks calls the novel an "Obit to Nature" in TIME magazine. He writes that McCarthy "has taken America's Nature man—Deerslayer / Ishmael / Thoreau—and plunked him down in the plastic 1960's: an anachronism who proves not only Nature is dead but also the original America that was a part of it."[7] McCarthy's hybrid genre seems appropriate for our current decade, which includes regular announcements of "the end of Nature," or at least certain ideas of it, along with the death of the environmentalism claiming to speak on its behalf.[8]

Then, as now, a heightened sense of urgency necessitated pulling the rug out from under the traditional sources of consensus. Terms like "Nature" suddenly have too many meanings, too many referents which proliferate beyond the confines of any one discursive or political effort to contain them. During such a crisis of legitimacy, artists, writers, and critics, work to "preserve, modify, or supersede" the descriptive terms which seem to no longer adequately hook into the world the way they once did.[9] This is often experienced as a disintegration, or disenchantment. What is often lost too is the reconstructive effort, that is, efforts to construct alternative narratives within the present. As the Anthropocene puts an end to the thirty-year window of life without

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[7] Melvin Maddocks, "Miss McCarthy's Obit to Nature," *LIFE* 70.19, 21 May, 1971: 12.

[8] For instance, Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989); Ted Nordhaus and Michael Shellenberger's 2004 essay, "The Death of Environmentalism," followed by *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2007); Paul Wapner, *Living Through the End of Nature: The Future of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge: MIT, 2010); to say nothing of the academic, environmental humanities scholarship inspired by thinkers like Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, and Timothy Morton.

[9] Noel Castree, "Nature." *Keywords for Environmental Studies*. Eds. Joni Adamson, William Gleason, and David Pellow (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 151-155.

metanarratives, it looms as either a symbol of apocalyptic failure or an opportunity to confront what cultural anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli calls a "monstrous truth," one that demands normative commitments which can no longer be justified on transcendental grounds.[10] These narrative (and normative) challenges have in recent years been advanced by movements like Occupy, Idle No More, and Our Children's [Climate] Trust, who have worked to create new environmental narratives. Even the renewed interest in democratic socialism suggests a desire for new practices of producing and relating the individual to "the common." They announce an effort to critically reconstruct publics and agendas on the basis of solidarities in the making—not on the belief in a shared essence that emerges once all of our differences are cleared away. To this end, I reconsider McCarthy's "death of Nature" novel in light of her primary interlocutor, Hannah Arendt, whose concept of a common world stands as the most salient image of how publics might compose themselves.

The correspondence between McCarthy and Arendt contains numerous exchanges on *Birds of America* and the ideas of nature that circulate in the novel. In their letters, they express repeated concern over the "fraying technological fabric" of postwar liberal democracies. While critical of the New Left's authoritarian tendencies, which they see as symptoms of the crisis, they are nonetheless sympathetic towards its sense of urgency and idealism. During the events of 1968 in Paris, McCarthy took heart in the anarchists at the *Odéon* Theater who created a popular and accessible communicative political space in which people "of all walks of life" came to discuss the issues; this, she contrasted with the doctrinaire Marxist-Leninists of the Sorbonne and the Maoist posturing of the *Tel*

[10] Elizabeth Povinelli, "Interview with Elizabeth Povinelli," *Societyandspace.com*. Web. Accessed 6 June, 2015.

Quel literary scene.[11] McCarthy was drawn to the *Odéon* group who announced in their communiqué that their occupation intends to make the theater "open to all… in order to undertake a labor of reflection concerning our refusal of the distribution of entertainment-as-merchandise and… for the development of an art of combat" against "bourgeois culture" and "capitalist society." Refusing the Fordist model of culture as spectacular consumption, they wanted critical space to restore creative action to public life. Despite the insurgent rhetoric, they imposed no ideological line and explicitly invited "entertainment professionals, in collaboration with workers and students, [to] take similar initiatives at their own workplaces."[12] Written during this period, *Birds of America* refuses to reduce these concerns to generational anxieties. The contradictory demands of its young protagonist express a need to build a common world against what he sees as a technocratic war against people and nature driven by mass consumption. In *The Human Condition* (1958), Arendt develops her concept of the common world against mass society as a sphere that is actively produced through human labor and communication.[13]

In this regard, what J.M. Bernstein describes as Arendt's "political modernism" is formulated against the dissolving horizon of life on earth.[14] The launch of the Russian satellite in 1957 unmoored human activity from gravitational bounds, the exploding of the atomic bomb destabilized matter at the smallest level, and in the workplace,

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[11] Arendt and McCarthy, 220.

[12] "Information Commission of the Odeon," Trans. Mitchell Abidor, May Events Archive of Simon Fraser University, *Marxists.org*, Web Accessed 7 July 2015.

[13] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

[14] J.M. Bernstein, "Political Modernism: The New, Revolution, and Civil Disobedience in Arendt and Adorno," *Arendt & Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations*, Eds. Lars Rensmann and Samir Gandesha (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 56-77.

automation and the communicative labor were arriving to disrupt the differences between work, labor, and action. The image of Nature as harmonious background too often implies a world without effort, without change, and without the struggle to understand, narrate, and organize that change; however, the narrative of loss and recovery—the recovery of meaning within a new context, or the creation of a shared recognition of a common *thing*—describes a continual process of historical becoming. Bernstein can just as easily be describing the experience of McCarthy's young protagonist when he characterizes Arendt's modernism as:

> The disenchantment of nature, secularization, the collapse of traditional authority, and release from the authority of dead gods and dead ancestors, but [it] equally involves the uprising of the new… what is without foundation, what is groundless, what affirms human particularity against the universal, what thus proceeds from human doing rather than unchanging reason, what belongs to history and its development, what bears within itself the emancipation of the human from myth and nature.[15]

Arendt develops her concept of the common world against mass society as a sphere that is actively produced through human labor and communication. For Arendt, the common is not to be confused with something that pre-exists society or the differentiation between public and private. It is "not identical with the earth or with nature," as in many environmentalist arguments for the commons. Rather, the common world is a collective construction, or constituting collectivity, organized around a shared and recognizable *thing*. "To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it," she writes; "the world like every in-between, relates and separates men at

[15] Bernstein, 56.

the same time."[16] Here, the massified experience of atomized subjects "resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible."[17] The "weirdness" of mass society is thus only the *illusion* of disenchantment, an illusion which a proper politics of the common would exorcize. A politics of the common would re-materialize the table (or toilet, or environment) that mass society has erased, in that the practical *thing* would be restored to its constitutive role in public life. In this context, Peter Levi's "bathroom ethics" can be understood as a failed response to the massified division of labor in the hostel which divests individual responsibility for collective waste.

Peter Levi lives out this demythologizing movement of modernization. He recapitulates the production of nature in the American imaginary from the hunter-agrarian economy the New England "primeval" forests to its post-industrial simulation in wildlife reserves and eco-tourism. In Moishe Postone's account of late capitalism, the natural world undergoes "an accelerating transformation of qualitatively particular raw materials into 'matter,' [and then] into qualitatively homogenous bearers of objectified time."[18] McCarthy echoes this late modernist transformation of nature into time that we find famously enunciated by Hamm in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. "Nature has forgotten

[16] Arendt, 52

[17] Arendt, 53.

[18] Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 312.

us," Hamm says. "There is no more nature," replies Clov. "No more nature! You exaggerate," Hamm responds: "But we breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!"[19] Beckett's exchange registers the increasing abstractness of nature as time, bodily duration, and the aging process, which perhaps makes a coming of age novel an ideal genre for locating "our ideals" within the planet's forgotten memory banks. However, as the bombs are dropping on Vietnam and Peter awakens from his swan-induced coma, the anxiously open ending induces this feeling of historical contingency. He must struggle to affirm "what is without foundation, what is groundless," and his own "particularity against the universal."[20] Here, "emancipation of the human from myth and nature" does not entail an escape from the material world, but rather from the social norms that justify inequality and violence by appeals to Nature, whose shadow looms over mass society like that of the disappearing table.

In a 1972 *Newsweek* article titled, "Imagination, Anyone?," McCarthy addresses environmental stumbling blocks context of the McGovern campaign. She considers the environment a "pseudo-issue" on which campaigns avoid offering anything of substance. Environmental issues are overdetermined by class and economics; in a sense, they are polluted by the idea of Nature as an object of elite consumption and leisure.

> In principle everybody is for the environment. In practice almost nobody is, chiefly because of general unwillingness to make the smallest immediate sacrifice in terms of comfort, speed, or profit, but also because to be "for the environment" has been construed to mean that you put clean air or water ahead of social justice for the poor. To propose that environmental measures be enacted into law is to identify yourself as a rich man's candidate, while the real rich man's candidate,

[19] Samuel Beckett, "Endgame," *Endgame and Act Without Words* (New York: Grove Press, 1958) 1-84, 11.

[20] Bernstein, 56

> since nobody challenges him to impose antipollution controls on industry… apologizes for inaction, pointing to high costs and low dividends.[21]

Environmentalism has long faced a political dilemma; it agitates for public and scientific—secular—intervention yet relies on an inflated spiritual rhetoric inherited from Romanticism and the leisure economy it inspired. What chance does the metaphysical grandeur of Nature have, no matter how brimming with meaning, when its survival depends on the contingencies of election cycles and business interests, and especially when those interests are embedded in what McCarthy and Arendt in their letters call the "technological fabric" of society? One response is utopianism, attempting to preserve an ideal by dropping out and getting "back to the wrong nature" as William Cronon puts it.[22] While there are oppositional versions of this move, it is precisely this vision of Nature as a refuge from modernity that is associated with the leisured middle-class (and middle-class radicalism) of the postwar period. In the seventies and eighties, the marginalization of environmental concerns led to the rise of deep ecological thinking that, in Peter C. van Wyck's estimation, "lifts and relocates a contested and confused modern subject from its structured relations to ideology, politics, the unconscious, and so on, to a smooth, noncontradictory ecological space."[23] To the extent that ecology, as a movement, promises a grand reconciliation of conflicting vocabularies, experiences, and interests, it provides an imaginary that mystifies actually-existing social relationships and

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[21] Mary McCarthy, "Imagination, Anyone?" *Newsweek*, July 10, 1972; 23-25, 24.

[22] William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: Norton, 1996), 69-90.

[23] Peter C. Van Wyk, *Primitives in the Wilderness: Deep Ecology and the Missing Human Subject* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 105.

institutional arrangements. McCarthy encourages readers to see through this "inert and soggy climate" and remember that "practical imagination once played a role in politics." She shares this practical imagination with "social ecologist" New York Intellectuals like Murray Bookchin and Paul Goodman. Just how is this practical imagination to be sustained when metaphysical Nature is deflated to material-discursive nature? Michael Bess captures the irony: "it was the advent of environmentalism," he argues, "the widely popular idea of saving nature—that helped explode the old conception of nature itself."[24] McCarthy wrestles with this dilemma and ends by defending the role that aesthetics can play in recomposing a common world.

In her 1969 *New Yorker* essay, "One Touch of Nature," McCarthy laments the progressive abolition of the natural world from modern literature, but in turn criticizes the contemporary environmental movement for seeking to conserve "scenery" amidst the mauling advance of industrial capitalism. Technology, she argues, has become our new Nature. This anti-romantic approach to ecology contains a perverse affirmation that anticipates later expressions of cyborg and socialist feminist irony. *Birds of America* bears this out, affirming the death of the universal concept of Nature. Culture follows closely behind, as Fordist subsumption eliminates the promise it held as a separate sphere. For the Arnoldian leftists, culture served as a replacement for religion in that it was believed to enjoy a degree of relative autonomy from the philistine world, and could thus become, if not a source of avant-garde politics, then a "total qualitative assessment"

[24] Michael Bess, *The Light-Green Society: Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000.* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003), 292.

of society, to use Raymond Williams' memorable description.[25] Peter Levi's *political* investment in the ideal of culture, as a transcendent source that can stand in for the "lost" common world, takes its refuge in high art against mass culture. Like culture, his imagination of nature as a refuge of autonomy becomes impossible to maintain without public regulation and state intervention.

"One Touch of Nature" is concerned with the increasing absence of natural environments in modern literature, but ends by affirming that "Nature is no longer the human home."[26] First, McCarthy argues that the loss of Nature as an extra-textual reference threatens to divorce literature from its moral capacity to speak to matters of shared social significance by weakening its claim to represent. With neither a concept nor recognition of "the natural" one cannot distinguish between free and coerced action, or between persuasion and violence.[27] In other words, Nature does not provide so much a norm that tells us *how* to live, but serves as a common point of reference through which we recognize ourselves in a world that we share with others. This shared recognition is necessary for articulating our desires alongside others. For McCarthy, the loss of external reference in increasingly self-referential forms of literature reflects a historical moment of modernization and signals a failure of literature to respond to the social needs of its audience.

In this account, the beautiful is a reminder of complicity and thus a possibility for ethics. On request, Arendt sent McCarthy a postcard in 1970 quoting Kant, with a rough

[25] Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia, 1983), 295.

[26] McCarthy (1970), 212.

[27] McCarthy (1970), 191.

translation: "The beautiful things in the world (meaning natural things) indicate that man is made for and fits into the world and that his perception of things agrees with the laws of his perception."[28] In a 1971 interview about the novel with Jean-Francois Revel, McCarthy admits to agreeing with Kant's notion that beauty in nature is proof "that man fits into the world;" natural beauty, in other words, is evidence *against* a universal condition of alienation. When the beautiful things of the world are threatened with destruction (e.g. "the outdoors, plants, farms, forests"), our ability to recognize ourselves and our ideals by way of beautiful things is also threatened, leaving "no ground for ethics" wherein "there's no longer a point of reference or court of appeals."[29] This is similar to Adorno's dialectical defense of natural beauty, in that even if it is "at its core, historical," natural beauty nevertheless holds out a promise of earthly harmony crucial to any project of emancipation.[30] "The feeling of natural beauty [is] intensified," he argues, "with the suffering of the subject thrown back on himself in a mangled and administered world."[31] In the moment when they are most needed, the beautiful things of Nature are becoming most threatened, along with, as Harvey Teres observes, any discussion of beauty as such. Teres cites McCarthy's 1974 lecture, "Living with Beautiful Things," as "one of the last serious discussions of beauty before that subject all but disappeared as a

[28] Arendt and McCarthy, 268.

[29] Mary McCarthy, "Miss McCarthy Explains." *Conversations with Mary McCarthy*, Ed. Carol Gelderman. (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1991), 114-122, 115.

[30] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), 65.

[31] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 63.

legitimate subject among American intellectuals."[32] Her lecture traces the pedagogical function of beauty as it shifted from art and architecture in classical cities to the natural world outside of mass industrial towns. Modern subjects are left with a concept of nature that does not include them, and with ideals of authenticity pre-packaged with a transcendent ethics, uncontaminated with human particularity.

In *The New Yorker,* McCarthy traces the effects and exhaustion of this arrangement, identifying affinities between back-to-the-land hippies and the John Birch Society. "A return to Nature implies not merely a rejection of the mechanics of modern life but an actual conviction of being poisoned by their effluvia," she writes, "whether identified as smog or the mass media or doctored [fluoridated] H2O from a state reservoir." "A desire to burrow in the ground," she continues, "below the contamination level, is seen in the vocabulary of radical youth, with their so-called underground press, and in the stockpiled shelters of the Minute Men."[33] A distrust of surfaces thus reanimates old metaphysical distinctions between reality and appearance. The metaphysical obsession with the singular reality beneath the multiple appearances, and preference for authenticity over kitschy knock-offs, is generated by media representation and commodified experience. For the left, authenticity meant expanded self-individuation in the face of a market-society that was all-too-eager to simulate the experience of individuality; on the right, it took on the "paranoid style" of big government conspiracies and libertarian desire for a stable referent mediating liberal exchange (gold). McCarthy argues that this elective affinity between the far left and far right comes from a loss of

[32] Harvey Teres, *The Word on the Street* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2011), 90.

[33] McCarthy (1970), 202.

solitude. The retreat to Nature contains a desire to test the reality of one's subjectivity in an encounter with the absolute, to produce a singularity that cannot be rendered fungible by the market. Alain Badiou affirms this "passion for the Real" as the impulse at the heart of aesthetic modernism.[34] McCarthy would argue that these people desire a Nature that can serve as "a final court of appeals:" an aesthetic replacement for a dead god that might save us from the trouble of engaging the practical imagination in politics.[35]

This reaction is symptomatic across the political spectrum and suggests that *modernization* is in question rather than any one political modernism attempting to shape it. Fredric Jameson too, ponders the effects of a "completely humanized environment" on the capacity for people to find meaning in technological modernity; that is, without a constitutive exteriority, or what Cary Wolfe calls a "pragmatics of the outside," we lose the "one touch of Nature" that can serve as a common reference point that is necessary for discerning the boundaries and effects of a political community.[36] Jameson writes:

> We must ponder the anomaly that it is only in the most completely humanized environment, the one most fully and obviously the end product of human labor, production, and transformation, that life becomes meaningless, and that existential despair first appears as such in direct proportion to the elimination of nature, the non- or antihuman, to the increasing rollback of everything that threatens human life and the prospect of well-nigh limitless control over the external universe.[37]

Left critics of total administration have always been better at imagining this "well-nigh limitless control over the external universe" than capitalists have been at

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[34] Alain Badiou, *The Century*, Trans. Alberto Toscano (Malden: Polity, 2007).

[35] McCarthy (1991), 115.

[36] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York: Cornell, 1981); Cary Wolfe, *Critical Environments: Postmodern Theory and the Pragmatics of the "Outside"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998).

[37] Jameson, 251.

accomplishing it. Climate change and the myriad other environmental crises illustrate how just how limited that control ever was. This high note of pessimism masks a hubris which frames humans as the only active force in the world. Or perhaps, the only force capable of deliberating on how it is to be a force. We are, as new materialists argue, co-producers with the various agencies of the nonhuman world, and yet, even as these agencies comprise our own ecological conditions of possibility, the means to annihilate these conditions are determined by capitalist social formations. Jameson argues that rather than clinging to "some ultimate reality, some ultimate bedrock of existence, artists and thinkers of such a period," should instead, "cling to the experience of meaninglessness itself."[38] McCarthy reminds us of Dostoevsky's illustration that "clinging to the experience of meaninglessness" can also lead to terrorism.[39] These two options may be useful for dramatizing the disorienting experience of global modernization, but they offer little by way of guidance on such profane matters as water conservation and energy policy, public health, or wildlife management. The experience of meaninglessness goes hand in hand with a certain "left melancholy," typified by Peter Levi's loss of transcendental justifications for his utopian critique.[40] If there is a perverse benefit to the destruction of the natural world, it is that it relieves us of the illusion that our social justifications lie outside our historical ideals, social formations, and collective

[38] Jameson, 252.

[39] McCarthy (1970), 191.

[40] Wendy Brown, in "Resisting Left Melancholy," *Boundary 2*, 26.3 (1999): 19-27, describes left melancholy as "[Walter] Benjamin's unambivalent epithet for the revolutionary hack who is, finally, attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal—even to the failure of that ideal—than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present."

tastes. McCarthy links the genuine desire to save beautiful natural places with the "reactionary" belief that Nature "is itself a value," lying *outside* an industrial capitalism which produces "scenery" as its exteriority:

> Well-meaning efforts to save the scenery from real-estate developers and oil refineries, to create wild-life preserves and national park areas (strictly regulated and policed by rangers) do not and cannot re-establish nature in her natural place. Modern moves to conserve a patrimony of mountains, gorges, rocky promontories, unspoiled beaches, are like moves to save stage scenery—prop trees and painted flats. […] To the extent that Nature has to be defended from man (with the inevitable recourse to police power), instead of being intrinsic to his species-existence, it is simply a backdrop, a photogenic setting, and has nothing to say, one way or another, in determining values or revealing truth. Indeed, the notion, still harbored by every reactionary heart, including my own, that Nature is itself a value, has become subject to opinion, like any other matter of taste…[41]

McCarthy recognizes that we can save beautiful places and natural environments, but there is no saving Nature. It is precisely this transformation of the environment into a "matter of taste" (backed by police power) that concerns her main character, and re-installs the importance of art and its critical relation to democratic politics. McCarthy admits her nostalgia, yet she knows, against her own "reactionary heart," that the status of Nature as a source of value has been called into doubt by the very forces capable of saving it. This questioning of her desire for uncorrupted nature finds an appropriate metaphor. She argues that Romantic Nature as an "utterance of the Universal Soul" is "the product of a rather widespread sub-species of humanity that secreted within itself a gland like that in the spider functionally adapted to the spinning of webs."[42] Thus, the concept of Nature we have inherited is the result of efforts by particular artists and thinkers to tell stories about *society*, stories which ensnare us in their figuration. In a

[41] McCarthy (1970), 212.

[42] McCarthy (1970), 213.

brilliant recursive move that illustrates her argument, McCarthy uses spider physiology and labor as "one touch of Nature" to argue for the necessity of nonhuman reference (or agency) in human self-understanding and narrative formation. It serves too as a reminder that the natural world includes cunning.

Birds of America opens with the death of "the Great Horned Owl" at the local Wild Life Sanctuary. It is not just any Great Horned Owl, but one who stands, in Peter's imagination, as a metonymy of timeless Nature. That this figure "could have 'passed away' like any senior citizen" shocks Peter into recognizing the historicity of the natural world, and the sanctuary itself as a kind of quarantine against the passing of time.[43] Peter is described as being "attached to history, provided it stayed still," and "opposed to progress in any direction" "except in the field of civil rights."[44] His relation to nature is mediated by what Heidegger would call a "standing reserve" of species and is more like a standing reserve against history. Cormorants, for instance, fascinate him in their "stillness and fixity," and seem "horribly ancient… as though they preceded time."[45] These individual creatures may die but they are taken as signs of an unchanging order beyond themselves. Insofar as this particular wild life reserve stands in for Nature as a whole, it appears to Peter that Nature is under historical threat from both industrial society and from conservation efforts to "organize and manage" it. For Peter, the sanctuary is not an effort at preserving ecosystems and species habitat from material degradation; it is, rather, a preservation of experience beyond the social.

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[43] McCarthy (1971), 3.

[44] McCarthy (1971), 8.

[45] McCarthy (1971), 15.

He refuses to join the local Nature Study group hosted by the sanctuary because "he did not want his relationship with Nature organized and managed for him."[46] Like Emerson, Peter follows in the American tradition of wanting an original relation to the universe. The continuous reference to the sanctuary as "*his* sanctuary" marks a claim of ownership over the refuge as a private space.[47] It serves as a private retreat and a realm of autonomy from the organized and managed world of postwar consumer society. The experience would be ruined if he actually owned it and had to manage it himself. The fact that it lies in a public trust and managed by government intervention relieves Peter of responsibility and provides him the freedom to live as if he were "exploring a wilderness unknown to the aborigines."[48] This is pure fantasy, as historians have illustrated the astonishing degree of environmental management that pre-Columbian North American societies performed not only for subsistence but also to maintain vast continent-wide trading networks.[49] By carrying the American mythology of wilderness into the space of the wildlife sanctuary, Peter's celebrated original relation to Nature contains quite a bit of disavowed history, organization, and management.

At the time, this wilderness myth had its New Left boosters and critics. The liberatory ethos of Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955/1966) for instance,

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[46] McCarthy (1971), 17.

[47] Emphasis in the original, McCarthy (1971), 17.

[48] McCarthy (1971), 31.

[49] Examples of this environmental history include, M. Kat Anderson, *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Resources* (Berkeley: University of California, 2013); William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003); Charles C. Mann, *1491: New Revelations in the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Vintage, 2006).

appealed to professional middle class students in that it translated Freud's critique of "civilization" into the bureaucratic era of Fordism. However, the primitivism underlying its argument, the belief that "man's happiness and well-being decreased in direct proportion to his degree of civilization," has a much longer history in post-Romantic American ideas about nature.[50] Irving Howe, McCarthy's fellow New York Intellectual, observed that much of the American literary imagination (exemplified by Faulkner) assumed a "radical disjunction between social man and the natural world," in which social man was seen as a degraded version of the ideal of natural man. This has led to a confusion between *apolitical* cultural or religious postures—e.g. "Edenic and apocalyptic moods"—and political movements that work toward achievable ends.[51] "The wilderness is primal, source and scene of mobility, freedom, innocence," Howe writes. "Once society appears, it starts to hollow out these values. And not one or the other form of society, not a better or worse society, but the very idea of society itself comes to be regarded with skepticism and distaste."[52]

This antagonistic relationship to society takes an eco-oedipal turn, as Peter "liked to fancy that he and his mother were pioneers." We are told that "his love for his mother coincided with his love of Nature and of the austere New England landscape," an "Earthly Paradise" defined by "the absence of others."[53] He defies his mother's

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[50] Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 47.

[51] Irving Howe, "Anarchy and Authority in American Literature," *Selected Writings: 1950-1990* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1990), 103-118, 106.

[52] Howe, 103.

[53] McCarthy (1971), 31.

boyfriend, *babbo*, the *anarchish*-intellectual, who exclaims that "Nature is an anachronism!"[54] After the Wilderness Act of 1964, the fantasy of Nature as a radical exterior to the technocratic totality becomes hard to maintain; equally hard to maintain is the radical separation between "social man and natural world" that Howe observed. Proving *babbo*'s theory correct, the narration informs us that "Peter did not have the makings of a real naturalist—he only liked Nature, which is not the same thing."[55] But not all Nature is equal. "He was convinced," for instance, "that [the desert] was the product of some nuclear catastrophe that had befallen an earlier race of scientists. He declined to consider Death Valley a part of Nature. Peter was strongly in favor of Nature, and he was against modern physics for interfering with Her."[56] Environments that do not fit his ideal are written off as anthropogenic aberrations, even if these aberrations pre-date humanity. In his shock at the historicity of the Wild Life Sanctuary, Peter wrestles with this responsibility, asking if—and how—he would be responsible for the "sequel" to the Great Horned Owl:

> What if the owl, weakened by captivity, was unequal to liberation? It might starve, left on its own in the woods. Alternatively, the predatory killer, freed, might make a holocaust in the wild-life refuge. Peter thought with anguish of the pine grosbeaks he and his mother had seen, almost tame, in a wild apple tree on Columbus Day; he imagined their rosy bodies all red with gore. A sanctuary was meant to be *safe*. He recognized with a sad Hello the classic conservative arguments as they passed through his head—arguments for not meddling with the *status quo*. […] Now that the notion of change had glided into his mind, he could not just accept the bird's being there as natural. It had to be *justified*.[57]

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[54] McCarthy (1971), 46.

[55] McCarthy (1971), 164.

[56] McCarthy (1971), 10.

[57] McCarthy (1971), 18.

This passage marks a secularization of Nature in Peter's imagination as it shifts from *myth* to a *historical problem* of managing ecosystems and species reproduction. Absent the environmental sciences, the question of what (and where) counts as natural becomes an aesthetic question, in which animals and landscapes become representations of environmental values—in McCarthy's words, "a matter of taste." The obverse side of this is that naturalized landscapes can no longer serve as ahistorical models for ethics. The political beliefs at the heart of modern conservation are exposed. Libertarianism in the space of the sanctuary could just as easily lead to a "Columbus-like" bloodshed with catastrophic results, while a totally planned ecology, with the belief that groups of species will act in accordance with our designs, might turn the sanctuary into a gulag. With the Vietnam War looming in the background, Peter's question of whether the owl would be "unequal to liberation" sounds like the arguments of those hostile to national liberation movements, thus linking environmental management, metaphorically if not directly, to colonial rule. McCarthy foregrounds this ambivalent set of problems—aesthetic, scientific, and social—that would later fall under the category of biopolitics. Sustainable ecologies could very well be "ugly," parasitic, or teeming with relations that bear no correspondence to human recognition of symmetry, ideals of justice, or pleasure.

In the "epistle" chapter, Peter considers the broader implications of his ethico-aesthetic revelation. "When Kant asks what the world would be like if everyone stole, that may be at bottom an aesthetic question," he writes to his mother. "What would the world *look* like?"[58] Precisely in striving to remove taste from ethics, Kant universalizes agreement on what is beautiful. Peter's belief that a proper cultural education—i.e. what

[58] McCarthy (1971), 142.

people find beautiful and therefore good—can be the source of the common world missing from mass society, comes into conflict with the consequences of mass access to art. Peter quickly turns on his mother and accuses her of being a snob who puts aesthetics before democracy. An accomplished musician, Italian émigré, and anti-capitalist intellectual, Rosamund Levi resembles today's slow food enthusiasts; as she scours the antique stores of Rocky Port looking for older, labor intensive devices, she evokes quizzical looks from store owners and homemakers. She wishes that she could go on voting for Norman Thomas forever, and pines for the days of the war, when puritan economizing and morality were linked in a pastoral vision of socialism, before it was inevitably "doomed" to dissolution by postwar abundance.

Peter accuses her anti-consumerism of being a veiled elitism. He says her "greatest weakness" is that she "can't legislate" and is resentful because of it. "You want your whim or prejudice to be a universal law," he writes. "Maybe all artists are like that; they feel they are at the *end* of some teleological chain. I'm coming to the conclusion that art is incompatible with democracy. If I want to be a democrat, it's an awful handicap to be the son of an artist. I will have to reject you, if I can." "Because," he finishes his thought, "you are a snob. Without wanting to be one. You can't help it."[59] Peter mounts a critique of art in the name of democracy before later reversing this position and embracing his snobbery in his Sistine Chapel exchange. If art and beauty provide the imagination of egalitarian symmetry in society, the aesthetic attitude can also turn against that society. It risks becoming, in Georg Lukács' words, "a violence done to the essence of everything that lies outside the sphere of art, and a desire to destroy it; an attempt to

[59] McCarthy (1971), 143.

forget that art is only one sphere among many, and that the very disintegration and inadequacy of the world is the precondition for the existence of art and its becoming conscious."[60] Beyond Peter's either-or ism—either democracy or art—McCarthy's politics as a writer commit her to criticizing the mass consumption that defined the Cold War horizon of democracy.

Focusing on McCarthy's cultural politics and the romantic critique of modernization implicit in the anti-consumerism of her main characters, Stephen Schryer argues that *Birds of America* is both a narrative taxonomy of professional-managerial class (PMC), or "new class," intellectuals, and a polemical response to the social scientists of the Cold War. McCarthy's time spent living in Hanoi during the war pit her against the modernization theorists who believed in a universal trajectory of social development mirroring North Atlantic modernity. Schryer writes that "by the mid-1960s McCarthy viewed the United States as an overtechnologized country that had destroyed its native traditions and replaced them with a debased mass culture that it was… exporting abroad." The spread of markets, by force, was in the process of destroying land-based and subsistence societies whose life ways are understood as rooted in particular environments. For McCarthy, he writes "the worst feature of capitalism is its destruction of nature, which is the ontological basis of the world's various traditional cultures."[61] The belief is that traditional societies, whether peasant or indigenous, are

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[60] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel.* Trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 38.

[61] Steven Schryer, "Mary McCarthy's Field Guide to U.S. Intellectuals: Tradition and Modernization Theory in *Birds of America*," *Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (New York: Columbia, 2011), 83-110, 88.

more embedded in the reproduction of natural systems and because their cultural narratives contain a greater range of references drawn from their environment. Just as capitalism uprooted the social temporalities of Medieval Europeans, so the logic goes, contemporary imperial powers were now uprooting the third world—to say nothing of various communist and nationalist modernizers. For McCarthy, the loss of nonhuman nature is a threat to culture as the material basis for our being and as a source of shared meaning.

This opposition to modernization abroad was shared by the PMC student left who opposed the high-tech artificiality of mass consumer culture at home. Barbara and John Ehrenreich identify the PMC's concerns: (1) a struggle over the university and higher education as a site of PMC reproduction (particularly the complicity of American universities with the Vietnam war); (2) an effort to distinguish themselves from the working class by way of consumption. "Typically," writes Barbara Ehrenreich, "this has meant an emphasis on things 'authentic,' 'natural,' and frequently imported;"[62] and (3) the combination of political radicalism and elite modes of consumption often becomes a prejudice against the working class who are depicted as "anti-intellectual, authoritarian, 'square,' and interested only in their material comfort."[63] These attitudes are based in the contradictory location of the professional middle class and Peter Levi personifies these contradictions. McCarthy asks whether or not one can properly hate mass consumption from the critical sphere of art while still remaining a radical democrat, since Fordist mass

[62] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989), 14.

[63] Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class," *Between Labor and Capital*, Ed. Pat Walker (Boston: South End Press, 1979), 5-48, 41.

production has made art available to people on a historically unprecedented scale. Peter confronts these contradictions in his exchanges with his advisor, Mr. Small, and shares the anxieties of many in the PMC student left, who found their universities and future professions complicit in an intolerable technocratic war. However, Peter's politics of non-intervention is rooted in a spectator ethic that distances him from the world.

Small suggests that Peter go talk to people and meet them where they are instead of sitting in his apartment ruminating on the failures of modernity to live up to its promises. "Widen your contacts with people. Talk to them in cafes, in museums, on the street. Don't brood in your room about the world's problems. Meet them, face to face."[64] Small implies that Peter would be better served by interacting and exchanging ideas with people rather than encountering "humanity" as an abstraction through books and art. The problem is that Peter tends to regard people with contempt. He likes humanity, but actual people fail to adhere to his categorical imperative. In short, Peter turns out to be the sort of person he imagines his mother to be; only she has the excuse of being an artist. He does not. Small's invitation to a "common world" is undermined by Peter's self-admitted "snobbish" aesthetic politics and his hostility toward others when they are anything other than an abstraction.

The Tragedy of the Cultural Commons

McCarthy stages a debate over the politics of culture in the Sistine Chapel, which Peter and Mr. Small discuss through analogies to nature and national parks. As it develops, the characters rehearse one the most dominant environmental narratives of the

[64] McCarthy (1971), 236.

last half-century: Garrett Hardin's "tragedy of the commons." Published by *Science* in 1968, and circulated in the Sierra Club's *"*Earth Day Handbook."[65] Hardin's story goes like this: a society of pastoralists hold grazing land in common, yet it is in the private interest of each individual pastoralist to use as much of that grazing space as possible, therefore the commons is doomed. The conflict between mutual "good" is what lends this story its tragic character. Hardin's tragic narrative has been used to justify neoliberal privatization with the belief that individual, small-property owners would be better stewards of resources. However, as Rob Nixon observes, in what has become a just-so story of the free market, Hardin was actually advocating for strong public regulation and protection of the commons.[66] Quoting Hegel, Hardin writes that "freedom is the recognition of necessity;" he advocates "mutual coercion" as a means of regulating the social use of nature. The problem, in both the free-market and state-regulatory interpretations of this story, is that it assumes a fixed ecological space, so that "mutual coercion" is reduced to the management of fixed or depleting (degrading) resources in the face of population increases. There are no possibilities for what Bernard Stiegler calls an "economy of contribution."[67] The perception of the biosphere as a commons from which we can only consume obscures any potential for thinking of humans as co-producers or participants in the ecological commons, who are equally capable of *increasing* soil

[65] Garrett Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons." *Science* 162.3859 (1968): 1243-1248; Garrett De Bell (ed), *The Environmental Handbook* (New York: Ballantine, 1970).

[66] Rob Nixon, "Neoliberalism, Genre, and 'The Tragedy of the Commons,'" *PMLA* 127.3 (2012): 593-599.

[67] Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy.* Trans. Daniel Ross. (Malden: Polity, 2010).

health, *restoring* biodiversity, and *becoming* more than a collective draw-down on planetary carbon and nitrogen cycles.

The image that lies behind the debate about *culture* is drawn from the Fordist image of *nature*, what Heidegger criticized as "standing reserve" of modern technics.[68] In that great reserve of culture, the museum, both Peter and Mr. Small discuss the experience of culture as a spatial conflict, along the lines of national parks and wildlife reserves. Assuming that natural environments and cultural objects are fixed and limited—and that they operate according to the same logic of consumption—Peter remains trapped. He is unable to imagine culture or nature as commons that are *produced*, and his socialist regulation scheme appears culturally conservative against Small's defense of capitalist modernization which, for all its faults, contains a progressive element. In these passages Small sounds much more like that neglected half of Marx who celebrates capitalism's profane acceleration and its ability to lay waste to entrenched cultural hierarchies, while Peter is remains the romantic anti-capitalist, melancholically struggling to preserve residual cultural forms against their dissolution.

The discussion revolves around Peter's disdain for fellow tourists. Small exposes Peter's preference for class tourism over mass tourism.[69] By class tourism, they mean the people who can afford to travel alone and do not take advantage of large package tours. Peter confesses that "the only tourists you don't look on as gate-crashers are the solitary art-lovers you can put in the same class as yourself."[70] Mass tourism enables increased

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[68] Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology." *Basic Writings.* Ed. David Krell (New York: Harper Perennial, 1977), 307-342.

[69] McCarthy (1971), 284.

[70] McCarthy (1971), 294.

access to high art, so the previous distinction between high and low culture is reproduced through academic discourses, which take up in theory where the old avant-gardes left off in practice. Small suggests that it is less about the object and more about cultivating particular attitudes and sensibilities of consumption. In this way, Small argues, the university discourse attempts to become the new gatekeeper of culture:

> "I'm aware of the new academicism. Entrenched interest groups resent the boom in museum attendance, the availability of cheap reproductions... They can't accept the fact that art is now within the reach of the masses… there's a drive on to restrict the understanding of art, if not the actual experience, to a tiny coterie of privileged and cultured dilettantes. They'd like to turn this wonderful spectacle over our heads into a private field of research, their own little hunting preserve—'Trespassers Keep Out.' Why, if they had their way, they'd institute screening procedures at all the great museums, to bar the vulgar public!"[71]

In Peter's concern over the ruined experience of art, Small identifies a desire to limit the circulation and consumption of culture, and thus, preserve its scarcity. Here, culture and nature are linked as private property (e.g. hunting preserves, no trespassing signs) in which increased participation entails a drawdown of a scarce resource. The solitude afforded through encounters in the natural world is analogous to art in that both are believed to impart an ethico-aesthetic education on the viewer. If ethical vision rests on aesthetics, as Peter recognizes in the epistle to his mother, he is now forced to consider whether a solitary aesthetic education is capable of preparing one's imaginative life for democratic mass society. Through these debates, McCarthy considers how aesthetic education of the kind championed by her fellow New York Intellectuals, in part relies on social hierarchies in other spheres.

Peter accepts Small's comparison of his concept of culture to a private nature reserve. "The nice thing about travel is the chance to be by yourself in an unspoiled,

[71] McCarthy (1971), 277.

pristine setting," Peter says. "My generation doesn't have experiences like that very often, which is why we come abroad, I guess. There isn't much unspoiled Nature around any more, and the places where people like poets used to look for it—the mountains and the seashore—are all jammed up with humanity and bottle-caps."[72] Like tourists and nature lovers, he prefers his experience to be private and introspective, where his relation to the universe is unpolluted by the presence of others. Nature and culture are linked in his imagination as a commons which is destroyed as too many people try to appropriate the experience for their own edification. "If you love someone, you want to be alone with them," Peter says, evoking his eco-oedipal New England landscape: "The same with art. There ought to be churches and museums where you don't have to meet gangs of tourists, where you can just sit and contemplate."[73] Levi refers to tourists as "garbage dumped here by planes and sightseeing busses," and then hesitates. "If you want me to say I'm part of the garbage, OK, I agree. I'm fouling up the element," he admits. "When I'm in the Sistine Chapel, I hate my fellow-man. There's something basically wrong with a situation like that. If a guy is in the presence of beauty, he should be having noble thoughts."[74] He begins to recognize that if this privatized experience of culture as an education in moral autonomy cannot stand up to the democratization of access, then it cannot serve as the basis for a common world. In this, McCarthy affirms the authentic desire for solitude and contemplation—Arendt's "life of the mind"—but also acknowledges the institutional and practical limits it faces.

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[72] McCarthy (1971), 296.

[73] McCarthy (1971), 297.

[74] McCarthy (1971), 298.

Peter's misanthropic confession prompts a question from Small: "Do you accept democracy, Levi?" It is a simple, but loaded question: does he accept the consequences of democracy, for art and nature, even if this means that these concepts themselves must be transformed in the process? Peter responds with an elaborate socialist plan to distribute museums and art around the country, and then regulate admission by having the would-be tourists pass exams. He realizes some inevitable contradictions in his plans which are only voiced in the free indirect discourse. "Under socialism, i.e., in an ideal republic," he thinks to himself, "just about everybody would be able to appreciate art, so that there would be no reasonable basis for exclusion, and the museums would be even more packed than they were now."[75] In short, Peter's plan is to regulate the cultural commons as a fixed, inherited set of scarce objects and experiences. It is a Hardin-esque regulatory response, based on "mutual coercion" where freedom is found in the recognition of necessity.

Like the Fordist consumerism he opposes, Peter can only consider the relation of art and democracy as one of consumption, never one of production. In a left-wing imagination limited to consumer choices, the only form of critical involvement resembles his mother's—the creation of boutique consumption practices often limited to those who can afford them. It is a cycle which, as critics like Thomas Frank have documented, has almost universally served the interests of updating and reinvigorating market fashions throughout the 20th century.[76] In a *different* ideal republic, one could argue, the means of cultural production would be more widely available and the pool of the cultural commons

[75] McCarthy (1971), 301.

[76] Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

would be enlarged because of it. People would be less likely to have the kind of alienated relationship toward culture and nature that Peter himself criticizes, but then again, the relation between the public and the commons will have been transformed. It is, as John Guillory argues, "the fact of class" and "how individuals gain access to the means of literary production" that is a "more efficient mechanism of social exclusion than acts of [aesthetic] judgment" in the realm of consumption.[77] Unfortunately, Peter can only imagine culture and nature as fixed storehouses unable to be expanded or replenished. Nature's death, in this regard, marks the limit of this imagination of the nonhuman environment as a repository of physical and creative resources for society.

Having received this entire exchange as confirmation of his suspicions about "little hunting preserves," Small dismisses Peter's plan as "modish drivel" and accuses Peter of wearing socialism as a mask for elitism:

> Capitalism, if you were only aware of it, has shown itself to be the most subtle force for progress the world has ever known. In its post-industrial phase, an insidious, awesome force. Boring from within the old structures, leveling, creating new dreams, new desires, and having the technical know-how and the dynamism to satisfy them. You're living in the midst of a vast global revolution originating in the United States and you seem not to take the slightest interest in it, except to go through some feeble motions of dissent. From your ivory tower, you look down disdainfully on that revolution and pretend to yourself that you'd welcome it if it bore the name socialism. I can assure you that you wouldn't, my friend. 'Socialism' is your alibi for rejecting the real progress capitalism has made, the leveling you abhor, if the truth were told. 'Garbage,' you said just now, in a moment of outspokenness which you no doubt regret. That was your epithet for the common man.[78]

Small's analysis resembles several New York Intellectuals, like Daniel Bell, who were beginning to place their trust in "post-ideological" technocratic centrism, and who

[77] Quoted in Teres, 108.

[78] McCarthy (1971), 302.

saw the "modernism in the streets" of the 1960s as a *symptom* of capitalist modernization, rather than a *cause* capable of reforming it.[79] Small admits to having once had "a brief romance with that mythical animal called democratic socialism," but now believes the political categories, left and right, if they still have any meaning, have effectively switched places in that the universities have become the locus of a cultural radicalism detached from working class concerns. In this, he anticipates the critiques of the "new class" by the first generation of neoconservatives in the 1970s who believed they were using socially conscious rhetoric to enrich themselves.[80] Small's *panglossian* theodicy of development is on display when he argues that capitalism will eventually "eradicate the slums" since it can't afford "under-consumption."[81] He attributes a teleological rationality to historical change and places his faith in it, a better future that justifies current pain. However, an incident occurs in which Mr. Small's "good faith" is exposed as a cover for naked self-interest. At dinner, Mr. Small tries to split the check so that he can collect double on Peter's portion of the meal: once when Peter pays him his half, twice when he is reimbursed from his expense account for the entire meal. Recognizing this small gesture as an example of the way cynical appeals to abstract democracy, such as the sharing of food, mask the realities of unequal exchange, Peter affirms his inner snob and asks for separate checks. His "high cultural" values still have some ability to check economic philistinism.

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[79] Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism, Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (New York: Basic, 1996).

[80] Ehrenreich, 165

[81] McCarthy (1971), 303.

Yet there is also some truth to Small's criticism of Peter. His Arnoldian Leftism is limited those who can afford education and travel to appreciate art in a classed way. Gone are the days where a high modernism met with radical politics in the relative autonomy of little magazines. "Socialists think that art ought to belong to everybody and not to a favored few," McCarthy writes, "That sounds right in theory, but in practice there is no way that that particular pie can be cut and distributed fairly… instead of belonging to everybody it belongs to nobody."[82] Perhaps this is the enduring argument for the novel: its portability and its capacity to provide a shared experience at the individual level. In her essay, "Living with Beautiful Things," McCarthy recounts the controversies surrounding the Mona Lisa in Japan. No matter how bureaucratically and "democratically" organized—even with the Taylorist allotment of thirty seconds of viewing time per museum attendee, which was later cut to ten seconds—protestors always found an excluded population. Reading McCarthy's catalogue of attacks on art in the early seventies, one wonders if they were not in fact attacks on the social conditions of its consumption. Finding no solution to this, McCarthy endorses the 19th century practice of distributing reproductions to schools and towns. If the occupiers of the *Odéon* Theater had their way in the 1968 "revolution," there would be a massive redistribution of social space and creative production within cities. "One doesn't know whether to put that word [revolution] in quotes or not," she writes Arendt regarding the events in Paris, "and there possibly is the tragedy."[83]

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[82] Mary McCarthy, "Living with Beautiful Things," *Occasional Prose* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1985), 101-126, 112.

[83] Arendt and McCarthy, 220.

Common Worlds

The image of the filthy communal toilet is an analogy for the loss of the common world of recognition that went by the name of Nature. Once the environment has been modernized, rolled over by industrial agriculture, the peasant classes urbanized, and the unconscious "colonized" by the media, there is nothing resembling an originary world as an extra-social repository of meaning. "Nature is not just the circumambient ensemble of non-human life but history on a grand scale—duration," McCarthy writes. It "gives us the awareness of being an instant reverberant in time."[84] The Anthropocene marks the return of Nature as "history on a grand scale," although it is a Nature we no longer recognize, entwined with our own histories and conflicts, and in which the human instant reverberates for much longer. In asking, "Could humanity be divided into people who noticed [the toilet filth] and people who didn't?" Peter questions a model of humanity that relies on some underlying essential quality as the basis for solidarity. Rather than believing that the common world is a matter of uncovering, of cleaning away, getting "beneath the surface" or "behind the appearance," of human differences, he begins to understand the common world as the name of a need to act in concert with others, to make matters of ecological concern *recognizable*. "The word 'nature,'" McCarthy writes, "derives from *nascere*: birth, natality."[85] She is no doubt thinking of Arendt's concept of natality, "the miracle that saves the world…from its normal, 'natural' ruin," that is, the

[84] McCarthy (1970), 206.

[85] McCarthy (1970), 191.

ability of "new men" to be born, not through a recovery of lost origins, but through the universal human capacity for beginning.[86] This is the Peter Levi's unfinished task.

Ecocritic David Mazel claims that for all their criticism of industrial capitalism, the New York Intellectuals "failed to produce much of anything resembling an environmentally informed criticism."[87] As the women of the New York Intellectuals have often been excluded from histories of the group, it is possible that Mazel may not be considering McCarthy. Her *Birds of America* announces the end of a politics that is able to rely on nostalgic appeals to nature as a de facto commons, whether they are agrarian pastorals that industrial modernity interrupts or a primitivist escape from history and society into an undiscovered wilderness. The black swan that bites Peter is a harsh reminder that beauty is no guarantee of ecological stability or sustainability, and that species conservation guarantees no immediate human benefit. Nature might be dead, but that swan is not. We might ask if (or how) the swan's bite signifies politically; or whether it is affirming its particular existence against a dead universality that would reduce it to scenery. If McCarthy's vision of the world rests precariously on the brink of nihilism, its social "taxonomy" of humans and the politics of their ideas locates us on the same plane as other beings in nature, with whom we share an existence that is increasingly without guarantees.

[86] Arendt, 247

[87] David Mazel (ed). *A Century of Early Ecocriticism* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2001), 7.

CHAPTER III

ENERGY FUTURES: JOHN UPDIKE'S FINANCIAL PETROFICTION

> The world keeps ending but new people too dumb to know it keep showing up as if the fun's just started.
>
> John Updike, *Rabbit is Rich*[1]

On the night of April 18th, 1977, Jimmy Carter addressed the American public. "Good evening," he began, "tonight I want to have an unpleasant talk with you about a problem that is unprecedented in our history."[2] This unpleasant talk was about the present, past, and future use of fossil fuels. Titled "The Energy Problem," this speech was intended not only to set a national agenda of energy and environmental reform, but was to shore up the mission of his presidency: to restore trust in American institutions after the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the Oil Crisis of 1973-4. For Carter, oil was not just a problem *of* history but a problem *for* history, which is to say that a projected shortage of non-renewable energy resources signaled a crisis in modern institutions, evidence that liberal democracy and capitalism are incapable of imagining and producing a desirable future. "To stay even," he claims, "we need the production of a new Texas every year, an Alaskan North Slope every 9 months, or a new Saudi Arabia every 3 years." In other words, to maintain itself in time the US would need to produce new spaces capable of filling the metabolic gap in material energy exhausted by its routine existence. "Staying even" with 1977 levels of consumption would entail the expansion of extractive industries and a loss of national sovereignty as increasing amounts of the precious resource lie outside its immediate territorial boundaries, and subject to the whims of a

[1] John Updike, *Rabbit is Rich* (New York: Fawcett, 1981), 78.

[2] Jimmy Carter, "The Energy Problem," *Jimmy Carter and the Energy Crisis of the 1970s*, ed. Daniel Horowitz (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 36-42.

global market. Carter argued that by not changing the way the United States constitutes and reproduces itself through petroleum, the country will persist only by destroying its own future and its own sense of history. His successor's solution, "morning in America," was an evasion of history—a *deferral*—that replaced the material with the affective as the speculative economy of finance took hold under neoliberalism.

John Updike's 1981 novel, *Rabbit is Rich*, was written and set during the energy crisis of 1979. It won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award that year and affirmed the post-Carter narrative of "malaise" and "morning in America" in real time. By linking the ambivalent pleasures of Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom's aging and death with the futural anxieties provoked by the energy crisis, Updike lends an existential credence to the environmental and economic concerns of the Carter administration while exposing the short-sided speculative solutions of the Reagan era. Jonathan Yardley, who won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism the year *Rabbit is Rich* was published, predicted that the book would be "gone and quite forgotten" in "a quarter century… if not sooner."[3] The novel remains relevant because the conditions which it describes still obtain. Updike's realism articulates private emotions with the emerging political and economic landscape since the 1980s. As Melinda Cooper observes, "the operative emotions of neoliberalism are neither interest nor rational expectations, but rather the essentially speculative but nonetheless productive movements of collective belief, faith, and apprehension."[4] In Cooper's affective read of neoliberalism, we hear the echo of Irving Howe's commentary in 1986

[3] Jonathan Yardley writing in the *Washington Post*, 26 April 1982; quoted by Lawrence W. Mazzeno's *Becoming John Updike: Critical Reception, 1958-2010* (New York: Camden House, 2013), 69.

[4] Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2008), 10.

that "the main achievement of the Reagan administration has not been institutional or programmatic," but rather, "it has consisted of a spectacular transformation of popular attitudes, values, and styles."[5] Updike's realist aesthetic catalogues these transformations in the mundane, producing a structure of feeling specific to an era of energy and financial instability animated by speculative attitudes.

Rabbit is Rich builds on the psychological and political concerns of the previous two "Rabbit" novels—*Rabbit, Run* (1960) and *Rabbit Redux* (1971)—to address energy and economic anxieties. In this novel, Rabbit inherits a Toyota dealership just before the energy crisis and engages in monetary speculation and financial leveraging in the housing market. He discovers ways to profit in the deindustrializing and inflationary landscape of post-Fordist America. Yet Rabbit's acquiescence to the reality (or apparent naturalness) of the market, as well as to the abstraction of "energy," prevents him from imagining a future beyond the crises of his moment. From our vantage point, after the 2008 financial meltdown and intensified reliance on "tough oil," we can recognize Updike's realist setting of the 1979 energy crisis as existing within a temporal horizon and field of experience that we still inhabit. Indeed, while many scholars in the environmental humanities are turning to science-and-speculative fiction, social realism can help historically situate the transformation of attitudes, beliefs, expectations, and ideas, that deeply inform environmental imaginaries. Updike's signature style of finding the tragic or beautiful in the mundane—the poetry in the petroleum—offers what Amitav Ghosh

[5] Irving Howe, "Reaganism: The Spirit of the Times," *Selected Writings: 1950-1990* (New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1990), 410-423, 411.

calls an "oil encounter" in the U.S. at a time when the identity of Americans and petrocultural life appeared to be coming to an end.[6]

The energy crises of 1973-4 and 1979 left in their wake a horizon of diminished expectations, symbolized most prominently by media images of "Sorry, No Gas" signs, long lines of automobiles, and a nation-wide trucker strike.[7] The US was becoming aware of itself as a society constituted by petroleum; its national future, or at least the stability of its present, would depend on access to a resource that increasingly lay in the hands and lands of others. Environmental scientists had projected limits to non-renewable resources in the early 1970s, and along with the acknowledgement of those limits came a recognition of a temporal horizon—a time internal to the social reproduction of the industrial world—which culminated in a late-countercultural feeling that technological modernity had already seen its approaching end. To say that society faces an energy crisis means a challenge to its ability to reproduce itself and thus, a crisis of temporality: a relation to its own end. This consciousness is expressed by the UK poet, Dominic Fox: "The [end of oil] narrative declares that 'another world' is not only possible but inevitable, since this world cannot go on as it is (and, indeed, has in a sense already ended, inasmuch as its condition has already been diagnosed as terminal.)"[8] This type of statement is often dismissed as an eschatological mode of politics that supplements its

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[6] Amitav Ghosh, "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel." *The New Republic*. 2 March, 1992.

[7] Mark Fiege, "It's a Gas: The United States and the Oil Shock of 1973-1974." *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2012), 358-402.

[8] Dominic Fox, *Cold World: The Aesthetics of Dejection and the Politics of Militant Dysphoria* (London: Zero Books, 2009), 8.

call for change with the threat of catastrophe. Yet it also enunciates the antagonism that is environmental consciousness itself: as the abstract knowledge of biophysical limits to industrial modernity finds no subjective recognition within daily life, it produces a modern form of "alienated" consciousness within "post-industrial" society.

This sentiment is expressed in the literature of the decade. A year before the *Limits to Growth* report was published, the narrator of E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* (1971), sardonically intones: "We must preserve our diminishing energies insofar as we direct them to the true objectives. A certain portion of the energy must be used for the regeneration of energy. That way you don't just die like a bird falling, like a rock sinking, you die on a parabolic curve."[9] The narration evokes images of resource curves and consumption projections, rejecting, perhaps in advance, the calls for discipline and austerity implied by their shape. Where Doctorow's New Left narrator conflates the individual's libidinal economy with the material (and moral) economy of American Fordism, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), presents what will be called "the energy crisis" through the temporal figure of the addict. As if anticipating the OPEC oil embargo later that year, he writes that,

> The System may or may not understand that it's only buying time. And that time is an artificial resource to begin with, of no value to anyone or anything but the System, which sooner or later must crash to its death, when its addiction to energy has become more than the rest of the World can supply […] Living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide….[10]

[9] E.L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel* (New York: Random House, 1971/2007), 210.

[10] Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 419.

In this passage a petrol-powered symbol of countercultural utopianism—Ken Kesey's bus of Merry Pranksters—is converted into a symbol of suicidal and narcissistic decadence. The temporality the bus inhabits, like that of an addict, is immanent to its next fix; it is a futurity internal to the petrocultural economy. A raging mania for spatial movement is symptomatic of the inability to transcend one's historical condition, or to imagine a future becoming which would change the conditions that force one to drift. As contemporary industrial life is constituted through its reliance on fossil fuels, Pynchon identifies the mode of transgression particular to the system, a transgression that expresses the logic of the whole. He presents time as an endless present in which pasts and futures are the products of speculation that enable the present to sustain itself for as long as possible before crashing. A fury of activity prevents an actual future from being constructed; in this situation, the future can only be imagined as apocalypse, catastrophe, or messianic revolution (e.g. Foucault's infamous support for the Islamic Revolution in 1979): all figures that appear to come "from outside," all figures that haunt a modernity which has yet to be rationalized.

Updike's choice to place Angstrom in charge of a Toyota dealership creates a petrofiction specific to the transformations in US society at the beginning of the neoliberal era. The Toyota showroom gives Rabbit a vantage point from which to survey the post-Fordist social landscape as he lives out its contradictions. Angstrom benefits from the dislocation of the US as a leader in the automobile industry, yet he laments this development. As Toyotas offer better gas mileage, he benefits from the crisis at the gas pumps, which was widely interpreted as a symptom of the US's weakened international standing. "The fucking world is running out of gas," Rabbit declares in the novel's

opening paragraph. The rising fuel costs and shortages in the wake of the Iranian revolution and oil embargo called consumer attention to the finitude of the resource and to the geopolitical relationships that make that resource possible: the contingent relationships (mistaken for material certainties) on which the modernity of the industrialized world depends. But these relations are quickly naturalized. If America is running out of gas, Rabbit reasons, the world must be running out of gas. The Earth is winding down but Rabbit is still comfortable; he's not satisfied, but he's happy in that he thinks he's in a position to be happy. His attempt at sunny optimism is troubled with internal doubts because he knows this arrangement cannot last.

The Toyota dealership's showroom is made into a space where heightened affect can circulate parasitically on the national discourse. The novel opens one month prior to Carter's "Energy and National Goals" speech, known later as the "Crisis of Confidence" speech. The president's ominous tone hangs over the dealership and finds its way into the exchanges with coworkers and customers. Charlie Stavros, a familiar character and coworker, dialogically challenges Rabbit's sunny view of their situation through half-digested bits of contradictory news events, personal anecdotes, and speculations. When Harry remarks that "Mother Earth is drying up," and that the crisis is "too big" for the oil companies, Stavros replies: "You know damn well Carter and the oil companies have rigged this whole mess. What does Big Oil want? Bigger profits. What does Carter want? Less oil imports, less depreciation of the dollar. He's too chicken to ration, so he's hoping higher prices will do it for him."[11] This bit of political economy seems lost on Rabbit, until he turns it into a conspiracy to sell a young couple on a car. "Did you notice in the

[11] Updike, 5.

paper this morning," he asks, "where Carter is taking gas from farmers and going to give it to the truckers? Shows the power of a gun, doesn't it?"[12]

Rabbit begins his sales pitch by playing up contemporary political fears and uncertainties around oil and eventually succeeds in selling the car to the young couple as an *investment*, a way to ensure stability in a turbulent future. While on a test drive, Rabbit makes a series of paratactic statements, each intended to increase the social anxiety of the couple. Evoking death and the "new industry of gas pump shrouds," he remarks: "You know it seems gruesome to me, all these gas stations closed up like somebody has died." Next: "Did you see in the paper where the Hershey company has had to lay off nine hundred people because of the trucker's strike? Next thing we'll be in lines for Hershey bars."[13] Each of these statements passively reinforces the prevailing consciousness of oil scarcity and systemic insecurity as well as national decline. As they drive downtown he remarks on how businesses have been "pulling out" and that people are afraid to go downtown for fear of crime. Back at the dealership, Rabbit tries his final appeal: identification.

> "We like to help young people out. I think it's a helluva world we're coming to, where a young couple like yourselves can't afford to buy a car or own a home. If you can't get your foot on even the bottom rung of a society geared like this, people are going to lose faith in the system. The Sixties were a lark in the park compared to what we're going to see if things don't straighten out."[14]

Rabbit's strategy mobilizes this uncertainty to make the sale. His pitch highlights the growing sense of social insecurity, signs that the future will not be bright, but

[12] Updike, 12.

[13] Updike, 17.

[14] Updike, 19.

paradoxically, this insecurity, this *lack of faith* in the system, becomes the reason to buy a new Toyota. In *Capital and Affects,* the Swiss economist Christian Marazzi connects the "existential malaise" of the late 1970s to a "climate of pervasive insecurity;" "the '*no future*' widely anticipated by some youth movements of the 1970s," was generated by successive oil shocks, unemployment, and restructuring of the workforce.[15] However, these ambivalent and disenchanted sentiments are, in the words of Paolo Virno, "put to work" in post-Fordist "offices of chatter."[16] Markets are able to thrive on the disenchantments they generate, implicating entire genres—from "transgressive" apocalyptic literature to punk music—in the process.

In the previous novel, *Rabbit Redux*, Rabbit worked in a linotype factory, an industry singled out by Antonio Gramsci as the quintessential example of Fordist labor.[17] Industrialism stood opposed to an unruly "animality" in which the instincts were disciplined according to the logic of organized social reproduction.[18] Fordism implied

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[15] Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy,* Trans. Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 67.

[16] Paolo Virno characterizes post-Fordist culture as being defined by the following qualities:

> habitual mobility, the ability to keep pace with extremely rapid conversions, adaptability in every enterprise, flexibility in moving from one group of rules to another, aptitude for both banal and omnilateral linguistic interaction, command of the flow of information, and the ability to navigate among limited possible alternatives.

See "The Ambivalence of Disenchantment," *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 14.

[17] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks,* Trans. Hoare and Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 308-310.

[18] Gramsci (1971), 298.

more than high wages capable of supporting a consumerist economy, it was a mode of regulation that organized social, sexual (reproductive), gender, and communicative relations. In Gramsci's description, linotype work necessitates a split between body and emotions: as the mechanical actions of the 20th century Taylorist worker become divorced from the "human content" of printed communication material, language itself becomes reduced from an expression of subjectivity to what Heidegger, in his late writings, calls its "technical-scientific image." The dream of Fordism culminates in the cybernetic circuit of labor, capital, consumption, production, and communication. Heidegger's claim that "cybernetics transforms language into an exchange of news" and that "the arts become regulated-regulating instruments of information," anticipates the instrumentalization of communication under post-Fordism.[19] However, the news that Rabbit exchanges is chosen deliberately to create an *environment* of expectations—in other words, what is communicated is different than what is explicitly said.

Rabbit's job is to manage how the couple interprets their consumer choice as a *competitive strategy* within an uncertain horizon of expectation, mobilizing cynicism, fear, and opportunism, as engines of market exchange. His labor is humanistic; Rabbit constructs narrative contexts and his customers perform the proper interpretive acts. He has the ability to deploy a variety of contradictory discourses, as when he code switches between racist and anti-racist idioms as he encourages his son to buy a Toyota instead of a Ford.

[19] Martin Heidegger, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," *Basic Writings*, Ed. David Krell (London: HarperPerennial, 1977); 427-449, 434.

Contrasted with the Fordist example of linotype work, post-Fordist labor is "increasingly *communicative* and symbolic," and "based on the signs, images, and representations of a specific socio-cultural context."[20] What has now come to be called the "Toyotaist revolution" was effectively the transformation of the alienated Taylorist assembly line worker into a team-based networked worker focused on communication and efficiency. In Western Europe and the United States, this meant "metabolizing" the "social and cultural critique of the Fordist model." According to Marazzi, the new management philosophies "put to work the most common, most public ('informal') qualities of the workforce… language, communicative-relational action."[21] Rabbit produces what Maurizio Lazzarato, the philosopher of immaterial labor, calls an "ideological product," in that it produces "new stratifications of reality" embedded in a social context.[22]

Rabbit believes "the cars sell themselves," but this is a kind of open cynicism. Admitting to himself that "the Toyota commercials on television are out there all the time, preying on people's minds," he takes pleasure being a symbol—Chief Sales Representative—of that community recognition. The "airiness" he feels, "standing there in his own skin, casting a shadow," is a sensation of blissful detachment, liberated even from the affects he circulates.[23] This experience is mirrored by the Toyota commercials, which evoke a metaphysical freedom through images of "men and women leaping,

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[20] Marazzi, 2011; 83.

[21] Marazzi, 2008; 41

[22] Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996); 133-150, 145.

[23] Updike, 3.

average men and women, their clothes lifted in cascading slow-motion folds like angels' robes, like some intimate violence of chemical mating or hummingbird wing magnified and laid bare in its process, leaping and falling, grinning and then in freeze-frame hanging there, defying gravity."[24] Updike's aging character embodies the newly dominant mode of immaterial labor; instead of manufacturing durable commodities he produces affects, desires, and interpretations. At the same time, Updike evokes the twin contexts of national feeling in 1979's energy crisis: the utopian desire of economically strapped citizens to be free from material constraints and the drive of capital to overcome its own material barriers through financial mobilization.

The higher gas mileage of Toyota represents a strategy for increasing consumer resilience at the pump. Timothy Mitchell remarks that "since most users cannot easily switch to alternative sources of energy" oil is different than other commodities in that its demand is not linked to price.[25] Because of the fixed demand of industrial economies and infrastructures, oil tends to have a *reverse* elasticity; as price goes up demand for it goes up. Angstrom and Stavros witness the evidence of this in the erratic behavior of consumers in gas lines and at the dealership. As they pile up money, they express little hope for future generations. "I figure the oil's going to run out about the same time I do," Rabbit says; "Seems funny to say it, but I'm glad I lived when I did. These kids coming up, they'll be living on table scraps. We had the meal."[26] Rabbit makes a living selling a future that he can't imagine and doesn't believe in. The ambivalence represented here, in

[24] Updike, 318.

[25] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil.* (New York: Verso, 2011), 176.

[26] Updike, 7.

the shift from cynically believing in the crisis in order to sell cars, to cynical *disbelief*—acknowledging that the crisis is very real but continuing on as before even with the understanding that one's activity is part of the crisis—is the subjective "flexible" response to a situation in which no viable alternative presents itself. Rabbit's efforts to overcome this instability through monetary and housing speculation become the very mutation through which capitalism was to sustain itself.

Energy shortages are thus one source for Rabbit's resigned attitude that there is no alternative. The other is generational anxiety over social reproduction. Harry is doubtful about the US energy future as the country is increasingly reliant on a volatile global market for the material it needs to reproduce itself. He's uneasy about the role that his dealership, a foreign company whose banner reads "TOYOTA = TOTAL ECONOMY," plays in his familial reproduction as his son, Nelson, goes to work in the showroom.[27] He encourages Nelson, a college dropout who is ambivalent about his own future, to go into solar panels, saying "that's where the future is," and that "the party's over" for cars; but one has the sense that neither he nor Nelson believe it.[28] Melanie, pregnant with Nelson's child, mouths an unconvincing green vitalism claiming that "as long as there are growing things, there's still a world of endless possibilities."[29] *Rabbit is Rich* provides no positive images or articulations of the future, it only presents characters who try to extend the present through various strategies of short-term speculation, and through managing expectations. Updike's realism registers what critics refer to as the financialization of

[27] Updike, 390.

[28] Updike, 235.

[29] Updike, 87.

culture. It is a petrofiction of the United States at a time when energy shocks were becoming the motivating force behind the political and economic restructuring of post-Fordism, and gives a narrative form to the atmosphere of uncertainty out of which emerged neoliberalism and its speculative relation to the future.

From Postmodern to Petromodern

Andrew Ross was one of the first cultural studies scholars to discuss the "futurological" implications projected shortages in reports like the *Limits to Growth*.[30] The report elicited utopian and apocalyptic responses across the political spectrum. The most hostile were those who rejected its call for rational planning, but the majority simply took it as a sign that the future—imagined as a progressive increase in standard of living and resource consumption—was receding before them. In effect, the material struggles of North Atlantic workers came into conflict with a new awareness of the global resource and labor base that made those gains possible. Ross revisited the Report in a paper given at the University of Bologna in 2010. Titled "Life and Labor in the Era of Climate Justice," he looks back at its message and considers how it might be implicated in the political transition from postwar embedded liberalism to neoliberalism. His emphasis on the turn to *speculation* highlights the shift in temporality that normalizes the conditions of insecurity:

> Not long after the *Limits to Growth* report was issued, the norms of public provision, which had ensured a degree of social equity in the Fordist compact, fell under attack. Tax reform, fiscal austerity, deregulation and privatization, structural adjustment, crumbling of secure work, and the general shredding of social welfare dramatically eroded most of the postwar gains for workers, and

[30] Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits* (New York: Verso, 1991), 185.

> pushed them underwater. The only compensation on offer was a lottery ticket in the speculative housing market–sparking a highly unsustainable round of land development which ended in the worst global recession since the 1930s. In retrospect, it is fair to conclude that the message of *Limits to Growth* was not ignored.[31]

This structural and conceptual short-termism explains the failed efforts at long-term investments in renewable energies. Long-term investment, nationally "embedded" capital, and regulated financial markets, were replaced by short-term contracts in a service economy as companies moved manufacturing overseas for cheaper labor, and to states with less environmental regulation. Neoliberalism, a belief that freedom consists in individual entrepreneurial agency and that government should intervene on behalf of market freedoms, came to power as a fully articulated ideology with the election of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. *Institutional* neoliberalism, on the other hand, began during the Carter administration with the deregulation of the transportation sector and Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volker, who "shocked" the economy out of stagflation by raising interest rates some twenty points overnight in October of 1979. This supply-side solution replaced the Keynesian assumptions that underwrote social protections in the Fordist interlude. "Where Keynesian economics attempts to safeguard the productive economy against the fluctuations of financial capital," writes Melinda Cooper, "neoliberalism installs speculation at the very core of production."[32] By monetizing futurity, contemporary capitalism encourages short-term speculation that disrupts the ability of societies to address long-term problems like energy, economy, and ecology. This reorganization of life under the "real abstractions" of finance produces

[31] Andrew Ross, "Life and Labor in the Era of Climate Justice," *Uninomade.org*. N.p., N.d., Web. Accessed 3 March, 2014.

[32] Cooper, 10.

effects of temporality—of historical change—but it amounts to a closure of an authentic future.

David Harvey describes the "neoliberalization" that brought Fordist Keynesianism to an end as "the financialization of everything."[33] Melinda Cooper attributes this financial turn under neoliberalism to an "ambition to overcome the ecological and economic limits to growth associated with the end of industrial production, through a speculative reinvention of the future."[34] She articulates the historical relation between *knowledge* of limits to natural resources (and ecological reproduction) with the temporality of financial speculation; together, this combination produces a new relation to the future that allows the present conjuncture to be continually reorganized in the interests of continued accumulation. Capital accumulation stands opposed to materiality, except when it needs it. Horkheimer and Adorno criticize the universal reign of exchange value as it renders people, places, and even the planet "universally fungible:" just one more decaying stockpile on the way to the bank.[35] The waves of inflation generated by the oil shocks of the 1970s were a harsh reminder of petroleum's materiality—it was not just another commodity. In Cooper's words "the very stuff of Fordist mass manufacture" was comprised of petroleum in the form of "plastics, fabrics… fertilizers and herbicides."[36] The factories and infrastructures that predated the oil crises, like virtually all forms of industrial technology, were built with certain fixed

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[33] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford, 2005), 33.

[34] Cooper, 11.

[35] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Englightenment: Philosophical Fragments,* Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: SUP, 2002), 7.

[36] Cooper, 21.

requirements of energy inputs. According to Barry Bluestone, "the average age of America's capital stock [in 1979], from sprawling factories to intricate machine tools, was 7.1 years."[37]

This lack of flexibility contributes to the overall inelasticity of oil demand and introduces systemic bottlenecks in factories, machines, and vehicles. As Rabbit complains, "Oil going up takes everything up with it; in the five years I've been in charge heating costs have doubled, electricity is way up, delivery costs are up, plus all these social security hikes and unemployment to pay."[38] A price spike or "scarcity" introduced in one part of the industrial chain will have cascading effects throughout the system. The immensity of this edifice on which so much depends often appears to operate according to fixed, quasi-natural laws, becoming a kind of second nature.[39]

This edifice represents an externalized economic logic that has taken on the appearance of the world itself, what Stephanie LeMenager has named "petromodernity."[40] Modernity, always more of a qualitative than chronological experience, has been shaped over the last century by readily available, cheap petroleum. Petroleum-based mobility and consumer products have become an inextricable part of contemporary experience of self-hood, temporality, and the world. Petroleum has defined the infrastructural contours of nation-states and defined the boundaries when it becomes

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[37] Barry Bluestone, "Forward," *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization*, Eds. Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2003), viii.

[38] Updike, 237.

[39] Georg Lukács uses "second nature" to describe the natural appearance of social relations in *The Theory of the Novel* (Cambridge: MIT, 1971).

[40] Stephanie LeMenager, "The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after *Oil!*" *American Literary History.* 24.1 (2012): 59-86.

an object of contestation between them. High levels of resource use have generated a kind of *petro-normativity*, in which the material satisfaction of needs and desires are surpassed by aspirational levels of conspicuous consumption to produce what Matthew Huber describes as an infinitely mobile, entrepreneurial, neoliberal subject.[41] For better or worse, the circulation of petroleum is thus linked with the imagination of *historical progress* as industrial development and *freedom* as a life beyond necessity guaranteed by that development. The *crisis* that energy presents to the imagination of history is unique in that it carries significance beyond the mere technocratic procurement of a resource. Here, Janet Roitman's argument for a narratological understanding of the concept of crisis is useful:

> [C]risis is mobilized in narrative constructions to mark out or to designate 'moments of truth;' it is taken to be a means to access historical truth, and even a means to think 'history' itself. Such moments of truth are often defined as turning points in history, when decisions are taken or events are decided, thus establishing a particular teleology. And similarly, though seemingly without recourse to teleology, crisis moments are defined as instances when normativity is laid bare.[42]

What has come to be called the energy crisis is the laying bare of the normativity that defines petromodernity. It calls into question the materiality out of which contemporary global societies are made and through which they reproduce themselves; perhaps even more traumatically, it calls into question the narratives through which we organize historical experience. As petromodernity is called into question, individuals and societies are forced to confront the material horizon of their own subjectivity and face a *decision* as to how to remake themselves and the world they have known. It is tempting

[41] Matthew Huber, "Refined Politics: Petroleum Products, Neoliberalism, and the Ecology of Entrepreneurial Life," *Journal of American Studies* 45.2 (2012): 295-312.

[42] Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 3.

for many on the left and right to dismiss events like the 1979 energy crisis and to say there was no real shortage, that was "politically contrived" by Big Oil (if you are on the left) or by Big Government (if you are on the right).[43] But this misses the existential and phenomenological component of the crisis. Here, we might distinguish a crisis of petromodernity from a crisis of what some critics have started to call "petro-capitalism." In an effort to link energy regimes with historical formations of capitalism, critics like Imre Szeman and Frederick Buell[44] have tried to periodize our present cultural moment by attaching the prefix "petro" to capitalism. They contrast petro-capitalism with coal-capitalism and wind-capitalism. The argument is that a crisis in the dominant form of energy signals a crisis in the reproduction of capitalism itself. However, this elides the fact that coal is still quite dominant in large parts of the global economy, not to mention a variety of other sources. Like "capitalisms" of the past, global finance operates across uneven and combined development. The recognition of a crisis for petromodernity may not mean a crisis in capitalism. Nevertheless, one cannot describe and conjuncturally locate contemporary experience without framing it in relation to petromodernity.

Through a familiar trope of the Rabbit novels Updike reveals the cracks in the edifice of petromodernity. Angstrom conducts a narrative survey of Pennsylvanian towns like he has throughout the series. The free indirect style in these moments historicize changes in the social landscape, defining both the particular "scene," in the words of Updike scholar Dilvo Ristoff, as well as Rabbit's perspective as an "agent" in that

[43] Huber (2013), 118.

[44] In "A Short History of Oil Cultures; or the Marriage of Catastrophe and Exuberance," Fredrick Buell goes so far as to blame "antifoundationalism" on the petroleum culture of the 20th century; see Ross Barrett and Daniel Worden (eds) *Oil Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2014).

scene.[45] Updike is thus able to offer descriptions of historically changing social landscape through the subjective and situated historical consciousness of the main character. These scenes now look over deindustrialized landscapes and evoke a melancholic acceptance of both decline and persistence that, when overlapped with the aging subjectivity and class position of the main character, enable a redemptive pleasure through the affirmation of decay. This narrative trope challenges the appearance of a transhistorical objective "natural" background and gives historical specificity to both the landscape and the subjectivity of the viewer.

After the opening scene at the dealership, we find Angstrom behind the wheel of his 1978 Luxury Edition Toyota Corona driving through Brewer, PA. He is driving as much through personal memory and social history as his voice merges with the narration. "Railroads and coal made Brewer," he says. "Everywhere in this city […] structures speak of expended energy."[46] The architecture and urban space contains the material traces of an abundance of fossil fuels and the might of industrial capital. Moving past old factories whose "shapely stacks have not issued smoke for half a century," railroad yards, and old textile plants, he finds them replaced by ophthalmologist offices and discount clothing outlets lined with banners announcing to customers that they are entering a place "*Where a Dollar is Still a Dollar*," perhaps pining nostalgically (or paranoiacly) for the stable referent which gave their previous lives value.[47] The fixed capital—buildings and machinery—that produced the post-war abundance now lie empty and rusting, alongside

[45] Dilvo Ristoff, *Updike's America: The Presence of American History in John Updike's Rabbit Trilogy* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988).

[46] Updike, 27.

[47] Updike, 28.

a population left precarious and bitter. At one time a victim of deindustrialization—having been let go from the linotype factory when the industry became computerized—he now looks on the scene as a "silent movie." Trees were planted to obscure the view of the city from the suburbs; the unintended forest downtown, originally for beautification, has become a shelter for muggers and the homeless, as if to confirm the continuation of barbarism under the false image of nature.

Updike temporalizes the *experience* of petro-shocked modernity by narrating it through the main character's bodily decline. Through his own aging, Rabbit comes to identify with a planet growing old, a maturity associated with exhaustion and entropy. Angstrom is concerned about future generations, but his subjectivity is capable of becoming so inflated that it identifies its own decadence with the Earth itself. Rabbit treats the abundance of petroleum as a given, disavowing his knowledge of the industry's transnational nature and that the US has built itself on a finite resource. The way of life that Rabbit's generation enjoyed becomes newly visible and fragile in its moment of crisis, just like the American power that sustains it. And just as the petroculture naturalizes the existence of readily available and cheap resources, so too does it naturalize its *decline*: it becomes possible to think of the decline of petroleum (and American petroculture) as the decline of *nature* itself. This negative image of American life is what Harry, now passing middle-age, sees from the showroom of the Toyota dealership: "it gives him pleasure, makes Rabbit feel rich, to contemplate the world's wasting, to know that the earth is mortal too."[48]

[48] Updike, 9.

The term for this specific pleasure is *jouissance*. Jacques Lacan expands its sexual connotation to describe the "paradoxical satisfaction that the subject derives from his symptom, or […] the suffering that he derives from his own satisfaction."[49] Rabbit's pleasure—his *rich* feeling—comes through the identification of his own death with the death of the world so that, paradoxically, his (generation's) wasteful activity is redeemed by the world's death. He contemplates "the world's wasting," but this ambivalent way of phrasing it draws out its dual meaning: the active wasting of the world's resources on the one hand, and the world "passively" wasting away through cosmic environmental entropy on the other. In the same way that he mistakes the market scarcity of oil for "energy" in the cosmic sense, Rabbit understands the deindustrializing landscape of Brewer, PA, as a natural process of decay and ruin rather than a symptom of capital flight. The title itself—*Rabbit is Rich*—references Harry Angstrom's *jouissance* as he consciously profits off America's "bad news," redeeming his guilty conscious by affirming the death of the world.

Back in the showroom, Stavros remarks that "people don't care about economizing anymore," and that "Big Oil has sold capitalism down the river, what the czar did for the Russians, Big Oil is doing for us."[50] The analogy is that the czars inadvertently prepared the ground for revolutionary upheaval, suggesting that America's economic dependency on corporate-supplied cheap energy is undermining both democratic sovereignty and the individual as an economizing actor. Rabbit evades these conclusions, implying that both nation-states and oil companies are subject to the

[49] Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 92.

[50] Updike, 393.

irrationality of the global market, and must struggle in this larger atmosphere of risk. He finds these debates strangely distant from everyday affairs. Against the background of inflation, Carter's voluntaristic calls to conserve energy echo as a new form of austerity. Rather than *undermining* the "economizing actor," however, the low demand elasticity of the high energy economy is actually *driving* individualized forms of market discipline. During the US Papal visit, for instance, Harry frets over the energy requirements that accompany demands for better working conditions:

> [J]ust the [heating] oil for the showroom and offices and garage has doubled since '74… and will double in the next year or two again and when you try to cut it down to where the President says, the men in the garage complain, they have to work with their bare hands… guys under thirty now just will not work without comfort and all the perks, a whole new ethic, soft, socialism, heat tends to rise in a big space like that and hang up there amid the crossbraces, if they built it now they'd put in twenty inches of insulation. If the Pope is so crazy about babies why doesn't *he* try to keep them warm?[51]

In this passage, a class antagonism over heating energy displaces traditional figures of moral and political authority (church and state). Heat, when it becomes an issue, highlights the distinction between those who "work with their bare hands" and those who, like Rabbit, perform the communicative and emotional labor of selling cars. In one of the few passages where "the men in the garage" appear, Rabbit's open hypocrisy is on display. Throughout the novel readers see how much he consciously values "perks" and the "soft ethic" of his comfortable income. Not wanting to share his comfort, he resents the mechanics as well as the yet to be born, understanding them as a material threat to his consumption of resources; he refuses an ethical relation to future generations and toward social reproduction generally. The energy crisis has weakened the normative force of traditional "reproductive futurity," which appears quaintly inefficient,

[51] Updike, 203

certainly not befitting Toyota's "TOTAL ECONOMY" ethos.[52] Absent the promised legislation for developing renewable energy, Carter's calls to action shift the responsibility of the crisis to the atomized consumer-manager, who is encouraged to adopt new strategies of belt-tightening at home and discipline in the work place. The diffusion of management from traditional bureaucratic institutions into the micropolitical sphere marks the transition to what Gilles Deleuze calls "societies of control," as it embeds the discipline of austerity in the atomized workplace.[53] This discipline is colored by a distrust of reproduction, as short-term survival overtakes long-term planning. In Rabbit's case, survival means maintaining his degree of newfound comfort as he religiously reads *Consumer Reports.*

Future Deficits

> I am reminded of how long-term data forecasting the correlation between energy reserves and the demographic curve of the earth's population increasingly came to affect middle- and short-term planning data in politics and economics.
>
> Reinhart Koselleck[54]

[52] Lee Edelman identifies a heteronormative relation to futurity through the figure of the baby and through biological reproduction in general in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke, 2004).

[53] In his "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (1992): 3-7, Deleuze links Michel Foucault's analysis of "disciplinary society" with Fordist institutions—the family, the workplace, the military, the school—against this, he contrasts the forms of flexible and self-regulated control exercised by individuals in post-Fordist and neoliberal societies.

[54] Reinhart Koselleck, "The Unknown Future and the Art of Prognosis," *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002).

Rabbit turns to monetary speculation which becomes a way to both produce wealth and reinvigorate his and Janice's flagging sex life. His seduction into monetary speculation occurs through the same communicative labor that he himself deploys on the floor of the showroom. These exchanges repeat the structure of his sales pitch: an authoritative statement followed by a dubious reference to world events that portends something significant, but that generates a sense that someone else knows something that one does not. It generates a perceived lack of knowledge, or *structural information deficit*, in the subject. The purpose is to instill a sense of uncertainty in the listener who is encouraged to profit in some way by recognizing and acting on this knowledge gap. This is more than a sales tactic. It represents a qualitative change in the discourse of the novel, one that marks its participation in what Cooper describes above as the "speculative reinvention of the future" under neoliberalism. The parallel speech patterns suggest an effort by Updike to represent the diffusion of this logic throughout the scene of the novel. Rabbit falls prey to these appeals when Webb Murkett convinces him to "get into" gold.

> "It's up over sixty per cent in less than a year and I see no reason for it not to appreciate at the same rate as long as the world energy situation holds. The dollar is bound to keep leaking, Harry, until they figure out how to get gasoline cheap out of grain alcohol, which'll put us back in the driver's seat. Grain we've got."[55]

In this passage, oil, metals, and wheat are presented as stable, and it is the dollar—by extension US influence—that is "leaking" value. This echoes a thought Rabbit had earlier: "Money is like water in a leaky bucket: no sooner [stored] there, it begins to drip."[56] Since the dollar has been delinked from the gold standard there is no longer stable referent to "contain" the value of money and no global "supranational currency"

[55] Updike, 157.

[56] Updike, 21.

that could serve to stabilize value. For the characters to produce value, that is to make money, money itself must be called into question. In speculation, what is at stake is not the "fundamental value" of any particular thing, but rather the sheer movement of value across things. Staying "ahead of the curve"—a phrase that takes on new meaning when one considers resource curves—here, means exploiting any perceived lack in knowledge in others' activity and working to take advantage of that difference. We see how this lack is produced when Webb convinces Harry to sell gold for silver.

> "The little man in America has caught the fever and when the little man climbs on the bandwagon the smart money gets off. Silver, now that's another story: the Hunt brothers down in Texas are buying up silver futures at the rate of millions a day, and big boys like that must know something."[57]

In the above passage, the urge to stay ahead of the "little man" is simultaneously a fear of *becoming* the little man and a "fear of falling" out of the middle class.[58] "Many individual investors," observes Robert Shiller, "think that institutional investors dominate the market and that these 'smart money' investors have sophisticated models to understand prices, superior knowledge."[59] The Hunt brothers represent the power that comes with knowledge of the market and the behavior of its individual agents. "Financialization," Marazzi writes, "depends on *mimetic rationality*, a kind of herd behavior based on the information deficit of individual investors."[60] Citing the studies of

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[57] Updike, 329.

[58] Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

[59] Robert Shiller quoted in Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language: From the New Economy to the War Economy*, Trans. Gregory Conti (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), 22.

[60] Marazzi, *Capital and Language*, 21.

behavioral finance theorists, he finds that these *structural information deficits* underwrite this form of imitative behavior. Individual investors submit to what they believe to be "*nature itself"* in the form of market forces. Really, they are submitting to something of their own creation, while their herd-like behavior becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rabbit may believe he is out-smarting the "little man" but in actuality he is playing into the Hunt brothers' attempt to corner the market on silver.

Updike was almost certainly aware of this historical irony. The Hunt brothers were not fictional, and their 1979 attempts to corner the silver and silver futures market led to the "Silver Thursday" collapse (and subsequent bailout) in March of 1980. The narrative reference appears in December of 1979, in the five month bubble when silver went from nineteen dollars an ounce to a peak of over fifty dollars an ounce in January. Across the country people were "selling family heirlooms and other silver articles" to cash in on the high prices.[61] After new rules were passed, however, prices dropped back to ten dollars an ounce within twenty four hours, leaving the Hunt brothers owing over a billion dollars. They were bailed out by other banks, with the "blessing" of Paul Volcker, in part by exchanging their offshore oil rights in the Beaufort Sea, north of Alaska.[62] Updike plays on the exuberance surrounding the Hunt brothers' silver bubble with full historical knowledge of the collapse they will have caused.

The "irrational exuberance" characteristic of the Reagan era has its economic corollary in what Marazzi calls *momentum financing*. Prices rise and fall on the basis of

[61] Jerry W. Markham, *A Financial History of the United States, Volume III: From the Age of Derivatives into the New Millennium (1970-2001),* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 61-64; see also, Leo Panitch and Sam Gindin, *The Making of Global Capitalism: The Political Economy of American Empire* (New York: Verso, 2013), 396-7.

[62] Markham, 64.

what investors think other investors are thinking. Reflexivity, as Jodi Dean argues, is built into neoliberal exchange itself; it presumes a "critical" subject.[63] Instead of acting in response to information, economic actors respond on the basis of how they expect others to respond. The rational kernel of speculative behavior, in Marazzi's estimation, comes from the *self-referential* nature of value in the post-Fordist reality: money, as the value-form, is no longer founded on gold or other material referent, but rather in the circulation of opinion and information. He argues that "the *disassociation* between economic value and exchange value is symmetrical to the disassociation between individual belief and collective belief."[64] In other words, as each individual believes they are acting against the wave of the collective, they are collectively individuated as competing subjects. In the same way, the discourse in the Toyota showroom is parasitic on the national discourse in that it relies on an imagined collectivity in order to encourage individuals to act in their perceived economic self-interests. "The modalities of communication of what the 'others' consider a good," Marazzi continues, "count more than what is communicated."

This mode of communication is on display at the metal store, *Fiscal Alternatives*, when the clerk (who is no specialist on international affairs) persuades Rabbit to make a risky trade from gold to silver. "Precious metals aren't a bubble," she tells him, "Precious metals are the ultimate security. I myself think what's brought the Arab money into gold was not so much Iran as the occupation of the Great Mosque. When the Saudis are in trouble, then it's *really* a new ballgame."[65] Here, the Saudis occupy the position of the

[63] Jodi Dean, "Complexity as Capture: Neoliberalism and the Loop of Drive," *New Formations* 80-81 (2013): 138-154, 141.

[64] Marazzi, *Capital and Language*, 23; 26.

[65] Updike, 332.

Hunt brothers as an additional (perhaps meaningless) piece of information that upsets the listener's previously held social interpretations. Each new piece of information could signal that the game has changed and one does not want to be in a position of playing by an obsolete set of rules and assumptions. Metals are again posited as a secure foundation beneath and beyond the flexible constructions of contemporary economic and cultural life. For Rabbit, it becomes a contradictory response to the country's "bad news."

While lamenting US decline, his speculative efforts become a private retreat from identification with the country and with the national future that he can no longer imagine. These exchanges confirm the existence of an economy of knowledge, but it is not a "knowledge economy" in the way that Daniel Bell and others intended. From Rabbit's sales pitch to his seduction into monetary speculation, each of these exchanges instrumentalize communication to generate a sense of uncertainty which becomes the affective condition of possibility for economic activity—a form of hedging against a future over which one has no claim except as a competitive individual in a naturalized market. Speculation, based as it is in vision, orients the viewer towards the world as a spectator. The world becomes reified as something against which one competes through submitting to larger forces rather than something that one participates in creating. Whereas this response reinforces a split between subjective viewer and objective conditions, Updike's realism portrays Rabbit as all-too-much a part of the scene he surveys.

By moving their money out of savings and into speculative markets, Rabbit does what many households were doing at the time. Critics like Randy Martin and Max

Haiven have referred to this as "the financialization of daily life."[66] For Marazzi, this began with "the diversion of savings from household economies to stocks and securities [which was] part of the trend shifting the financing of the economy from the banking sector to the securities sector."[67] After making quick trades on gold and silver, Harry and Janice use the money to put a down payment on a house. This becomes their "lottery ticket," to recall Ross' description, insofar as inflation continues. Re-establishing the household on this new basis becomes an occasion for Updike to eroticize this process. Harry and Janice rejuvenate their flagging and "post-productive" sex life through these speculative endeavors, allegorizing Cooper's observation that the "speculative reinvention of the future" contained within it an "ambition to overcome" material limits associated with Fordist industrial production and familial reproduction.[68] The futural imagination is no longer located in the bodily labor of making babies—reproducing the family unit—nor is it in the national future. Rather than saving and investing with a belief in a stable and growing US economy, the Angstroms' financial future is wagered against stability. The production unit of the family has exploded beyond its traditional coordinates.

The first sex scene in which they are mutually aroused occurs when Harry brings home the gold Kruggerands. He presents them to her as "a dead man reborn." With gold as a guarantor of value against dollar depreciation, he again has a future; "No coffin dark

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[66] Randy Martin, *The Financialization of Daily Life* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2002); Max Haiven, *Cultures of Financialization: Fictitious Capital in Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (New York: Palgrave, 2014).

[67] Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language,* 21.

[68] Cooper, 11.

greets his open eyes," as it will with his granddaughter, "just his wife's out-of-focus face." "The beauty of gold is, it loves bad news," he tells her; "as the dollar sinks, gold goes up. All the Arabs are turning their dollars into gold." Rabbit combines the image of alchemy—turning things into gold—with a hint of lavish orientalism. Their bodies are described in ugly and comical terms. Janice's body is breakable, old, fragile, while his body is "massive and bearing down." The sheer weight of their bodies is foregrounded—"the depressions their interlocked weights make in the mattress"—against the *bodiless* promise of value contained (though not exhausted by) the gold coins, which move about the bed. "A kind of interest compounds," as they command each other not to orgasm; their activity is sustained for as long as Rabbit is able to think about "the recent hike in the factory base price of Corollas."[69]

It is incorrect to say that the financial economy is "non-productive" or "fictitious." It is a very real part of the economy; it produces value, enables accumulation, and has very tangible social and political effects. For instance, the profits from gold and silver trading allow Harry and Janice to put a down payment on a house. They wager that increased inflation will eventually turn them a profit in the housing market. This type of speculation and risk—the high of profiting off of generalized misfortune—is also eroticized:

> "That's the beauty of inflation," he says seductively to Janice. "The more you owe, the better you do… You pay off in shrunken dollars, and the interest Uncle Sam picks up as an income tax deduction. Even after buying the Krugerrands and paying the September taxes we have too much money in the bank, money in the bank is for dummies now. Sock it into the down payment for a house, we'd be letting the bank worry about the dollar going down and have the house

[69] Updike, 195.

> appreciating ten, twenty per cent a year at the same time." Her cunt is moistening, its lips growing loose.[70]

This process is commonly referred to as leveraging. Rabbit is willing to risk his down payment on a house against the chances that inflation will continue, which will cause the dollar value of the house to increase, and that the bank will assume the risk of loaning money at fixed interest rates against the unstable value of the dollar. Like the gold and silver that increase in value (against the dollar's value) when there is "bad news," and like his Toyota dealership that profits from US energy instability, Rabbit finds a way to prolong his richness through speculative endeavors. Eroticizing this process of leveraging gives a new meaning to the so-called "post-productive" economy, where value is generated as people exploit information deficits and "post-material" conceptions of value. This subjective response is very much a historical part of the "real" economy. To the extent that the traditional novel has often posed "biographical solutions to systemic contradictions," through its realism, *Rabbit is Rich* demonstrates that this mimesis can hold up for critique the kind of imitative behavior which naturalizes the neoliberal economy.

National Narratives

The intended effect of Carter's speeches was to reconfigure US history around a collective project. His vision was framed by the energy project—developing renewable sources and retrofitting infrastructure—but it also contained a cultural project. The cooperation and discipline (i.e. solidarity) this would require, he believed, would restore the traditional values that had been dissolved in consumer capitalism. He was in close

[70] Updike, 320.

contact with two social theorists—Daniel Bell and Christopher Lasch—with whom he had dinner immediately before penning his "Energy and National Goals" speech. Whereas Lasch diagnosed American culture as a "narcissistic" personality structure, Bell sought to locate current events within what he called "the cultural contradictions of capitalism."[71] In Bell's analysis, 20th century capitalism produces a contradictory culture that demands discipline in the workplace and wildness in the market, which has led to an individualistic cultural modernism that undermines the values associated with public responsibility. The rebelliousness of the late 60s counterculture, in his estimation, was itself an expression of capitalist desire. Both thinkers had been leftists who moved to the center and now believed the country's social problems (and solutions) were to be found in culture rather than political economy.

Carter's speeches appear in the free indirect speech of the characters. The culturalist sentiments of Bell and Lasch manifest themselves in Angstrom's attitudes toward the younger generation and toward his marriage with Janice, which he describes as "a real crisis of confidence."[72] Carter sought to give the United States a historical purpose, to redefine time through a national narrative, and to posit a horizon of the energy crisis as, in Roitman's phrasing, "a temporality on which one can act."[73] It would be through collective action that historical progress would be re-established. "On the

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[71] Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York: Basic, 1996); Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in the Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979); for a full account of the dinner (which included Jesse Jackson and Bill Moyers) see Daniel Horowitz, *The Anxieties of Affluence: Critiques of American Consumer Culture, 1939-1979* (Boston: University of Massachusetts, 2005), 203-244.

[72] Updike, 43.

[73] Roitman, 8.

battlefield of energy," Carter asserts, "we can win for our Nation a new confidence, and we can seize control again of our common destiny."[74] Rabbit has no such battlefield to restore his confidence; he has no leverage over the political circumstances that dictate the price of oil, he can only opportunistically profit off of fluctuations. As a character, the contradictions he embodies can only be resolved at a higher level. By conflating technology with history—the urgent need to master the instruments of our mastery—Carter's appeal announces a new dialectic of modernity itself.

Rabbit is Rich challenges similar postwar narratives. The narrative of white baby boomers is challenged, for instance, during an exchange between Rabbit and Webb Murkett when Webb suggests that that the younger generation has "seen the world go crazy since they were age two, from JFK's assassination right through Vietnam to the oil mess now." The "oil mess" is serially included into a list of defining historical blunders. Rabbit responds with a grunt and remembers his friend and co-worker, Skeeter, an African American character who loomed large in *Rabbit Redux*, who had been recently killed by police in Philadelphia and whose experience confirmed that the world had never been a "pleasant place."[75] This exchange, although subtle, suggests that national narratives are by no means homogenous; they are often based on specific generational, racial, and class experiences, as well as circulated through particular mediums. An exchange like this is one way that Updike calls attention to the particularity of Rabbit's perspective as a middle-class, middle-aged, white, middle-American, a perspective we find challenged through the form of the novel itself; constitutively polyphonic, it is open

[74] Jimmy Carter, "Energy and National Goals," *Jimmy Carter and the Energy Crisis of the 1970s,* Ed. Daniel Horowitz (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2005), 108-119, 115.

[75] Updike, 158.

to other perspectives despite the main character's narcissism. Although Carter speaks through the medium of television his speech contains a heteroglossic acknowledgement of differential national history as he recollected comments he received while on a speaking tour.

Carter narratively organizes these voices, with their distinct concerns, around the common concern of energy. A "young Chicano" tells him: "Some of us have suffered from recession all our lives. Some people have wasted energy, but others haven't had anything to waste." "A black woman who happens to be the mayor of a small Mississippi town" draws attention to local and embodied aspects of energy, reminding the President that "'you can't sell anything on Wall Street unless someone digs it up somewhere else first.'" Others make declarative informational statements: "'We can't go on consuming 40 percent more energy than we produce. When we import oil we are also importing inflation plus unemployment;'" "We've got to use what we have. The Middle East has only 5 percent of the world's energy, but the United States has 24 percent." Carter quotes someone who tells him that America's "neck is stretched over the fence and OPEC has a knife," before quoting someone who references Carter's earlier speech "the moral equivalent of war:" "When we enter the moral equivalent of war, Mr. President, don't issue us BB guns." This range of voices, however constructed it may be, contains the range of local, particular reactions to the energy crisis, and to the efforts at creating a national narrative out of a collective project that promised to solve social antagonisms at the heart of American life. Using the word "future" nine times in the 1979 speech alone, Carter reminds the viewing public that "we've always had a faith that the days of our

children would be better than our own."[76] Nothing could be further from the lack of generational faith the energy crisis generates at the dealership.

The official energy narrative is simultaneously accepted, challenged, and mocked, in the exchanges at the Toyota dealership. First, in the form of jokes; "you can't beat Christopher Columbus for mileage," Rabbit says, "look how far he got on three galleons." The "cheerful plane of dwindling energy" becomes a frame for reinterpreting prior narratives of North American and US history. Harry continues, recapitulating Carter's history lesson of his 1977 speech as he looks back, first on wood and then coal, marking the centuries "like a football field." Through the free indirect discourse of the narration, Updike gives narrative form to the process by which people become conscious of petromodernity. However, the topic, almost as soon as it is raised, feels exhausted to him. Discussions of energy, we are told, "in private conversation and even on the television where they're paid to talk it up, run dry, exhaust themselves, as if everything's been said in this hemisphere."[77] For Rabbit, both the form of energy and the narrative of its crisis are geographically specific, and temporally worn out. A different hemispheric perspective is what is missing from his local conversations.

Yet Angstrom's anxieties are not assuaged by US-Middle East relations. Against the backdrop of the Iranian Revolution and the taking of American hostages, Rabbit feels a strange affinity with the Ayatollah Khomeini. He sees in him the mirror of Carter, both of them are "trapped by a pack of kids who need a shave and don't know shit;" he muses that "if you could get the idiotic kids out of the world it might settle down to being a

[76] Carter, 110-111.

[77] Updike, 9.

sensible place."[78] This one-way solidarity is better understood as a displacement of his own frustrations, as he attempts to dampen the younger generation's utopian imaginations. Harry's attitude eventually boils over as he mocks protesting students on television: "'Energy is people,' they sing. 'People are en-er-gy!' Who needs Khomeini and his oil? Who needs Afghanistan? Fuck the Russkis. Fuck the Japs, for that matter. We'll go it alone, from sea to shining sea."[79] This sarcasm is directed at those who do not appreciate the interconnectedness of global oil markets and the transnational economy, which includes his Toyota dealership. He takes the younger generation's easy dream of national and individual sovereignty as a naïve insult to those of the older generation who must negotiate a world of fraught relationships, contradictions, and responsibilities. When Angstrom hears about energy he thinks of it in precisely the terms Amitav Ghosh describes the way Americans "smell" oil: "unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, [and] economic uncertainty."[80] In his mockery, Rabbit anticipates and criticizes, thirty years in advance, current rhetoric surrounding so-called "energy independence."

The "energy is people" attitude is echoed by Melanie who expresses a representative viewpoint of the younger generation. "I believe the things we're running out of we can learn to do without" she says. "I don't need electric carving knives and all that. I'm more upset about the snail darters and the whales than about iron ore and oil…

[78] Updike, 321.

[79] Updike, 422

[80] Amitav Ghosh, "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel." *The New Republic*. 2 March, 1992.

as long as there are growing things, there's still a world with endless possibilities."[81] Melanie's vitalism reframes the industrial economy so that priority is given to its ecological underpinnings, but in doing so she writes off the immense social disruptions that would accompany a sharp decline in readily available petroleum. Like Rabbit, she is not optimistic about the future of industrial economies and nation states, but unlike him, she anticipates a contingent world of vibrant freedoms in place of the confining world that Rabbit has throughout his life tried to escape. Presenting no genuine alternative and no historical subject that might bring it about, Melanie can only speculate about a world of negative freedoms, a world in which "growing things," much like commodities, will offer themselves seemingly of their own volition and with every appearance of freedom. When his granddaughter is presented to him in the novel's final paragraph, Rabbit sees in her the innocent and terrible future whose arrival puts the "nails in his coffin."[82]

Rather than locating his future in and through the baby, the baby becomes, for Rabbit, a positive sign for the *absence* of a future. If indeed, "energy is people," it is an energy future that does not include him. Just as much as he desires "the new" in the form of new products and appetites, Rabbit's anxieties over social reproduction represent a fear of the authentically new. The arrival of the baby is the narrative culmination of Rabbit's earlier showroom observation that "the world keeps ending but new people too dumb to know it keep showing up as if the fun's just started." His comment is as much an observation on modernity itself which, as Peter Osborne observes, is "everywhere haunted by the idea of decline" because of its "perpetual desire to transcend the

[81] Updike, 87.

[82] Updike, 423.

present."[83] This goes double for petromodernity, in that the awareness of temporal and biophysical limits to our form of life coincides with the deindustrialization and financialization of the American landscape after Fordism. Dominic Fox, we might recall, observes that the "end of oil" narrative merely announces that another world is inevitable, whether or not we believe it is possible, and that it leaves us with a "terminally diagnosed" present. Rabbit, as the fictional embodiment of national sentiment, recognizes the finitude of the world oil has produced—and even recognizes himself as part of that world—yet he is fearful of a genuine alternative. Within the horizon of the present, his own death is much easier for him to accept than Carter's promise of a different national future through a project of eco-modernization.

Conclusion

> He loves Nature, though he can name almost nothing in it. Are those pines, or spruces, or firs? He loves money, though he doesn't understand how it flows to him, or how it leaks away.
>
> *Rabbit is Rich*[84]

Not long after the publication of *Rabbit is Rich*, Updike released a collection of poetry on nature and natural processes titled *Facing Nature.* One of the poems, "Energy: A Villanelle," was first published in 1981 and speaks to the antagonisms of *Rabbit is Rich.*[85] Closely associated with the pastoral genre, the villanelle's fixed patterns and

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[83] Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Verso, 1995), 19.

[84] Updke, 124.

[85] John Updike, "Energy: A Villanelle," *Facing Nature* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 102. This poem originally appeared in 1981, alongside a Chinese translation, *Modern Poetry: East and West* (Hong Kong: Shih Feng Association, 1981).

refrains evoke rustic folk songs and the timeless reproduction of nature. Here, Updike contrasts the natural cycles of solar energy in wood fires with the linear, inflationary economy of petroleum energy. By the end of the poem, the linear accumulation of the petrocultural economy appears as an apocalyptic convergence with the mythic repetition of the pastoral solar/wood economy.

The juxtaposition of solar fire in the refrain—"the logs give back, in burning, solar fire"—with the alternate refrain—"nothing is lost but, still, the cost grows higher"—draws out the contradictions between energy as it exists materially and energy as it exists represented and mediated through the economy. Each stanza addresses a different aspect of contemporary energy and attempts to draw out its contradictions. The "solar fire" is released by the most primordial form of human energy use—fire—as the logs give off the solar energy "processed" by the green leaves of the tree's branches. This is followed by the prospect of lunar powered wave energy: "The ocean's tons of tide, to turn, require / no more than time and moon." These examples are contrasted with "the oil rigs in Bahrain" that "imply a buyer" and a "Good Gulf" that "gives it faster; every tire." The cost of this energy continues to grow higher even though the sun and the moon continue to serve as a practically inexhaustible source for plant and animal life. The final stanza evokes a dark future that disrupts the perpetual energy cycle. "So guzzle gas," the poem contemptuously invites the reader, "the leaden night draws nigher / when cinders mark where stood the blazing sun." The sun, as a transcendent source of energy, has been blacked out and replaced by earthly cinders and "microörganisms," "quite a few" of which "became petroleum."

The way that energy becomes naturalized gets in the way of understanding how our lives are bound up with it. The leap from its historical and material specificity to cosmic ontology renders it unhelpfully metaphysical. Lacan, for instance, exposes the idealist formulations in the way people *talk* about energy while making a larger point about the circulation of libidinal desire in *Seminar IV*:

> To say that the energy was in some way already there in a virtual state in the current of the river is properly speaking to say something that has no meaning, for the energy begins to be of interest to us in this instance only beginning with the moment in which it is accumulated, and it is accumulated only beginning with the moment when machines are put to work in a certain way.[86]

The image of machines being "put to work in a certain way" denaturalizes discourses of energy. When people talk about an energy crisis, they are not only referring to the technical and social infrastructures of accumulation, organization, and distribution, they are often implicitly referring to the historical imaginaries predicated on those machines—machines that are "put to work" in a historically specific way. We imagine stores of energy existing in the universe because machines have been organized to capture and make use of specific processes. Alongside these energy imaginaries exist the temporalities, expectations, and anticipations associated with the "real abstractions" of the cultural economy. Sunlight and waves may be free, but the infrastructural concentrations of knowledge (labor) necessary to transform and organize sunlight from virtual to actual "energy" are mediated by historical economies. An authentic materialism recognizes this abstract dimension of the real, which literature can help in providing.

The history of the oil industry is replete with examples of how companies had to create a material need and cultural desire for petroleum. Technologies had to be invented

[86] Quoted in Teresa Brennan, *History After Lacan* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 48.

and socially disseminated so as to create a market for their product.[87] The social character of American petroculture was organized by Fordist investments in social reproduction—fixed capital in the forms of factories, schools, and hospitals—as well as the expanding satisfaction of needs via consumerism. The energy crisis called the material basis of this arrangement into question. Given the tremendous energy required to transform the presently existing material infrastructures in the United States, let alone other societies, we find ourselves with Doctorow, wondering how best to expend our energies so that we at least die "on a parabolic curve." Like the river in Lacan's example, energy in the abstract "meaningless" sense of the term is not an issue, but putting machines to work in a new way *is*. The prefix on petromodernity serves to give the material energies organized by industrial capitalism a new visibility, opening the possibility of a future transformation that includes both ecological modernization and the new rationalities that will have overcome neoliberal speculation.

"It may be," Szeman writes, "that the disaster of oil is already prefigured in the temporal shift of the capitalist economy that goes by the name neoliberalism." This temporal shift is not just the historical effect of large-scale economic restructuring, but "inward" as well: "subjectivity announces… a temporal recalibration away from the future to the present."[88] This temporal recalibration is the effect of machines being put to work in a way that reorganizes desire according to the rhythm and moods of neoliberalism. It represents the "overcoming" of the temporalities associated with

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[87] Daniel Yergin, "The New Century," *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Touchstone, 1992), 78-95.

[88] Imre Szeman, "System Failure: Oil, Futurity, and the Anticipation of Disaster," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.4 (2007): 805-823, 817.

industrial production in the wake of Fordism precisely by turning its back toward the future. In the move from the objective to the subjective, Szeman's analysis confirms what Bernard Stiegler argues, namely that neoliberal speculation has replaced Fordist investment and "structurally prevents the reconstitution of a long-term horizon."[89]

Narrative arts, as LeMenager suggests, can help reconstitute such long-term horizons in the historical and environmental imagination. In this sense, literatures themselves can become machines which produce new virtualities capable of being harnessed and put to work organizing yet more machines. However, efforts at implementing large-scale projects of energy reform in the political sphere, even modest ones like Carter's, find themselves overdetermined and undermined by the speculative temporality of neoliberalism. The practical impotence of speculation can produce a symptom homologous with the rejuvenated sex life of Harry and Janice Angstrom, in which deferral itself becomes the object of desire. Here, even criticism is implicated. At its best, literary and cultural theory is the first to acknowledge its complicity with the world it critiques, and yet, as Jeffrey T. Nealon argues, much criticism during this period has also participated in the production of speculative moods and outlooks.

> As postmodernism reoriented the disciplines of economics, art, or architecture around speculation, and not knowing (more specifically, about not-knowing what really counts as value, art, or good design), so too has "theory" remade literary and cultural studies as that thing dedicated to the open-endedness of interpretation, undecidability, and living primarily through the wages or wagers of futurity.[90]

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[89] Bernard Stiegler, *For A New Critique of Political Economy,* Trans. Daniel Ross (London: Polity, 2010), 5.

[90] Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Post-Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Just in Time Capitalism* (Durham, Duke, 2013), 173.

In Nealon's estimation, postmodernism has been transformed from a critical into a positive project. Just as *not knowing* and uncertainty become the motivating affects in economic behavior, theory now resembles Marazzi's "structural information deficits" in its continuous deferral. Instead of a future, we are left with futurity, the vague feeling of openness and contingency that substitutes *not knowing* for a revolutionary potential. What it actually signifies is a refusal to make claims on the future, associating these claims with a totalitarian closure of possibility—as if such a total closure has ever been historically possible. More often than not, this attitude affirms a position of virtuous powerlessness as if it were a choice. Not unlike Rabbit Angstrom, the cultural left often sustains its energies through sublime moments at the limits of knowledge, deriving its *jouissance* in an oscillation between euphoric affirmation and spectatorial melancholy.

A recent example of this would be *Speculate This!*, an Occupy-inspired manifesto written by the "Uncertain Commons" collective and published by Duke University Press.[91] Its anonymous authors argue that speculation is the contemporary *Zeitgeist* as it has come to define a range of social discourses, from economics to the sciences and policy think tanks. They write that speculation "project[s] into and stake[s] claims on the future;" "whether the lasso thrown across time is thought or money, speculation always constitutes an attempt to draw the future fully into the present." They claim that the speculative relation to the future has become instrumental in colonizing both the temporal imagination and material relations for capital. In their words, speculation is "a modern apparatus for erasing the future by realizing it as eternal present." The manifesto's authors refer to this as *firmative speculation*, in that it solidifies the range of future

[91] Uncertain Commons, *Speculate This!* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

possibilities as well as the corporate *firms* that benefit. Against this, they endorse an *affirmational speculation*, which seeks to "multiply uncertainties" as a way of exploding what the discourses of "risk" try to bracket or contain. "To speculate affirmatively," they write, "is to produce futures while refusing the foreclosure of potentialities, to hold on to the spectrum of possibilities while remaining open to multiple futures whose context of actualization can never be fully anticipated."

As we have seen in Updike's portrayal of Rabbit's (and others') economic and emotional strategies, this anticipation of multiple possible futures already describes the conscious activity of individuals living in the chronic contingency of post-Fordism. At times it is hard to see how Uncertain Commons' response to the financial crisis of neoliberalism differs from the horizontal and "disruptive" management philosophies that administrate its techno-cultural industries. Affirmational speculation "is a consistently modifying practice that seeks to act in shifting, multiscalar worlds. It mandates intuition, creativity, and play." "In this sense," they continue, "affirmative speculation affords modes of living that creatively engage *uncertainty*." While affirmational speculation is a necessity for artistic and literary practice, one might ask if this radicalism is a privilege reserved only for those who can afford to creatively engage uncertainty, or alternately, if it is the abject freedom of those with nothing to lose. In the following chapter, I address this tension in the science fiction of the 1990s, exemplified by Michael Crichton and Octavia Butler.

CHAPTER IV

"LIFE FINDS A WAY:" SCIENCE FICTION'S DEREGULATORY FANTASIES

> Depending on which aspect happens to be paramount at the time, ideology stresses plan or chance, technology or life, civilization or nature. As employees people are reminded of the rational organization and must fit into it as common sense requires. As customers they are regaled, whether on the screen or in the press, with human interest stories demonstrating freedom of choice and the charm of not belonging to the system. In both cases they remain objects.
>
> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno[1]

> [W]hen we look a bit more closely, we may of course hear it as a kind of more or less Rousseauesque return to nature… a "*Vitalpolitik*," a politics of life. But what is this *Vitalpolitik*… of which this is an expression? Actually, as you can see, it is not a matter of constructing a social fabric in which the individual would be in direct contact with nature, but of constructing a social fabric in which precisely the basic units would have the form of the enterprise…
>
> Michel Foucault[2]

> Empire does not confront us like a subject, facing us, but like an *environment* that is hostile to us.
>
> Tiqqun[3]

It is not often that the Union of Concerned Scientists issues a response to a novel.[4] Michael Crichton's *State of Fear* (2004) became infamous not only for its sub-par dialogue, but for the way it utilized the rhetoric of complexity to obfuscate the consensus

[1] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 118.

[2] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-9*, Trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2008), 148.

[3] Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*, trans. Alexander Galloway and Jason Smith (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 171.

[4] http://www.ucsusa.org/global_warming/solutions/fight-misinformation/crichton-thriller-state-of.html#.VGLi5vnF_Ss

of climate scientists across the globe.[5] Crichton's thesis is that the world is too complex, the effects are too distributed and the causes to diffuse, for us to ever be fully comfortable acting with our limited knowledge. Given that the world always exceeds our knowledge of it, Crichton believes we can never hope to effectively regulate human activity. Moreover, our efforts at regulation and intervention in the world (with the aim of producing desired results) will only intensify the unpredictability of the world's chaotic systems. Crichton's thesis combines a soft anti-humanism with new age titillations; leaping from cosmic chaos to sublunary politics, he merges a romantic catastrophist worldview with a non-interventionist "wisdom" that passes for environmental thinking by virtue of its reduction and de-centering of human intentionality. We find this argument at work in his most famous novel, *Jurassic Park* (1990), which attempts to reconcile his skepticism of regulation against the unchecked boom of the biotechnology industries.[6]

In many respects, Crichton's thought aligns with the neoliberal philosopher Friedrich Hayek, who in the late eighties outlined what might now be called a neoliberal philosophy of Nature in the first volume of his collected lectures: *The Fatal Conceit.*[7] For Hayek too, complexity is the order of the world, and the only possible regulatory mechanism for such a world is the market. Hayek argued that only price signals and free market exchange are able to give us knowledge of the world as it evolves in all its human and nonhuman complexity, precisely because capitalism evolved to do just this. Efforts at industrial and economic regulation, social justice, and redistribution, in this view, are

[5] Michael Crichton, *State of Fear* (New York: Harper, 2009).

[6] Michael Crichton, *Jurassic Park* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1990).

[7] F.A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988).

attempts at "social engineering" that are doomed to fail because, as a form of control, they stand against the evolutionary emergence of markets in human societies. Rather than understanding markets as "embedded" in societies, as Karl Polanyi argued, Hayek sees societies embedded within markets.[8] This move of the market—and the category of "the economy" itself—from the inside to the exteriority, i.e. nature, is the hallmark of most forms of neoliberal thought. What emerges out of Crichton's chaos and complexity narrative is an anti-regulatory attitude that emphasizes a vague scientific and technological humility in the wake of spectacular violence. Similarly, environmental discourses that speak the language of complexity and humility contribute to the construction of the neoliberal consensus.

Octavia Butler is another science fiction writer who came to prominence in the late eighties and nineties. Since her death in 2006, Butler's award-winning novels have become canonical examples of the genre's ability to speak to issues of race, gender, and social inequality through a range of imaginative biological and ecological conceits. In her 1993 novel, *Parable of the Sower*, Butler too turns chaos into cosmology, naturalizing the decaying and violent social order that surrounds her characters. Her invention of a poetic religious text, "Earthseed," allows the small survivalist group surrounding the narrator to start a commune and negotiate a world that seems to have lost its metaphysical moorings. As I'll argue in this chapter, this conceptualization of "God as Change" naturalizes the chaotic social order of the characters; however, the narrator's insistence that our task is to "shape God" is an invitation to *intervene* in the chaos and shape it into a humane, environmentally sound order. Butler's fiction, like Crichton's, naturalizes the

[8] Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of our Time, 2nd Edition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

deregulatory landscape (i.e. reifying "community" against other members of society who are flattened into an obstacle that is to be overcome). However, where Crichton's fiction takes aim at—or is at best ambiguous toward—state and public intervention that would impose environmental regulations on business and technology, Butler depicts the future trajectory of the unregulated capitalism of the nineties.

This chapter examines the complicities of science fiction's "deregulatory" fantasies within the cultural politics of neoliberalism. Reading Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* alongside and against Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels, I argue that each writer takes failed state regulation as the basis of their narratives; each deploys naturalistic metaphors and allegorical images of Nature that attribute cosmic meaning to the political-ecological breakdowns that surround them. In doing so, each author evokes a vitalistic chaos only to recuperate it for different ends. Each makes an appeal to vitalism as a response to an unpredictable situation. However, even if this vitalism asserts a will to "life" against its biopolitical organization in the market, it is just as easily appeal to a will to "life" as competition in the naturalized market. In the discourses of neoliberalism, markets themselves are often described as living entities which explode the boundaries of public and state regulation.

Where Horkheimer and Adorno argued that Fordist capitalism appeals equally to civilization (control) and nature (wildness) depending on whether one is in the workplace or the marketplace, Foucault identified the merging of life and economy as a *vitalpolitik* under neoliberalism, and the rise of an "entrepreneurial subject" which views the self as a biopolitical enterprise in the naturalized market. Central to these concerns is the category of control, and its romantic, individualist refusal in favor of a naturalistic image of self-

organization. “By capturing the ideals of individual freedom and turning them against the interventionist and regulatory practices of the state,” David Harvey argues, “capitalist class interests could hope to protect and even restore their position.”[9] This deregulatory narrative is the ideological terrain—both left and right—on which the “construction of consent” under neoliberalism is accomplished. Crichton and Butler are responding to the uneven combinations of techno-social pessimism of the nineties. Rather than reading speculative fiction as “possible worlds,” I argue that it remains the best genre for *critical* reading; in other words, it is the genre that most readily displays the contradictory fantasies which animate the political imaginary of a given moment. In light of this, we may wish to temper the recent investment in speculative fiction as a genre, and consider the social implications for interpretive theories.

“Most literary theories,” writes Terry Eagleton, “‘foreground’ a particular literary genre, and derive their general pronouncements from this.”[10] The genre of ecocritical theory in recent years has been undoubtedly science fiction. It lends itself to imagining what it may be like to live through the environmental projections of scientists. For better or worse, science or speculative fiction is becoming the dominant literary form of our era of environmental and political crises. In 1971, the yearly years of post-Fordism, J.G. Ballard declared that “everything is becoming science fiction,” and that more conventional narrative forms, notably the social realism of “Saul Bellow and John Updike,” is no better than the worst science fiction. “The social novel is reaching fewer

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[9] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 42.

[10] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1996), 44.

and fewer readers," he claims, "for the clear reason that social relationships are no longer as important as the individual's relationship with the technological landscape of the late twentieth century." Ballard argues that "the reading of science fiction should be compulsory."[11] Just why something so inevitable should also be made compulsory is inexplicable. More to the point, however, is the dubious distinction Ballard draws between the "technological landscape" and "social relations." If there is any truth to the description of this period as "post-industrial" it rests the "social character" of the new technologies of communication, affect, information, and infrastructure. It is the industrialization of the social, even the biosocial. The technological landscape is the reification of social relations. The extent to which these technologies intervene at the level of biology and genetics rewrites bodily and ecological nature as a social relation subsumed into the reproductive cycles of capital.

Ballard's recognition that "social relationships are no longer as important as the individual's relationship with the technological landscape" is both a description and a prescription for his favored genre of literature. If this is taken as the foregrounded genre of literary ecocriticism, the consequence would be to jettison the analysis of social relations and historical conjunctures through which technological organizations develop and spread. It would be to mistake particular organizations of production for a transhistorical "spirit" of technology, as Heidegger did, which often makes for an equally metaphysical approach to politics. The additional effect of not addressing the social relations which technological arrangements reproduce is a *flattening* of the human social world and nonhuman nature which reduces both to a generalized instrumentalism in the

[11] J.G. Ballard, "Fictions of Every Kind," *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, Eds. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2014), 235-240, 237.

practice of theory. In "Toward a Phenomenology of Opportunism," Massimo De Carolis argues that,

> One of the most incisive effects of recent technological development has been to subvert this distinction between community and environment—first by rendering ever weaker the ties of the community, then by colonizing the environment in an ever more massive way, and finally by generating theoretical and practical paradigms capable of being applied indiscriminately to social reality no less than to the environment, that is, to nature.[12]

In the Introduction chapter, I attributed this flattening to the emergence of a professional-managerial class aesthetic which supplements the naturalistic turn to evolutionary-biological forms of neoliberal economics, and one that *excises* the class antagonism from production chains of human and nonhuman actors (e.g. ANT). While the latter holds the possibility of an environmental justice *logistics* which makes visible the nonhuman actants that compose assemblages of oppression and exploitation, unless this empiricist approach is situated within a historical context it risks becoming another "post-political" management discourse that obscures the role of states and multinational corporations in structuring social and environmental, which is also to say technological, relations on a global scale. For De Carolis, the concept of the *umwelt* signals a new experience: the naturalization of post-Fordist technology and the biopolitical logic of contemporary capitalism which dominates humans and nature alike.

In *The Death of the Posthuman*, Claire Colebrook addresses this conflation of biology, economy, and governmentality, in the contemporary ideology of life. "When cultural production turns directly (as it does occasionally) to the problem of life," she writes; "it is precisely at that point that the question of life refuses to be asked." It is

[12] Massimo De Carolis, "Toward a Phenomenology of Opportunism," *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, Eds. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minnesota: University of Minneapolis, 1996), 37-52, 46.

a "question of what we accept and do not accept, what we can consider or question and what remains beyond question."[13] What form of life is implicated in *Jurassic Park*'s singular phrase, "Life finds a way?" What form of life is being affirmed and what question about what is acceptable or unacceptable is being refused? Colebrook identifies a false antihumanism at work in many contemporary philosophies. "In place of man as a body with the additional capacity for reason, one distributes reason or thinking throughout life," she writes. The projection of one's humanism onto all biological and ecological life as a "mindful, creative, [and] self-organizing" intelligence becomes a neo-Darwinian, "just so" story.[14] This same neo-Darwinian antihumanism is taken up by Hayek, who appeals to "autopoiesis, cybernetics, homeostasis, spontaneous order, self-organization, synergistics, [and] systems theory" to argue that capitalism has evolved appropriately *against* our purported values of "social justice" precisely "because of its superior capacity to utilize dispersed knowledge."[15]

> Our values and institutions are determined not simply by preceding causes but as part of a process of unconscious self-organisation of a structure or pattern. This is true not only of economics, but in a wide area, and is well known today in the biological sciences. This insight was only the first of a growing family of theories that account for the formation of complex structures in terms of processes transcending our capacity to observe all the several circumstances operating in the determination of their particular manifestations.[16]

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[13] Claire Colebrook, "Why Saying 'No' to Life is Unacceptable," *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2014), 186.

[14] Quoted in Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2013), 63.

[15] Hayek, 8.

[16] Hayek, 9.

Hayek's argument against central economic planning, and in favor of the "spontaneous order" of the competitive market, rests on an evolutionary biological claim that life, society, and the world, is too complex to have total knowledge of and is therefore impossible to regulate. Max Horkheimer once described the anarchy of capitalist society as a process that "is accomplished not under the control of a conscious will but as a natural occurrence;" in which "everyday life results blindly, accidentally, and badly from the chaotic activity of individuals, industries, and states."[17] However, he understood this as justification to change it. Indeed, as Nigel Thrift argues, capitalism has figured out ways of "knowing itself," whereby reflexivity increasingly becomes another instrument of accumulation within this unpredictable atmosphere.[18] Jodi Dean links this shift in capitalism toward complexity, reflexivity, and the production of unknowing, as a signal that that the dominant cultural logic has shifted from the psychoanalytic subject of desire to the subject of the drive. Whereas the subject of desire seeks the object to satiate desire and return to steady-state equilibrium, the subject of drive desires the repetitive failure to attain the object and thus, the repetition becomes an open feedback circuit of "accumulation, amplification, and intensification."[19] Her examples are the rise in derivatives trading and the rationalized endangering of value through the financialization (and packaging) of risk. In the 2008 financial collapse, banks appealed to complexity and the inability to comprehend the complicated processes in order shirk responsibility.

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[17] Quoted in Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx,* Trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Verso, 2014), 41.

[18] Nigel Thrift, *Knowing Capitalism* (London: Sage, 2005).

[19] Jodi Dean, "Complexity as Capture: Neoliberalism and the Loop of the Drive," *New Formations* 80-81 (2013): 138-154, 140.

"Complexity displaces accountability onto knowledge," Dean writes, citing Foucault's argument that "the economic rationality of liberalism" is that "limits on knowledge are limits on government."[20] Complexity contributes to the instrumentalization of speculation, which indefinitely suspends both governance and accountability (see chapter two). We cannot know everything, so the reasoning goes; therefore we can—and ought!—do nothing. At the same time, she writes, "the appeal to complexity is a site of convergence between despotic financialism and critical theory."[21]

Critical humanists have traditionally appealed to moral, if not material, complexity of the world, yet now find themselves having "run out of steam" as the hermeneutics of suspicion has pervaded public life.[22] Dean writes that both "academic and financial types share a weak ontology of interconnectivity, mutual causality, contingency, and singularity (the unique qualities of individuals, persons as well as non-persons)." She considers the work of Jane Bennett, [23] a new materialist who is "attuned to the complexity of assemblages constituted out of human an nonhuman actants… mixing 'coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, water, economic theory, wire, and wood.'" Bennett argues that "In a world of distributed agency… a hesitant attitude toward assigning singular blame

[20] Dean, 149.

[21] Dean, 147.

[22] Bruno Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225-248.

[23] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

becomes a presumptive virtue."[24] For Dean, this "hesitation" participates in the same structuring affect as neoliberalism. Dean offers the recent example of BP's Deepwater Horizon disaster as a case where the multinational corporation's appeal to complexity, distributed agency, and epistemic finitude, became a means to deflect accountability. Indeed, the New York Times uncovered a memo by the American Petroleum Institute (API) which outlined their plan to invest millions of dollars in media so that "recognition of uncertainty becomes part of the 'conventional wisdom.'"[25] ExxonMobil and others have contributed millions of dollars to think tanks like the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI) and American Enterprise Institute (AEI) to promote uncertainty around climate change and other energy-related issues.

Crichton was the literary darling of the American Enterprise Institute. In 2005, he gave an AEI sponsored lecture titled "Science Policy in the Twenty-First Century," in which he attacked representations of climate data, notably the "hockey stick" graph. AEI president, Christopher Demuth, introduced him and is quoted as saying that Crichton delivers "serious science with a sense of drama to a popular audience."[26] In his various speeches, Crichton puts his narrative skills to work; he critiques crypto-religious environmentalist narratives and evokes the historical imagination as he lists of some fifty commonplace objects and concepts that Teddy Roosevelt, "godfather" of American environmentalism, could never have imagined. When it comes to genetics, Crichton appeals to government saying that scientists, drug companies, and journals cannot be

[24] Dean, 147.

[25] Chris Mooney, "Some Like it Hot," *Mother Jones*, 1 May, 2005. Web Accessed 11 May 2016.

[26] Quoted in Mooney, "Some Like it Hot."

relied on, and that legislation should be written to prevent monopolies, especially on "facts of nature" like genes.[27] At other times, however, particularly around climate change, he argues that government should not "politicize" science, and that the language of consensus has no place in science. In "The Case for Skepticism on Global Warming," Crichton chastises consensus as the language of politics while also demanding that politicians come up with "mechanisms to insure a much, much higher standard of reliability in information in the future."[28] This contradictory demand prefaces his remarks on the "complexity of non-linear systems" whose "inherently chaotic" unpredictability implies that there is no knowable relation to a future that might inform contemporary legislation. Rather than debating economic policy, these petroleum-funded think tanks are debating the science, or rather, raising the controversy in order to make uncertainty the new conventional wisdom. Crichton never addresses this source of potential corruption, but aims his hermeneutics of suspicion outwards. "Much has been said about the postmodernist claims about science to the effect that science is just another form of raw power, tricked out in special claims for truth seeking and objectivity that really have no basis in fact," he writes. "Recent events have made me wonder if they are correct."[29] The appeal of complexity on the right lies in its justification for deregulation based on inherent limits to knowledge.

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[27] Michael Crichton, "Genetic Research and Legislative Needs," *MichaelCrichton.* 14 September 2006. Web Accessed 12 May 2016.

[28] Michael Crichton, "The Case for Skepticism on Global Warming," *MichaelCrichton.* 17 January 2003. Web Accessed 12 May 2016.

[29] Michael Crichton, "Aliens Cause Global Warming," *MichaelCrichton.* 25 January 2005. Web Accessed 12 May 2016.

The appeal of complexity on the left has been mixed, and is often set against either the romantic socialism of the guild and the farm, or more recently, in the nostalgia for comparative employment security under (unionized) Fordism. Remarking on E.P. Thompson's endorsement of William Morris' vision of socialism, Raymond Williams argues that "the extent to which the idea of socialism is attached to… simplicity is counter-productive." "It seems to me," he continues, "that the break towards socialism can only be towards an unimaginably greater complexity."[30] The most vigorous defense of complexity as both an ontological condition and a socio-aesthetic trajectory to pursue has come from Wendy Wheeler who evokes Williams' vision in her biosemiotic account of culture.[31] More recently, "accelerationists" like Nick Srnicek, Alex Williams, and the authors of the *Xenofeminist Manifesto*, have pushed for intensified technological complexity and increased abstraction through digital platforms and infrastructures.[32] It remains a fundamentally Marxian insight that the political power of workers often depends on the concentration of production materialized in infrastructure (e.g. autoworkers, steel worker unions, energy workers, dock workers). That the major labor struggles of the present involve teachers unions, healthcare, and communication workers, might be evidence that the location of power has shifted. Post-Fordist decentralization and singularization of production may offer a high tech route back to the artisan/guild

[30] Raymond Williams, "On Morris: An Interview (1977)," *Tenses of Imagination: Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia,* Ed. Andrew Milner (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 87-92, 88.

[31] Wendy Wheeler, *The Whole Creature: Complexity, Biosemiotics, and the Evolution of Culture* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2006).

[32] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (New York: Verso, 2015); "Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation," *Laboriacuboniks.net.* Accessed 12 May 2016.

ideal, but has thus far materially weakened workers while concentrating the power of elites.

Closely aligned with popular interpretations of chaos theory, complexity becomes a quasi-spiritual metaphysics, a vision of nature and society, in which a highly aestheticized crystalline, fractal order is believed to emerge out of the spontaneous activity of free agents. As a social imaginary, it is the most recent attempt to reconcile conflicting desires for freedom and order; in pop culture, it is a new age philosophy that restores wonder to a mathematized universe; as a research methodology, complexity is the banal observation that history, science, politics, nature, and art do not develop in teleological fashion that culminates in a final vocabulary or reconciliation of ends. Images of nature deeply inform economic thought, and therefore, that the narratives of nature in popular and scientific culture shape the way economists develop, explain, and justify their models. If writers are the "unacknowledged legislators of the world," as Shelley wrote, what kinds of regulation might they imagine?

Jurassic Park's Double Narrative

Jurassic Park is an ideological masterpiece, which accounts for the success of the franchise. It tells two stories simultaneously. The first story it tells is the one that we are familiar with; it is the story that the characters themselves tell about their situation. It is the *chaos narrative*. In this narrative, nature is inherently chaotic and thus breaks through all attempts at control and regulation. As part of nature, human societies are part of this chaos; we are meant to know our place and not act hubristically toward the earth with our sciences and technologies. The collapse of the park is, as charismatic mathematician Ian

Malcolm repeatedly assures readers and other characters, bound to happen. It was an inevitability confirmed in the very nature of things. The fact of the park's collapse is offered as evidence of Nature's unpredictable complexity and of our doomed efforts at controlling that chaos which, we are led to believe, unleashed the instability to begin with. Implicit here, is the utopian specter of a harmonious nature that human intention disrupts. The chaos narrative is the narrative of Steven Spielberg's 1993 film, which presents Hammond as a hapless idealist concerned with the happiness of children. Chaos happens, and sometimes our best intentions make it happen. The enemy here is the desire for control. The reader takes a perverse pleasure in watching the park's systems fail, as the living creatures explode the mechanisms of control. Changing the sex they were assigned at birth (or rather, in the petri dish at the lab), they prove that they are not commodities or simulations, but agents in a clawing and biting vitalist insurgency: life finds a way.

There is a second story that I call the *regulatory narrative*. While the novel contains all of the *chaos narrative, Jurassic Park* is also a story about a biotechnology company that avoids state regulations and creates an off-shore experimental entertainment park, expected to produce billions in profits, and which ends in catastrophe due primarily to acts of corporate espionage/sabotage compounded by an extreme weather event. It is precisely the deliberate avoidance of regulations, of "control," that the park is able to exist in the first place. In the regulatory narrative, the collapse of the park's own regulation systems serve to confirm the broader cynicism of the park's CEO, John Hammond, who believes neither in public, state-funded and regulated, biotechnology, nor in the humanitarian ends of this research. The park exists as a state of

exception, a place "outside" control or public oversight. And yet the novel's internal chaos narrative relies on the perverse affirmation of "life" as a sublime force which sunders any attempt to shape or control it. The park's collapse thus becomes an allegory for the failure of the regulatory state which was meant to contain it. If the regulatory narrative depicts the park as a dangerous evasion of public responsibility (i.e. limits), the chaos narrative allows readers to celebrate the transgression of those limits.

"Life finds a way" is the franchise's most memorable phrase as it appeals to the post-sixties libertarian left as well as the neoliberal right. As Paul Lauter puts it, "Life will find a way" offers "a kind of primitive hopefulness, an inert optimism that, in our age, sometimes passes for progressive politics."[33] With respect to governmental ideology, readers may condemn Hammond and Wu's explicit evasion of regulatory institutions, but in the rest of the novel they will be enjoying the dinosaurs' transgression of the park's regulatory institutions. By conflating the evasion of control with "life," radically different organizations of biological and economic life are elided and naturalized. Critical companions to Crichton's work often depict the novel as a critique of scientific hubris, or offer a kitsch Marxist reading, in which the dinosaurs are an "exploited class" that overthrow the capitalist company.[34] Americanists like Susanne Hamscha, have interpreted the film as a narrative about the American rediscovery of wilderness. She interprets the park itself, which is located in Isla Nublar, Costa Rica, as a Thoreauvian

[33] Paul Lauter, "Dinosaur Culture: From Mansfield Park to Jurassic Park," *From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park: Activism, Culture, and American Studies* (Durham: Duke, 2001), 99-118, 106. Lauter argues that the film "neutralize[s] the very critique it proposes" of the commercialization of science whose tourist commodification, the audience is well aware, produces very real pleasure (112).

[34] Elizabeth A. Trembly, "Jurassic Park (1990)," *Michael Crichton: A Critical Companion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996).

space free from a native population that might trouble the sense of wilderness as a blank space to enact social reinvention.[35] What these readings miss is the real-world context of multinational globalization that Crichton uses to stage the conflict between control and life. This market vitalism is central to the neoliberal modernization of the social state; at the same time this vitalism infuses the ideology of the biotech revolution, which Melinda Cooper describes as an effort to generate life beyond planetary limits for the purposes of capital accumulation.[36]

In the rhetoric surrounding the dismantling of the welfare state, no figure loomed as large as the dinosaur. The dinosaur stood for all that is outmoded and evolutionarily obsolete; it was a lumbering figure whose size left it ill-adjusted for a world that had been transformed around it. Douglas Hague, economic advisor to Margaret Thatcher, argues that "the lesson of the dinosaurs is that creatures which cannot adapt to external change do not survive." "The same is true of organizations," he continues, "especially in the private sector." Hague saves the bulk of his evolutionary recommendations for a list of *public* sector "dinosaurs" that need to be transformed, among them, health, education, and the universities. "Privatization does not mean closure," he writes, "but it does mean shaking off the civil service culture."[37] The culture of civil service and the ideal of the public good was the ethic of social democratic programs on both sides of the Atlantic.

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[35] Susanne Hamscha, "From Walden Pond to *Jurassic Park*: The Re(dis)covery of America," *The Fiction of America: Performance and the Cultural Imaginary in Literature and Film* (New York: Campus Verlag, 2013), 119-149.

[36] Melinda Cooper, *Life as Surplus: Biotechnology and Capitalism in the Neoliberal Era* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2008), 20.

[37] Douglas Hague, "Transforming the Dinosaurs," *Life After Politics: New Thinking for the Twenty-First Century,* Ed. Geoff Mulgan (London: Fontana Press, 1997), 111-144, 140.

Hague's article, "Transforming the Dinosaurs," was published by *DEMOS* in *Life After Politics: New Thinking for the Twenty-First Century*. *DEMOS* was a UK think tank founded by former director of *Marxism Today,* Geoff Mulgan. Its journal became central to Tony Blair's "Third Way" policies in the 1990s, and it increasingly moved to the right. Angela McRobbie once described it as "a rather stuffy gentleman's club whose doors are shut to those who do not want to sit down to high table with the 'radical right.'"[38] The *Life After Politics* collection serves as an example of the way that organizational imaginaries were being restructured alongside the emerging techno-industries to promote individualized, flexible, and uncertain modes of "life" after the burden of politics in a new "post-ideological" age.

In a similar way, InGen's scientific project is made possible by an argument against the public university. Here, Crichton anticipates the increasing privatization of the American university and the development of what Jeffrey Williams calls the "post-welfare state university."[39] Henry Wu, InGen's chief geneticist, was recruited from Stanford by Hammond. "Universities are no longer the intellectual centers of the country," Hammond tells Wu, then a struggling grad student.

> "Universities are no longer the intellectual centers of the country... Universities are the backwater… Since World War II, all the really important discoveries have come out of private laboratories. The laser, the transistor, the polio vaccine, the microchip… the personal computer, magnetic resonance imaging, CAT scans…Universities simply aren't where it's happening any more. And they

[38] Angela McRobbie, "Looking Back at the New Times and its Critics," *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies,* Eds. David Morely and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 238-261, 239.

[39] Jeffrey J. Williams, "The Post-Welfare State University," *American Literary History* 18.1 (2006): 190-216; see also, Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, "The Neo-Liberal University," *New Labor Forum* 6 (2000): 73-79; Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

> haven't been for forty years. If you want to do something important… you don't go to a *university*. Dear me, no."[40]

For John Hammond, universities are outmoded in that they require too many checks and regulatory hurdles, and because they are publically funded with a view toward the public good. "What must you go through to start a new project?" Hammond asks. "How many grant applications, how many forms, how many approvals? The department chairman? The university resources committee? How do you get more work space if you need it? More assistants… A brilliant man can't squander precious time with forms and committees. Life is too short, and DNA is too long." "If you want to get something *done*," he finishes, "stay out of universities." Hammond's criticism of the university borrows the university's own promise of professional autonomy in the pursuit of knowledge. However, instead of justifying the pursuit of knowledge in the service of a common good, Hammond presents it as the autonomous pursuit of knowledge itself, only in the service of private enterprise. Whereas the promise of public funds comes with numerous strings attached, for instance, that the research might be put to medical rather than entertainment uses; the private corporation, on the other hand, can offer unparalleled freedom. "What does a scientist need to work," Hammond asks Wu. "He needs time, and he needs money. I'm talking about giving you a five year commitment, and ten million dollars a year in funding. Fifty million dollars, and no one tells you how to spend it. You decide. Everyone else just *gets out of your way*."[41]

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[40] Crichton, 123.

[41] Crichton, 124.

This is a prime example of what sociologist Steven Brint describes as the shift from "social trustee professionalism" to "expert professionalism."[42] In his history of professionals, intellectuals, and the American middle class, Brint identifies a shift in postindustrial society in the relation of intellectual labor to the market. Rather than justifying the professions in terms of a public good, professionals began marketing their expertise over a body of knowledge as a commodity. Economic sociologist Philip Mirowski goes into greater detail in his book, *Science-Mart: Privatizing American Science*, to trace the emergence of a new regime of American science since 1980.[43] Whereas the postwar and Cold War era was organized around mass education and the production of democratic citizenry, the dominant sciences—"physics, operations research, formal logic"—had been primarily funded by military, think tanks, and national laboratories.[44] This regime had been displaced by global corporations and hybrid startups between universities and contract research organizations (CROs). The new dominant sciences are "biomedicine, genetics, computer science, [and] economics." The inclusion of economics as a science signals the instrumentalization of the field by finance and, not coincidentally, the financialization of the life and computer sciences. These fields are linked by the new, non-equilibrium mathematics of chaos theory. It is perhaps ironic then that Ian Malcolm, the novel's spokesperson for chaos, possesses Brint's professional ethic of "critical rationality" and "moral commitment," evoking the public and ecological

[42] Steven Brint, *In an Age of Experts: The Changing Role of Professionals in Politics and Public Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[43] Philip Mirowski, *Science-Mart: Privatizing American Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[44] Mirowski, 95.

good despite his outward bad-boy image.[45] Malcolm is the quintessential figure of the "rock star academic"—down to the leather pants and transgressive charm—who uses his expertise to craft a personal brand while the university cashes in on his prestige.

We might contrast Wu's offer with the situation of paleontologists, Alan Grant and Ellie Sattler, whose work Hammond has been funding for several years. Hammond calls on them to serve as consultants in Costa Rica. The narration informs the readers that, "although many fields of science, such as physics and chemistry, had become federally funded, paleontology remained strongly dependent on private patrons […] Grant understood that, if John Hammond asked for his help, he would give it. That was how patronage worked—how it had always worked."[46] Where a patron of the arts would invest in either a particular artist's work (an object) or invest in an institution that would allow the continuation of production, Hammond's monetization of paleontological knowledge production is a financial enterprise. Their role was to make paleontological knowledge of past bio-geological epochs actionable. By using their interpretive knowledge of past environments they are to advise and assist in reconstructing those environments for genetically recombined species. They understand the environments, but they are clear that evidence of how particular dinosaur species might have inhabited those environments is speculative at best. No one knows what the dinosaurs are like as agents within those environments. As we will see, the debates over whether or not the dinosaurs in the park are *authentic* will be eclipsed by the necessity of not being eaten by them. Grant and Sattler see their fields transform from archeological and interpretive

[45] Brint, 81.

[46] Crichton, 63.

reconstructions of sedimented bio-evolutionary archives to a project of constructing new environments for Hammond's financial enterprise.

"The commercialization of molecular biology," represents for Crichton, "the most stunning ethical event in the history of science." In the introduction to *Jurassic Park*, Crichton distinguishes the biotech revolution from past scientific breakthroughs. The atomic revolution was the product of a single, government funded, research institute; the digital or computer revolution consisted of a "dozen companies," whereas biotech revolution is "now carried out in more than two thousand laboratories in America alone," with over "five hundred corporations" globally. It is not taken up with a specific end in mind but the results instead "emerge" out of the distributed, individual actions of various agents. It is less a revolution that overturns, than it is a phase shift in the relations of human and nonhumans. However, as Crichton observes, this distributed technological process is the product of transnational and unregulated finance. "The work is uncontrolled," he writes. "No one supervises it. No federal laws regulate it. There is no coherent government policy, in America or anywhere else in the world… no watchdogs are to be found among the scientists themselves… nearly every scientist in genetics research is also engaged in the commerce of biotechnology." Simply put, "there are no detached observers."[47] The lack of public oversight and the fluidity of finance is the condition for the proliferation of research, with scientists acting as entrepreneurs on corporate campuses.

Here is where the novel begins to diverge from its popular interpretation. The ultimate conflict in *Jurassic Park* is not primarily between human technological hubris

[47] Crichton, *x*.

and the dinosaurs who give them their comeuppance, but rather between the financial, governmental, and corporate infrastructures that make this commercialization of knowledge possible. *Jurassic Park* stands as Crichton's warning against the commercialization of science, rather than its popular reception as a warning against interfering with the "natural order," which is imagined as harmonious so long as humans do not enter the frame. The novel allows for both readings; however its success as a commercial franchise is linked to the latter narrative. This is the narrative that is in line with contemporary ideology, I argue, in that it celebrates transgressive vitalist freedom while simultaneously cautioning epistemic, technical, and governmental humility. Instead of a natural order of stable harmony, Crichton posits a natural order of chaos and uncontrollability. In this vision, the world and nature are so complex that knowledge of it always supersedes our grasp and therefore any attempt to control human or nonhuman behavior, or regulate activity, is doomed to failure. The novel speaks in two registers, out of both sides of its mouth.

Before discussing the broader implications of chaos and agential dinosaurs, let us examine the exchanges between Malcolm and Hammond, which are so central to the novel's internal dialogue on the events as they unfold. The injured mathematician rises when he hears Hammond describe the situation as "simple." He chastises the CEO for the actions of his chief geneticist, Henry Wu, who knows neither the names of the dinosaurs he creates, nor what they are, nor what they are capable of. He characterizes the power of interventionist science as a form of "inherited wealth." Whereas disciplines like martial arts or the attainment of political power require years of practice in which one develops a respect for the practice.

> "Scientific power is like inherited wealth: attained without discipline. You read what others have done, and you take the next step… You can do it very young. You can make progress very fast. There is no discipline lasting for decades. There is no mastery: old scientists are ignored. There is no humility before nature. There is only a get-rich-quick, make-a-name-for-yourself-fast philosophy. Cheat, lie, falsify—it doesn't matter… No one will criticize you. No one has any standards. They are all trying to do the same thing: to do something big, and to do it fast."[48]

Malcolm criticizes the transformation of science from the pursuit of knowledge, disinterested to the extent that it serves the public good, to the sciences pursued as a commercial enterprise, with all the competition and sabotage that entails. For Bernard Stiegler, this brings out the pharmacological relation between *savoir-faire*, "knowledge of how to make or do," with *savoir-vivre*, "knowledge of how to live."[49] Malcolm is describing the conditions that drive individual behavior. In the economy of information, *savoir-faire* or know-how is stripped from *savoir-vivre* or the knowledge of how to live with that know-how and use it responsibility. The production of information as commodity allows this knowledge to circulate as the object of financial speculation and undisciplined consumption. Malcolm continues:

> "Because you can stand on the shoulders of giants, you can accomplish something quickly. You don't even know exactly what you have done, but already you have reported it, patented it, and sold it. And the buyer will have even less discipline than you. The buyer simply purchases the power, like any commodity. The buyer doesn't even conceive that any discipline might be necessary." "A karate master does not kill people with his bare hands," he says, "He does not lose his temper and kill his wife. The person who kills is the person who has no discipline, no restraint, and who has purchased his power in the form of a Saturday night special. And that is the kind of power that science fosters, and permits."[50]

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[48] Crichton, 306.

[49] Bernard Stiegler, *For a New Critique of Political Economy*, Trans. Daniel Ross. London: Polity, 2010, 16.

[50] Crichton, 307.

The purchaser here is the corporation, the enterprising firm, rather than the social or political community of the nation-state. From the perspective of the enterprise, it does not matter if the commodity is biological or consumer electronics. Lewis Dodgson, for instance, is characterized as the "most aggressive geneticist of his generation." He is known for reverse engineering competing companies' products, looking for the "biological equivalent of a Sony walkman."[51] As the walkman embodies the post-Fordist shift to miniaturized and individualized Japanese consumer products, the boutique biogenetic experiments seek not only to add to existing culture but to create new cultures of their own. Crichton singles out entertainment as a particularly undisciplined use of biogenetic intervention.

The theme park was the consumer model of reality which philosophers like Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard termed the hyperreal.[52] The argument was that in the new technologies of simulation have become real through their effects even if the objects and processes they are believed to model never existed. In this new condition, signs without referents circulate in an economy which has lost its claim to represent social exchange: social exchange itself shapes the way life is represented and understood. The critique of hyperreality follows political and cultural concerns over the location of authenticity in consumer economies. It builds off of the Situationist critique of spectacle as the mode through which postwar capitalism reproduces its relations. The model of hyperreal is Disney World—or, the theme park in general—whose purpose is to produce

[51] Crichton, 65.

[52] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, Trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1995); Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality* (New York: Harvest, 1983).

a landscape of entertaining consumption through replications of really-existing peoples and places, through simulations, fantasy, and enjoyment. The distinction between simulation and the real melts into a generalized performativity. *Jurassic Park* anticipates the end of the Disney model of hyperreality.

What disrupts the representation within the narrative of the park is "life" itself. Amidst the debates about the authenticity of the dinosaurs, their DNA (e.g. genetic / phenotypic / behavioral authenticity), and the efforts of the park's technicians at biological control through sexual selection and amino acid dependency, the dinosaurs themselves surpass the reach of the park's control mechanisms. As the narrative illustrates the ways that computer representations of the park fail to adequately correspond to the number and distribution of dinosaurs, it also illustrates how these representations (computer models) are interacting with and shaping the actions of characters within the park. It anticipates a turn to new forms of realism and materialism that position representations as acts within a world. John Arnold, the computer systems analyst, draws similar distinctions between living and non-living (mechanical) systems through what he calls "resonant yaw." Like temperature in the body, he argues, biological and living systems "are never in equilibrium;"[53] in fact, it means that they are "healthy and responsive." He contrasts it with mechanical systems, in which a small wobble can intensify and lead to cascading collapse.[54] Living systems cannot ever be fully represented and controlled, he suggests. "This is life, not computer models," he says as he points at his own malfunctioning mechanical system in the control room. One of the

[53] Crichton, 247.

[54] Crichton, 248.

major turning points in the plot occurs when the characters realize that the computer's search protocol is only showing them exactly what they are searching for, not for the actual numbers of dinosaurs in the park who are changing sex and reproducing uncontrollably.

Part of the thrill of the theme park is stepping "back in time" to when the planet was populated by reptilian life, and to be seen by that life. To say that it is *ancient* implies a shared, even mammalian, temporality; this world is *other*. In the gaze of the velociraptors, Grant has the decentered experience of himself as an object of prey. "For a mammal like man, there was something indescribably alien about the way reptiles hunted their prey," Grant observes. "The stillness, the coldness, the *pace* was all wrong. To be among [them] was to be reminded of a different kind of life, a different kind of world, now vanished from the earth."[55] To be seen by this threatening life behind the fences offers a sublime disorientation of the very human mastery which made it possible. The same cannot be said for the Afro-Costa Rican workers whose anonymous deaths populate the construction and collapse of the park. Malcolm's question to Grant, "Is this a persuasive animal to you? Is it in fact a dinosaur?," turns the novel's discussion toward authenticity, or rather to what might be called the correspondence theory of dinosaur production, elaborated in a debate between Hammond and Wu.[56] Hammond is upset when Wu suggests that park visitors will have been culturally conditioned to expect slow moving dinosaurs, and that slower dinosaurs would be easier to manage. "We haven't *re-created* the past here," Wu says. "The past is gone. It can never be recreated. What we've

[55] Crichton, 117.

[56] Crichton, 119.

done is *reconstruct* the past—or at least a version of the past. And I'm saying we can make a better version." Hammond interjects: "Better than real?" "But they're not real now," Wu replies, "That's what I'm trying to tell you. There isn't any reality here."[57]

Because Wu understands the dinosaurs as constructed, his distinction between real and artificial is predicated on intervention alone. Hammond, the idealistic non-specialist, is closer to the park visitor whose distinction between real and artificial is based on how closely the dinosaurs resemble his imagination of them as shaped by popular culture and loosely on scientific projections. In the free indirect discourse Wu imagines trying to explain to Hammond the problem with his thinking. "The DNA of the dinosaurs was like old photographs that had been retouched, basically the same as the original but in some places repaired and clarified."[58] Hammond does not understand how much intervention was necessary to make these dinosaurs "real." On top of this, the metaphor Wu must use—photography—operates on a similar representational logic in which DNA contains a miniature image of the dinosaur in a one to one correspondence. With no reference to the mediation of the camera (laboratory) or photographer (Wu), this metaphor also cannot take into account the dinosaurs as living, social beings, whose environment presents behavioral and even chromosomal opportunities for adaptation. In short, there is quite a bit of "reality" there, only it is a reality that is *becoming* in excess of the imaginations and constructions of the park's genetic architects. The dinosaurs' agency upends the distinctions on which the concerns over hyperreality and simulation are based. As feral velociraptors and "compys" escape onto mainland Costa Rica they devour crops

[57] Crichton, 122.

[58] Crichton, 122.

rich in the lysine enzyme to fulfill their engineered need. After the artificial barriers come down, a new post-natural and performative ecology establishes itself.

Jurassic Park's narrative anticipates a move beyond philosophies of the real and its representation while remaining formally conventional. Even as "chaos" is disrupting the characters and events, Crichton's narrative is itself tightly controlled. It jumps from location to location, dropping in on expository conversations that give context to what is happening elsewhere in the park. The only representation of "chaos" is in the increasingly complex fractal shapes that develop on the chapter-heading pages. Indeed, one might claim that chaos is the narrative means through which the events are made sensible and managed. While it may be tempting to read the novel as a shift from what Donald Worster has called the "ecology of order" to the "ecology of chaos," *Jurassic Park* is ultimately a narrative about the failure of an entrepreneurial project in the opening decade of the current cycle of capitalist globalization.[59] Ian Malcolm argues that the emergence of risk and chaos theory is proof that the world we know is in the midst of being swept away like the medieval order that Enlightenment science displaced. The passing from one paradigm to the next is dramatized by Malcolm's death. With his final words he mumbles about paradigms and how everything looks different on the other side. He fulfills his prophetic function by asserting a vision of the new world that is displacing the old, and gives his life as a final "I told you so" to the old world that wouldn't listen.

The *Jurassic Park* franchise has arguably been so influential that it not only reflects the DNA discourses of the day but, as Sarah Franklin argues, has helped to

[59] Donald Worster, "The Ecology of Order and Chaos," *The Wealth of Nature: Environmental History and the Ecological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 156-170.

construct the "global genetic imaginary," which conflates radically different conceptions of "life itself."[60] Melinda Cooper articulates vitalist affirmation of biological possibilities of life in the context of the financial turn under neoliberalism and the new economy of biogenetics. "The expansion of commercial processes into the sphere of 'life itself' has a troubling effect on the self evidence of traditional economic categories," she writes. "Where does (re)production end and technical invention begin, when life is put to work at the microbiological or cellular level," Cooper asks; and "what is the relationship between new theories of biological growth, complexity, and evolution and recent neoliberal theories of accumulation?"[61] Extending Foucault's influential analysis of the shift in governmentality from the power "to kill" to the power to "let live," she argues that the production of life—and the image of life—as that which surpasses boundaries has become instrumental in neoliberal economic models.[62] These models were a response to the "limits to growth" studies of the seventies, in which the Keynesian steady-state regulatory model of "embedded liberalism" came into conflict with capital's need for new frontiers of accumulation. Disruption replaced balance as an ideal order of nature and society, as the Fordist interlude came to a close and "ordinary capitalism" returned.[63] "Even in the work of Prigogine and Stengers," Cooper observes, "the new political economy of nature sounds suspiciously like the new political economy of

[60] Sarah Franklin, "Life Itself: Global Nature and the Genetic Imaginary," *Global Nature, Global Culture,* Eds. Franklin, Lury, and Stacey (London: Sage, 2000), 188-227.

[61] Cooper, 4.

[62] Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power over Life," *The Foucault Reader,* Ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 258-272.

[63] Sanford F. Schram, *The Return of Ordinary Capitalism: Neoliberalism, Precarity, Occupy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015)

neoliberalism."[64] Old, "big nature" style conservation (and science) in the service of the public good became the "grey flannel suit" in the new cultural politics, while chaos came wearing leather pants and a libertarian attitude like Ian Malcolm, clothing the new paradigm in rebellious fashions as it set about philosophically undermining the legal concepts—like wilderness—central to really-existing environmental restrictions on corporate extraction and pollution. In its place was a free market "wise use" principle reliant on individual responsibility. Cooper insists that "in the absence of any substantive critique of political economy, any philosophy of *life as such* runs the risk of celebrating *life as it is*."[65]

Crichton's narrative chastises a biogenetic company for not heeding the very emerging paradigms that spurred the growth of the biotech industry and deregulatory incentives to begin with. His narrative registers a critique of deregulated biotechnology, but the sublime chaotic vitalism that disrupts InGen's project is the same vitalism that is instrumentalized in the biotech imaginary of neoliberalism. *Jurassic Park*'s deployment of "life" in this way is another instance of its instrumentalization. This produces the "double narrative" effect of simultaneously lamenting deregulation while naturalizing the resistance to regulation. Life finds a way both around (market) barriers to expansion and it finds a way to get ahead in a generalized "precariousness" which, in Franco Berardi's description, is "the desert of the world returned to jungle."[66]

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[64] Cooper, 42; Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature* (New York: Bantam, 1984).

[65] Cooper, 42.

[66] Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide* (New York: Verso, 2015), 203.

In what I called "kitsch marxist" readings of Jurassic Park, the dinosaurs represent an oppressed proletariat who overthrow the corporation.[67] If one is looking for an allegory, I would claim that the dinosaurs more closely resemble the image of flexible, infinitely demanding, consumers in the marketplace, whose agency is affirmed alongside that of the entrepreneurial subject. Sam Binkley suggests that "where the Fordist compact… demanded the production of 'docile' bodies, smiling organization men happy in their modest functions as appendages of large, remotely administered bureaucratic machines, the culture of post-Fordism demanded the insurrectionary body."[68] "Life finds a way" becomes an adventure slogan which appeals to the post-sixties libertarian left and free-market conservatives alike, instilling a disruptive, antiregulatory impulse into the very building blocks—the matter—of life. As a slogan, it speaks to the desire to transgress the law, which is also to say a desire *for* the law, while at the same time assures one of the resilience of "life" amid austerity and deregulation (and the sixth mass extinction). Leaving aside the questions of whether the dinosaurs consciously conspire to abolish themselves as objects of a set of biopolitical arrangements, they do manage to abolish themselves as the *simulation* of others' fantasies. However, this agency is made possible by planned acts of corporate espionage which sabotaged the park's security systems, which was then compounded by an extreme weather event. Once again, the

[67] Reza Negarestani describes "kitsch Marxism" as a set of related and contradictory attitudes in the contemporary academic left that refuse to articulate norms and thus subtract themselves from the future; Negarestani's "inhumanism" would likely recognize, contra the lesson of Crichton's chaos narrative, that new techno-commercial knowledges need to be harnessed to a radical emancipatory project, instead of an abyss from which one can only shrink, "The Labor of the Inhuman, Part 1," *E-Flux* 52 (2014), Web Accessed 20 May 2016.

[68] Sam Binkley, *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 207.

desire to focus on the "chaos narrative" rather than the "regulatory narrative" contributes to the obfuscation of social and economic conditions, e.g. competing "post-national" biogenetic firms, which made the park possible—technologically, financially, and geopolitically. I turn now to Octavia Butler's *Parable* novels, which address the "sentimental" and affective response to naturalized chaos.

Octavia Butler's Affirmation Of Chaos

> "…stability disintegrates / as it must"[69]
>
> –*Earthseed: The Books of the Living*

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998), affirm the chaos that surrounds the narrator's dystopian future. Her novels describe a United States that is an exaggeration of our own in which environmental and social disruptions are exacerbated by deregulated business practices, a crumbling infrastructure, and the return of unfree labor.[70] In Butler's words, these novels take the form of a warning: "an 'if this goes on…' story."[71] She bases her vision of the future economy as an extension of the "Maquiladora Plants in Mexico," which had amassed along the border of the US and Mexico in free-trade zones. These dramatically expanded with the signing of NAFTA. In a 1994 interview Butler refers to the maquiladoras saying that, "the opposite of slavery is also in evidence now: throw-away labor… American companies

[69] Butler (1993), 103.

[70] Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1993); *Parable of the Talents* (New York: Warner Books, 1998).

[71] Octavia Butler, "Sci-Fi Tales from Octavia Butler, 1994 Interview with H. Jerome Jackson in *The Crisis*," *Conversations with Octavia Butler*, Ed. Consuela Francis (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2010), 43-48, 44.

going down there to take advantage of cheap labor and unenforced environmental regulations."[72] She connects the economic and environmental logic of this globalization: "If you can get labor for a dollar an hour or eighty cents an hour… you're going to be able to lower wages where you are by threatening to move down there." "And if you can spew filth into rivers down there," she continues, "you can always threaten to move down there if the environmental regulations get a little fight up here."[73] Butler's novels depict a world in which spaces of exception in the global economy, like the *maquiladoras* or Crichton's fictional Isla Nublar, have become the norm. She "imagine[s] the United States becoming, slowly, through the combined effects of lack of foresight and short-term unenlightened self-interest, a third world country."[74] Butler, like Crichton, is confronting a rapidly globalizing modernization, but where Crichton presents modernity as a problem of technology and knowledge, Butler's avowedly "sentimental" characters experience the deregulated landscape as one comprised of human relationships and cosmological attitudes.

The *Parable* novels follow the life and writings of Lauren Olamina, a young woman who invents a new religion in response to a United States that has been reduced to quasi-apocalyptic landscape of drug addicted pyromaniacs and racist corporate towns. Her own gated community becomes unsafe and she is forced to flee to the north. Where the twentieth century African-American migration narrative moved from rural, agrarian south to the urban, industrial north, Butler's characters move from gated ex-urban spaces

[72] Butler (2010), 44.

[73] Butler (2010), 47.

[74] Butler (1993), 337.

of southern California to the rural landscape of Humboldt County. Long seen as a hippie stronghold of alternative, New Age, and back-to-the-land communities, this location (Acorn) becomes a means for the characters to establish lives in relative autonomy from the dangerous urban environments, a means for survival, and an opportunity to form a community around a cosmology that is both agrarian and space age. Butler's vision shares much in common with Sam Binkley's account of post-sixties, professional-managerial class narratives of "loosening" as a way to negotiate the flexible modernity of post-Fordism.[75] Using Binkley's exploration of New Age and communitarian print cultures of the seventies, and drawing on Rebecca Wanzo's location of Butler within the "New Age boom" of the nineties, I examine the lineage of Butler's affirmation of chaos, and deification of "Change," within the deregulatory landscape.[76]

The Parable novels are unique in that they are composed entirely of journal entries, so that the events are always interpreted through a particular perspective. The glue that holds these entries together are the poetic fragments and epigrams from Olamina's religious text, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. Olamina's poetic writings are collected and presented as *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*. The passages from Earthseed hover above each journal entry of the narration. In postmodern fashion, the fragmented aphorisms serve as paratexts for both the reader and the characters alike as the latter make reference to the book and attempt to explain their situation through its vocabulary. The Earthseed passages provide examples within the novel of ways that texts

[75] Sam Binkley, *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

[76] Rebecca A. Wanzo, "Apocalyptic Empathy: A Parable of Postmodern Sentimentality," *Obsidian III* 6-7.1-2 (2005): 72-86.

are composed and circulated. Beyond the representativeness of fiction or realism, these texts intervene at the level of action by shaping the characters' affective responses to situations—and, by extension, the reader's. Within the world of the novel, Earthseed circulates as a religious and practical text. It influences the characters' interpretation of their situation and is meant to be instructive in the way that the *Parable* novels are themselves meant to be instructive for contemporary readers, serve as a warning and a guide to potential transformation. They provide a parallel situation through which readers can understand their own struggles within a social order that feels like it is disintegrating.

Earthseed's dominant message is that "God is change" and its members are to "shape God." The fragments combine an affirmation of change with a will to adaptation and overcoming. "We adapt and endure, / For we are Earthseed / And God is Change."[77] Individual and community formation is elided with biology, and civilization with intelligence. "Intelligence is ongoing, individual adaptability. / Adaptations that an intelligent species may make / in a single generation, other species make over / many generations of selective breeding and / selective dying."[78] "Civilization is to groups what intelligence is to individuals."[79] Intelligence is linked with behavior and adaptability, the ability of groups to make decisions and build institutions through instrumentalized knowledge. It is less about knowledge per se, but intelligence, meaning what people are to do with the knowledge and where to go with it. Earthseed members are told to be "Opportunistic / Tenacious / Interconnected, and / Fecund. / Understand this. / Use it. /

[77] Butler (1993), 17.

[78] Butler (1993), 29.

[79] Butler (1993), 101.

Shape God."[80] Other slogans include: "Embrace diversity / Or be destroyed."[81] and "Learn or die."[82] Above all, the charge is to "Shape God," by which they mean, "shape change," or change the change.

In *The Parable of the Talents*, Olamina's husband describes the beliefs of Earthseed as a theology of chaotic processes without shape.

> Her god is a process or a combination of processes, not an entity. It is not consciously aware of her—or of anything. It is not conscious at all. "God is Change," she says and means it. Some of the faces of her god are biological evolution, chaos theory, relativity theory, the uncertainty principle, and, of course, the second law of thermodynamics.[83]

Olamina's imagination of God as Change is a naturalistic religion derived from late-twentieth century mathematics and post-Newtonian science. In a sense, it can be read as the religion of modernity itself—as ceaseless change which requires the perpetual "making new" of individuals, cultures, and societies. It is a conscious shaping of the change that simultaneously changes the shaper, ala Marx's historical materialism. It is an immanent deism that is both pragmatic and Darwinian in the sense that its outcome is not known in advance, but rather, its trajectories are directed along the way by collective acts—which may or may not coincide with any collective will. At the same time, Earthseed resembles many New Age philosophies that attempt to find a consilience between the advanced sciences and the romanticized—agrarian, tribal, communal, pre-modern—past. For Andrew Ross, New Age practitioners desire "a kinder, gentler

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[80] Butler (1993), 125.

[81] Butler (1993), 196.

[82] Butler (1993), 279.

[83] Butler (1998), 46.

science" over which they have some agency in modernity: "New Age addresses its adherents as active participants, with a measure of control over their everyday lives and not as passive subjects, even victims of larger, objective forces."[84] That Butler's Earthseed registers on so many levels is part of its narrative appeal; and within the story, the religion's malleability enables community identity to be maintained in a harsh world of compulsory adaptation.

Earthseed's demand that its followers shape the change that surrounds them is starkly contrasted with Lauren's brother, Marcus. "My Uncle Marc… hated the chaos," writes Olamina's daughter. "It wasn't one of the faces of his god. It was unnatural. It was demonic. He hated what it had done to him, and he needed to prove that he was not what it had forced him to become. No Christian minister could ever hate sin as much as Marc hated chaos. His gods were order, stability, safety, control."[85] Marcus' belief system stands direct opposition to the worldview of Earthseed, however it is presented as another response to the same chaotic situation. The narration reduces the two worldviews and approaches, as well as the politics that seem to flow from them, to individual psychologies. Marcus "was a man with a wound that would not heal until he could be certain that what had happened to him could not happen again to anyone, ever." Even when it comes to shaping change, it would seem that there are political differences in how to shape it based on different interpretations of the situation, as much as on the psychologies of those implicated.

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[84] Andrew Ross, *Strange Weather: Culture, Science, and Technology in the Age of Limits* (New York: Verso, 1991), 69.

[85] Butler (1998), 111.

One of the contradictions of Earthseed is an inability to distinguish between good and bad processes in favor of a vague affirmation of "life." "Any entity, any process that / cannot or should not be resisted or / avoided must somehow be / partnered. Partner one another. / Partner diverse communities. Partner / life."[86] As in *Jurassic Park*, "life" comes to stand for a generalized and affirmational process without subjects. For instance, the plot of the second novel is centered on the takeover of Acorn by authoritarian Christian fundamentalists who operate as a kind of blackshirt force in support of an authoritarian populist president, Andrew Steele Jarret, whose campaign slogan is "Help us to make America great again."[87] Olamina describes Jarret's effort at "making America great again" as a threat of war against Earthseed and Acorn, who are seen as un-Christian heathens by the fundamentalists.[88] Several members of Acorn are drawn away from the community to join Jarret. By locating the religious authoritarianism as *outside* the Earthseed belief system, Butler misses the opportunity to illustrate that even "good" belief systems are prone to authoritarianism in their practices—her daughter's later experience of the bureaucratic hierarchy of Earthseed notwithstanding. How does one determine which entity or process needs to be avoided or resisted? What does it mean to partner with a process that one wants to resist? Is the resistance itself a form of systemic partnering at the level of a higher process? This deliberate vagueness lends itself to broad interpretation in which "life" includes bad things which must be affirmed so as to be overcome in the name of survival.

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[86] Butler (1998), 135.

[87] Butler (1998), 20.

[88] Butler (1998), 26.

Rebecca Wanzo situates Butler's *Parable* novels within the tradition of American sentimentalism and New Age literature. For Wanzo, Lauren Olamina, who suffers from "hyperempathy," is a figure of the liberal sentimentalist whose vision of community strives toward a harmony of interests, while her internal text, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, falls into the genre of New Age literature. Butler's novels correspond with the 1990s boom in the sales of books classified as "New Age, Mind Body Spirit, Spirituality, Occult, Self Help, and Western variations of Eastern traditions." Since the early seventies, she argues, New Age texts have been concerned with the "suffering 'I'" who must create a sense of self without contributing to the suffering of the world.[89] Butler reconfigures these therapeutic texts from the individual to the community to encourage a sense of resilience. Clarence Tweedy III eschews this New Age connection and reads the Earthseed text within the Black Theological tradition of the Black Church in America. "By negating the politics of victimization with a doctrine of self-agency," Tweedy argues, "Lauren creates a clear distinction between the other-worldly faith of her father and the this-worldly doctrines of Earthseed."[90] This is not a theology of transcendence to be reunited with a distant patriarchal father, he suggests, but rather a participation in the earthly becoming of an immanent god concerned with the social fate of the community. As New Age literature is a postmodern genre that recombines incredibly diverse traditions with varying degrees of "authenticity"—experience itself is held as the only measure of authenticity—it can certainly incorporate elements of the Black Church. One

[89] Wanzo, 80.

[90] Clarence W. Tweedy III, "The Anointed: Countering Dystopia with Faith in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*," *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture* 13.1 (Spring 2014), Web.

can argue that Olamina rejects her father's spiritual tradition because it had failed to maintain the community. She resuscitates the sustaining functional role of the Black Church, albeit through a new theology.

Butler may indeed be updating the theology of the Black Church, but does so through a narrative particular to the post-sixties countercultures of those who moved "back to the land" and adopted philosophies in opposition to the dominant Fordist, mass-consumer model of society. Cultural sociologists of the New Age phenomenon link its emergence to professional-managerial class discontentment with bureaucratic corporate liberalism, apocalyptic high technology, and the impersonal "conformist" nature of contemporary society. For Sam Binkley, New Age narratives of "self-loosening" helped members of the middle class to negotiate the flexible modernity of the 1970s, with its crises of environment, war, and restructuring of work and family. "Modernities," Binkley writes, "develop in their conjunctural specificity, at the interstices opened up by emerging and receding patterns of life."[91] A set of amorphous attitudes emerged which were prefigured by more politically articulate documents like the 1962 Port Huron Statement. Resisting the strictures of industrial society meant not only opposing this or that policy, it meant attempting to embody the world one desires by "letting one's hair down" and "going with the flow." Andrew Ross sees a shared social critique between the New Age discourses of the seventies and nineties, and the field of cultural studies, a description that characterizes many of the positions Butler adopts in her fiction.

> The small-scale imperative of New Age's cooperative communitarianism brings with it a host of potentially critical positions: against big, centralized bureaucracies; against big, transnational business conglomerates; against large-scale, and environmentally destructive technologies; against the imperialist claims

[91] Binkley, 29.

> made on the basis of strong nationalism; and against monolithic institutions in education, industry, religion, and the nuclear family.[92]

In both its content and in the way it circulates in the world of the novels, Butler's conception of *Earthseed: The Books of the Living*, bears a striking resemblance to the worldview and print culture of the New Age literature in the seventies. Binkley considers the "book as tool" in much countercultural discourse. Books, newsletters, and magazines became focal points for bringing together lifestyle communities interested in "remaking real life through print."[93] The publication was a therapeutic manual for the self and society, capable of aligning the romantic project of self-creation with the outward commitment to the social good. Accompanying this was the rise of the "intimate professional." This new form of "loose" expertise "had to be humanized and individualized, and the basis for his knowledge had to be dislodged from the distanced, remote, and abstract pedagogy of the old Fordist managerial supervisor and fashioned again as real intimate knowledge—the kind that can be gained only from direct experience, learning, and personal growth in one's life."[94] Lauren Olamina's "hyperempathy" equips her with a special ability to feel other's mental and physical anguish and her diaries accompany Earthseed as quasi-religious text that testifies to the personal experience and authenticity of its author. Wanzo observes that, for Olamina, "hyperempathy" abolishes the distinction between delusion and fiction, and the real is the domain of feeling, which tells us how Butler understands fiction working on people and intervening to produce the liberal community of feeling.

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[92] Ross, 69.

[93] Binkley, 103.

[94] Binkley, 79.

Books are depicted as incredibly useful, but ultimately reliant on the reader to put it to use through interpretation and action in a context. In *Parable of the Sower,* Olamina convinces Jo to look through her family's books. "Books aren't going to save us," Jo replies. "Nothing is going to save us. If we don't save ourselves, we're dead," Olamina counters: "Is there anything on your family bookshelves that might help you if you were stuck outside? […] Any kind of survival information from encyclopedias, biographies, anything that helps you learn to live off the land and defend ourselves. Even some fiction might be useful."[95] Olamina's apparent disregard for genre is actually a respect for the diverse sources from which knowledge might be attained. Later, she remarks that her "grandmother left a whole bookcase of old science fiction novels."[96] Reading these prepared her to recognize the trope of the "company-city" in the town of Olivar and to recognize how the heroic overthrowing of "the company" never happens in real life. Her only option is to escape her "disintegrating neighborhood" to found Earthseed. "I used to wait for the explosion, the big crash, the sudden chaos that would destroy the neighborhood," she writes, recognizing the failure of traditional narratives to map her reality: "Instead, things are unraveling, disintegrating bit by bit."[97] While the plots of these science fiction novels proved unrealistic, their content inspired her to follow reports on the Anglo-Japanese cosmological station's discovery of "life-bearing" worlds and to imagine Earthseed's mission to "take root among the stars." "Life alone is enough," she writes. "There *is* life out there… just a few light years away, and the United States is

[95] Butler (1993), 59.

[96] Butler (1993), 123.

[97] Butler (1993), 123.

busy drawing back from even our nearby dead worlds."[98] Olamina's use of "old hat" science fiction lies in its ability to speak simultaneously to the earthly and extra-terrestrial imagination, even if the plots offer unrealistic narratives. Here, Butler is responding to the failure of conventional plots in which the hero that overcomes the chaotic event; she writes of disintegration and slow violence, distributed heroics and small acts.

Butler often speaks of the relevance of fiction to political movements. Her negative examples are Andrew Macdonald's *The Turner Diaries*, and *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. These racist fictions created speculative narratives, e.g. race war or Jewish conspiracy, which readers were invited to either carry out or prevent from happening.[99] *Parable of the Talents* is in many ways a narrative of the how a community utilizes a particular text in order to resist a fascist movement. The status of fiction and the "truth" of Earthseed is raised in a conversation between Olamina and her brother, Marcus, who is influenced by Jarret's propaganda and thinks it is a cult. Olamina describes it as "a collection of truths… just one collection of thoughts that are true."[100] To which he replies, "But you made Earthseed up. Or if you didn't make it up, you read it or heard about it somewhere." She gives him a rock. "If I were to analyze this stone and find out exactly what it's made of, would that mean I made it up?" Blending scientific and social-humanistic description, Olamina situates Earthseed outside of the traditional genres of writing. "All the truths of Earthseed existed somewhere before I found them and put them together. They were in the patterns of history, in science, philosophy,

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[98] Butler (1993), 83.

[99] Octavia Butler, "'Radio Imagination:' Octavia Butler on the Poetics of Narrative Embodiment," *MELUS* 26.1 (2001): 45-76.

[100] Butler (1998), 126.

religion, or literature. I didn't make any of them up," she argues. Marcus accuses her of making "Earthseed up the same way you would have made a novel up if you wrote one." She replies: "Except by that definition, a novel is fiction. Don't call Earthseed fiction."[101] For her characters, this genre blending text gives them a common narrative that enables their project of community building amidst repression. Butler understands her own fiction as serving a similar purpose—a narrative intervention that readers will have to make real. In interviews about the utility of fiction in *Parable* novels, Butler links fiction with religion as a tool to shape and direct societies. She suggests that a forward-looking and naturalistic religion might direct humanity's cultural evolution toward sustainability and exploration of outer-space, and that, "if we are to be anything other than smooth dinosaurs we'd better get out there."[102]

Here, dinosaurs are again the environmental figures of obsolescence in general; however, taking into account the fact that African Americans and non-whites have often been absent from fictional futures of space, this obsolescence is racialized and underscores the importance of a black futurist imaginary. Gil Scott-Heron wrote "Whitey on the Moon" in 1970, highlighting the contradictions between high technology and urban poverty. It might be read in response to Richard Brautigan's 1967 poem, "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace," which imagined a pastoral "cybernetic ecology / where we are free of our labors / and joined back to nature." Butler's work infuses the utopian ideal with the urgent consciousness of bodily injustices, articulating a modernity for the uneven present. "Modernities are never the property of one group,"

[101] Butler (1998), 127.

[102] Butler (2010), 175.

Binkley writes, "much less the unconditioned spirit of an age, but the articulation of moments and temporal trajectories at the reconfigured boundaries between groups."[103] The thread which connects the countercultural politics and New Age lifestyle consumption to the yuppie consumerism of the eighties and nineties is the role it has played in the professional-managerial class navigating (and creating) the niche economy of post-Fordism. Butler repurposes the tropes of this often white-coded discourse to speak to the anxieties of the neoliberal nineties, fashioning a survival ideology and what Paul Gilroy might call a "planetary humanism" for a multi-ethnic community in a future, post-apocalyptic America.[104]

Butler's science fiction has taken on increased political importance. The recent publication of *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements,* testifies to the continued, and increasing, relevance of the speculative genre for reform and revolution minded writers and activists. "Whenever we envision a world without war, without prisons, without capitalism, we are producing visionary fiction," writes editor, Walidah Imarisha. "Organizers and activists envision, and try to create, such worlds all the time."[105] Here, the explicit utopian desire of fiction becomes a tool for activists to imagine worlds besides this one. The affirmation of utopian desire offered by the editors of *Octavia's Brood*, however, differs slightly from thinkers in the historical materialist tradition. Adorno recognized that all art carries a utopian dimension, or promise of

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[103] Binkley, 29.

[104] Paul Gilroy, "Third Stone from the Sun: Planetary Humanism and Strategic Universalism," *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[105] Adrienne Maree Brown and Walidah Imarisha (eds.), *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* (Oakland: AK Press, 2015).

fulfillment, implicating the present society for its contradictions and erasures of suffering. Even the experience of injury or "damaged life" implies a normative conception of health or wholeness. Speculation may also be prone to becoming a battle over competing ideal images of the world, which may scuttle the very effort to organize people around collective projects. Rather than situating people by way of speculative visions of fulfillment, we might instead situate speculation by way of people. If Earthseed serves as Butler's example of how a speculative text might serve the interests of a particular community—rather than vice versa—then the question of who should have a larger presence in the speculative and imaginary work of social movements is answered by collections like *Octavia's Brood.*

Recent books like Carolyn Finney's *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors,* and historical case studies like Andrew Hurley's *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980,* have joined a chorus of scholarship in writing African-American historical experience back into the cultural economy of nature.[106] Ecocritics have revisited Harlem Renaissance writers like Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston, as well as later chroniclers of alienation in industrial capitalism, such as William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*.[107] Working against notions that African Americans either do not care

[106] Carolyn Finney, *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2014); Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

[107] Joni Adamson and Kimberly Ruffin (eds), *American Studies, Ecocriticism, and Citizenship: Thinking and Acting in the Local and Global Commons* (New York: Routledge, 2013); John Claborn, "From Black Marxism to Industrial Ecosystem: Racial and Ecological Crisis in William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 55.3 (2009): 566-595.

about the environment, or are so destitute as to be unable to create imaginative and meaningful relationships with the natural world and its inhabitants—which, for Butler includes outer space—these authors complicate and situate blackness in the past, present, and future of environmental thought.

Finney's book closes on a story of her family's former home in New York. Sometime after they had moved away, they received a letter informing them that their land had been included in a trust and would be protected watershed habitat for the extensive wildlife. "What caught my attention," she writes, "was how the author of the letter thanked the current owner for his 'generosity and conservation mindedness,' but says nothing about my parents, who cared for that land for fifty years, with no 'conservation easement' or other environmental incentives." "I believe," she continues, "that my parents are part of a larger story of people seen and unseen whose relationship to the environment is one forged in sweat, ingenuity, necessity, and a little true grit."[108] This touching tribute to her parents' unrecognized labor of conservation shares in the spirit of Wendell Berry, whose small-is-beautiful, property-owner ethic of conservation speaks to the scale of daily life in the discourses of environmental justice: "the places where we live, work, and play." However, this environmental ideal—the small property owner / farmer as the basis of a democratic social order—inherits the Jeffersonian vision of democracy whose agrarian and rural basis relied on unfree pools of labor, and, as Bayard Rustin argued in his promotion of industrial democracy,[109] is not a workable or

[108] Finney, 137.

[109] Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement," *Commentary Magazine* 1 February 1965, Web Accessed 20 May 2016; "The Failure of Black Separatism," *Harper's Magazine,* January (1970): 25-34, Web Accessed 20 May 2016.

effective model for the 20th century urban political economy, let alone millennial neoliberalism which relies on atomized entrepreneurialism as the basis of its flexible extractions of resources and wealth. Neoliberalism is often said to promote a "racially enlightened" meritocratic ethos while intensifying inequality and a nostalgic green moralism that speaks of "sweat, ingenuity, necessity, and true grit," would make itself rhetorically available in naturalizing austerity.[110]

Butler's Earthseed vision of sustainable community resilience may already be at work in food gardens and urban agriculture projects across the country. However, as Jodi Dean provocatively puts it: "Goldman Sachs doesn't care if you raise chickens." Dean's underlying assumption is that small-scale urban farming is not a challenge to the financial order. It is, in many instances, a boutique practice which blurs the line between radical project and backyard hobby. However, in the case of cities like Detroit, urban agriculture has become a necessary matter of people feeding themselves and providing community-building opportunities in the wake of the financial crisis of 2008—an event which brought into sharp relief the long-term destruction of the black middle class in the decline of Fordism. For Butler, survival is itself a heroic act of overcoming both nature and society, each of which exhibit processes that one must shape to one's own ends, content with the knowledge that one will be changed in the process. It is a shame that it only becomes a practical alternative, or adaptive strategy, in the wake of catastrophe.

[110] For outstanding work on this trend, see Jennifer M. Silva, *Coming up Short: Working-Class Adulthood in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), and Lester Spence, *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics* (New York: Punctum Books, 2015); Spence's example of Jay Z's famous line, "I'm not a businessman, I'm a *business*, man," is an instance of the neoliberal *vitalpolitik* in action.

Vitalist Style

Life finds a way, but which life? Horkheimer and Adorno write that "the great artists were never those whose work embodied style in its least fractured, most perfect form but those who adopted style as a rigor to set against the chaotic expression of suffering as a negative truth."[111] It is in this light we can situate the turn to vitalism—in examples like *Parable's* Earthseed and *Jurassic Park*—as a will to affirm adaptation and flexibility in the face of economic-environmental hardship. We can read this desperate vitalism as the "negative truth" of the deregulatory era. In their critiques of the Fordist dream of total administration, the Frankfurt School thinkers shared with their opponent, Martin Heidegger, an understanding of vitalism as "a protest against reification that became complicit with reification."[112] Daniel Bell would later recognize the "cultural contradictions of capitalism" which require disciplined comportment in the workplace and wild rebellion in the ethos of market consumers.[113] As the seventies came to a close, Foucault anticipated a neoliberalism that constructed the self as an active, even disruptive, entrepreneurial project, a *vitalpolik* in which the "basic units" of life have become an enterprise, while the Italian philosophers of post-Fordism have argued that melting distinctions between society and the natural world has resulted in a generalized biopolitical *opportunism* that clothes those already within the networks of privilege with

[111] Horkheimer and Adorno, 103.

[112] Wesley Phillips, *Metaphysics and Music in Adorno and Heidegger* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2. The well-known example is commercial jazz which, as Jeffrey Nealon notes, was criticized by both Adorno and Amiri Baraka alike for offering a reified experience of freedom; see *Post-Postmodernism; or, the Cultural Logic of Just-In-Time Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 107.

[113] Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (New York, Basic, 1996).

a naturalized legitimacy. For some, this may be a romantic project of self-creation, but for the majority, the compulsion to flexibility is a market-driven response to an inflexible social environment.

John Rieder argues that science fiction cannot be separated from the context of colonialism and the scientific ideas that continue to inform the imagination of difference. "Evolutionary theory and anthropology, both profoundly intertwined with colonial ideology and history, are especially important to early science fiction from the mid-nineteenth century on," he writes.[114] "The complex mixture of ideas about competition, adaptation, race, and destiny that was in part generated by evolutionary theory," was a focal point of nineteenth and early-twentieth century politics. It should come as no surprise then that both Crichton and Butler take the natural sciences, now with updated chaos, complexity, and "postclassical theory," as the basis for new models of thinking community, the individual, race, and the environment.[115] Crichton's depiction of the professional/expert was tied to a critique of commercialized knowledge and technical ability to intervene into "life," while Butler's "intimate professional," Lauren Olamina, derives her expertise from empathy, a liberal social value, which has become the inborn biological condition, "hyperempathy." Crichton articulated his appeals to complexity with a broadly antiregulatory politics, and his own speeches assisted in materially constructing the obfuscating discourses of corporate-funded climate change denial. Butler's readers must ask themselves with what politics her vision of complexity might

[114] John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 2.

[115] Barbara Herrnstein Smith and Arkady Plotnitsky, *Mathematics, Science, and Post-Classical Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

be articulated, or whether it will become another personal cosmology of lifestyle consumption amid the broader market multiculturalism.

By staging the conflict as *control* vs. *life*, radically different conceptions of life are elided: life as biology, life as meta-biological evolutionary "striving," life as metaphysical will of individuals or collectives, and life as transgressive, self-organized "emergent" markets against the "embedded" markets of Keynesian welfare states. This elision transforms *life*—as an idea of nature—into an ideological pivot point. "Life finds a way" characterizes the social attitude of neoliberal transformations of the public and private sectors, its affirmational character. In *Life after Politics*, John Gray reminds us that Thatcherism and Reaganism were essentially "a modernizing project with profound and irreversible consequences for political life."[116] Gray would later argue that Hayek's vision of unregulated markets failed to engender the spontaneous development of order and has proved to be the final twentieth century utopia to have enlisted life in the service of the destruction of life.[117] Like earlier modernizations, the maelstrom of activity required in the formation of new markets is presented as the means to escape the boundaries of tradition and history. For Adorno, this vision of chaotic dynamism complements "bourgeois 'a-historicity,'" meaning that the concept enables production to be divorced from social need. Activity itself becomes the desired object, with no necessary end that is pursued.

> The conception of unfettered activity, of uninterrupted procreation, of chubby insatiability, of freedom as frantic bustle, feeds on the bourgeois concept of nature

[116] John Gray, "After Social Democracy," *Life After Politics*, Ed. Geoff Mulgan (London: Fontana, 1997), 325.

[117] John Gray, "The Friedrich Hayek I Knew, and What He got Right—and Wrong," *New Statesman* 30 July 2015. Web Accessed 12 May 2016.

> that has always served solely to proclaim social violence as unchangeable, as a piece of healthy eternity… It is not man's lapse into luxurious indolence that is to be feared, but the savage spread of the social under the mask of universal nature, the collective as a blind fury of activity.[118]

A post-historical vitalism that naturalizes the economic disruptions and precarious social experience of the present can be countered with a literature capable of revealing what remains unchanged. This is what Adorno meant when he wrote that "the task of art today is to bring chaos into order."[119]

[118] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, Trans. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 2002), 156.

[119] Adorno (2002), 222.

CHAPTER V

RETERRITORIALIZING NORTH AMERICA: WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN'S ENVIRONMENTAL MEMORY

> Thus, it is not only the substance of justice, but also the frame, which is in dispute.
>
> Nancy Fraser[1]

> Without a past, no matter how controvertible, the present cannot be anything other than a tumble through darkness towards the darkness which neither past nor present can illuminate.
>
> William T. Vollmann[2]

One of the hundreds of footnotes in William T. Vollmann's *Imperial*, a non-fiction novel set in the agricultural borderlands of California and Mexico, is a quote on "infinity" from *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*: "The presence of a boundary or measure necessarily implies the possibility of exceeding it."[3] Being able to make a distinction means that one has already in some sense internalized what lies beyond the distinction; the territory is the after-effect of the mark. In this Hegelian wisdom from an artifact of a now defunct empire, one can perhaps hear the echoes of Napoleon's cannons. Theodor Adorno famously turns this "infinity" on its head. The implication of his *Negative Dialectics* lies in what he calls "the preponderance of the object."[4] It is the world, in other words, and our relations within that world, which are always in excess of our efforts to measure and bind everything into concepts—attempts, Adorno believes, to violently

[1]Nancy Fraser, "Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World," *New Left Review*, 36 (December 2005): 69-88, 72.

[2] William T. Vollmann, *Imperial* (New York: Viking, 2009), 42.

[3] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 44.

[4] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2003), 183.

impose identities on the non-identical, if not the multiple. Vollmann's plunge into history, as evidenced in his transnational and historiographic metafiction, stages a confrontation with the non-identity of the past and the multiplicity of the present.

In this chapter, I argue that Vollmann's metafictional approach to history *reconstructs* the environmental memory of North America, a memory of a world already in excess of its borders and identities. He creates what Nancy Fraser refers to as "frames of justice" in that he foregrounds the political nature of the narrative act. For Fraser, narrative framing, or what Vollmann calls "delineation," is a necessary third dimension that underlies, and is often excluded from, the discourses of recognition and redistribution.[5] Vollmann's writing dramatizes the work of composing a common world, what Raymond Williams calls "a knowable community," at the beginning of the 21st century. He offers a social and environmental consciousness capable of negotiating the multiple and often conflicting frames through which the transnational struggles over life, land, and labor will be waged.

William T. Vollmann (b. 1959) is known for his wildly prolific career. He has published copious works on subjects like gender in Japanese Noh Theater, to Copernicus' *uncentering* of the Earth, ethnographic journalism on global poverty, and a seven volume treatise on violence. His novels are fragmented and self-referential, and often take an international scope. He won the National Book Award in 2005 for *Europe Central*, his novel on the totalitarian imaginaries of World War II. In addition to being a novelist, he has served as a war correspondent and a travel writer touted with having a "post-tourist

[5] Nancy Fraser, "The Politics of Framing: An Interview with Nancy Fraser by Kate Nash and Vikki Bell," *Scales of Justice: Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 142-159, 145.

gaze."[6] Jeff Williams identifies Vollmann as a member of "Generation Jones." Alongside writers like Jennifer Egan, Jonathan Franzen, Chang-Rae Lee, Richard Powers, Ruth Ozeki, Louise Erdrich, Percival Everett, Sandra Cisneros, and David Foster Wallace, he shares in the answer to the question of what comes after postmodernism, namely the contemporary: a "renewed realism" of the moral and aesthetic kind, "multicultural" and forgiving rather than "adversarial" and nihilistic.[7] Beginning in the mid-1980s, Vollmann's work has rejected the disappointed idealism and apocalyptic cynicism that accompanied the postmodern cultural moment, and participates in what is now somewhat unaffectionately called "the new sincerity." His use of postmodern literary techniques couples antifoundationalism with a democratic and pluralist ethos. Combining humility and responsibility, along with playfulness, beauty, and yes, even irony, Vollmann exposes the gap between intention and effect in a deeply social world whose brutal intransigence often tests the limits of individual agency and understanding.

Vollmann writes in a post-textualist universe, that is, a world that has always been both real and profoundly shaped by our narratives and descriptions of it. As Linda Hutcheon argues, "the conventions of narrative in both historiography and novels are not constraints," but are rather the "enabling conditions of possibility of sense-making."[8] This fidelity in Vollmann's writing to both the narrated and non-narrated world is alternately described by Lawrence Buell as a "dual accountability" in the ecocritic's

[6] Allison Russell, *Crossing Boundaries: Postmodern Travel Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), 156.

[7] Jeffrey J. Williams, "Generation Jones and Contemporary US Fiction," *American Literary History* 28.1 (2015): 94-122, 96.

[8] Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 121.

analysis of nonfictional aesthetics.[9] By writing in a historiographic genre that contains "the intratextual, the intertextual (the world of other texts), the autorepresentational (the text figured as a text), and the outer mimetic (the world outside the text)," Vollmann's literary sensibility reflects the complex array of reference deployed in environmental literature broadly.[10] As a surveyor of violence and abjection in the global economy, his writing situates knowledge as first an act *within* the world, and second, a representation *of* the world. This pragmatist distinction informs both the ethical and epistemological project at the heart of his books. The continuous awareness of his embeddedness approaches an intensity that borders on the scientific, as if the endeavor to categorize and manipulate the diverse array of reference is a constant effort to master reality. Yet this same impulse can also be read as an expression of fidelity to what exists—to the people and places out of which he composes his stories—the kind of fidelity needed if one is to discover how to properly betray it so that it might be transformed.

Vollmann's reconstruction of North American environmental memory re-maps the political imaginary of belonging and exclusion in the post-Fordist era. It is the time of NAFTA, neoliberalism, and what Nancy Fraser calls the "post-Westphalian order" that has replaced the Keynesian welfare state. In Fraser's analysis, the transnationalization of production as well as the globalization of crises (e.g. climate, AIDS, water) has been contested by similar transnational movements that operate both within and beyond the nation-state. Thus, while earlier conceptions of justice based on (economic) redistribution and (cultural) recognition fought it out within the nation-state, a third dimension is now

[9] Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 91.

[10] Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*, 93.

needed: justice at the level of framing, or (political) acts of representation. The first two dimensions focus on the "what" and the "who" of justice, she writes in *New Left Review*, while the frame of representation focuses on the "how."[11] Fraser's "politics of framing" thus reconfigures the political space itself—it draws attention to how political space, memory, and identification is *constituted*, what is included and excluded in that frame, and how those frames are deployed in the service of diverse ends. Similarly, by foregrounding his techniques of literary production, Vollmann exposes the "delineations" of the past that served, and continue to serve, the interests of the powerful. "This book," he writes referring to *Imperial*, "represents my attempt to become a better-informed citizen of North America."[12] His attention to material history creates an environmental memory for readers out of conflicted and hybrid experiences of the past, now obscured by hardening of borders and identities under neoliberalism.[13]

Vollmann is hardly the first US author to concern himself with redefining America. Henry James took up the international context of American identity in his novels, and argued that the novel was the very "art of representation." The novel, James writes, continuously expands "round us in a widening, not in a narrow circle".[14] For Williams, the modern novel that James represents is a response to a "crisis of the knowable community" in which social experience is no longer evenly distributed, nor

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[11] Nancy Fraser, "Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World," *New Left Review* 36 (2005): 69-88, 73.

[12] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 115.

[13] Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

[14] Henry James quoted in Richard Chase, *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (New York: Gordian Press, 1978), 22.

transparent to all members of a society.[15] The expanded art of representation expands the moral, ethical, and political imaginations of readers. Richard Rorty, channeling John Dewey, has this in mind when he speaks of "justice as a larger loyalty" and the importance of telling "sad stories in the public sphere."[16] Aldo Leopold's land ethic was infused with narrative: Odysseus' execution of slave girls *as property* is juxtaposed with brutal treatment of land as property. Without posing an eternal definition of justice, literature can encourage the expansion of recognition, solidarity, and broaden frames of consideration beyond the limits of current institutional contradictions. It does this through reframing the locations and perspectives of the primary actors, laying bare the unjust "enabling conditions" of the narrative descriptions and categories that maintain the present order. In what follows, I outline the concept of environmental memory and how it serves as a "frame of justice" in two Vollmann texts: *The Ice-Shirt* and *Imperial*.

The concept of "environmental memory" has been, as Lawrence Buell observes, "used and abused."[17] Memory is often thought to be more authentic and closer to interior experience than history, yet both memory and interiority are made possible by technical prosthetics such as texts, images, objects, and languages.[18] Environmental memory is as

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[15] Raymond Williams, *The English Novel: From Dickens to Lawrence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 14.

[16] Richard Rorty, "Justice as a Larger Loyalty," *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, Eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998), 45-58, 45.

[17] Lawrence Buell, "Uses and Abuses of Environmental Memory," *Counter Nature/s*, Ed. Steven Hartman (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2014), 31-56.

[18] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Beardsworth and Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

much a prosthetic invention, subject to its own rules of selection and historical transmission, as it is the accumulation of unmediated encounters in a particular place. This transmission, as Axel Goodbody suggests, can be understood by taking a "cultural memory approach to environmental texts," that is, by examining how texts narratively reconstruct past social relationships with nature. Goodbody takes an interest in geographic realities as "symbolic entities" which are "remembered and imagined, which play a central role in subject constitution, and serve crucial political, social, and cultural functions."[19] Guarding against the myopic particularism of the local and the false universality of the global, Goodbody argues that recompositions of the past can rewrite previously unquestioned spatial identifications in ways that expand the realm of ethics and politics to include those who were previously viewed as not belonging or unworthy of consideration. For Fraser, this exclusion is based on "misframing" and constitutes a "meta-injustice" as it becomes the basis for later claims.[20] Thus, Goodbody turns to writers who attempt to redress these exclusions, and who reconstruct cultural memory by calling attention to "their own authorial strategies of representation and construction," unpacking the process of individual and collective memory formation itself:

> [M]emories are not stores of complete sets of sense data, but consist rather of fragments of experience…which must be reactivated in processes linking them up into coherent patterns of information. This process of "re-membering" the raw experiential data explains why memories are subjective and context-dependent,

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[19] Axel Goodbody, "Sense of Place and *Lieu de Mémoire*: A Cultural Memory Approach to Environmental Texts." *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches.* Ed. Kate Rigby (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2011), 55-67, 57.

[20] Fraser, "The Politics of Framing," 144.

and why they often tell us as much about the present needs and desires of the remembering subject as they do about the past.[21]

For Goodbody, memory describes a compositional process that binds disparate elements of information and experience into meaningful patterns which are part of the larger movement of subject formation within a historical—that is to say, narrative—context. This is environmental and cultural memory at the individual level. Lawrence Buell's categories of environmental memory, on the other hand, are not tied to an individual experience or medium. Instead, his categories allow environmental memory to be defined by its formation and use across multiple time-scales and constellations. These timescales are: the *biogeological*, which frames human life-spans and meaning within planetary ecological time; the *personal*, defined by individual experience of places; the *social/collective*, that is, narratives that relate people to their generational and intergenerational experience in their environs; and finally, the *national*, which draws on Benedict Anderson's "imagined community" defined by circulating media whose timescale emerges with its sense of shared identity and relation to place as political territory.[22] Buell avoids reducing environmental memory to any one of these particular time-scales so as to focus on the different social processes and media through which that memory is formed and circulated. Paul Ricoeur formulates this well, arguing that "we are not capable of producing a concept of time that is at once cosmological, biological,

[21] Goodbody, 58.

[22] Buell, "Uses and Abuses of Environmental Memory," 33.

historical and individual." It is only through "the activity of narrative," he continues, that we can construct "coherent temporal ensembles: in order to configure time."[23]

Memory is understood here as a narrative act of framing with the capability of composing new subjects and new histories. Just as Rorty argues that "the principle backup for historiography is not philosophy but the arts," the role of the artist is not to passively reflect but to actively compose new frames.[24] Historiographic metafiction is a genre that consciously foregrounds its own narrative conventions as an element of the history it interrogates; as such, it is the ideal medium for explicitly reconfiguring the differing timescales and range of references that compose environmental memory, and the political frames that memory serves. Linda Hutcheon warns, however, that although this mode of writing "reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining… in so doing it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge."[25] It carries with it a certain danger, a danger we might call the political. Rather than accepting history as given it explores the empirical construction of that history, the retroactive creation of memory, and auto-ascription of social meaning. Vollmann expands the environmental identifications of contemporary subjects by recapitulating Goodbody's process of "re-membering" in the provisional and contingent nature of his metafiction.

Environmental Memory and *The Ice-Shirt*

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[23] Quoted in Paul Virilio, *The Lost Dimension* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), 103.

[24] Richard Rorty, "Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism," *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth,* (New York: Cambridge, 1991), 197-202, 200.

[25] Hutcheon, 89.

The Ice-Shirt is the first of seven novels in Vollmann's as yet unfinished project, *Seven Dreams: A Book of North American Landcapes*. He began writing after the signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the US and Canada in 1988, and published two volumes by the time NAFTA was extended to Mexico. While the economic consolidation of the continent may provide political motivation for re-imagining its cultural and environmental history, it takes on new geo-historical relevance in the Anthropocene. *The Ice-Shirt* tells the story of the "coming of the frost" to North America, a material and environmental symbol of violent competition over resources. Inspired by medieval Icelandic manuscripts like the 14th century *Flateyjarbók, The Ice-Shirt* rewrites the 13th century *Greenlanders' saga* and *Eirik's saga*, adding imaginative detail to the Norse "discovery" of America and their interactions with the indigenous "Skraelings" in the late 10th century. Vollmann's retelling combines the family sagas with the mythology and oral traditions of the Greenlandic Inuit and Newfoundland Micmac. His novel is a hybrid of history and fiction, contemporary travel writing, and speculative ecology, in which a cacophony of physical, spiritual, and human agencies come into conflict and anthropogenically inaugurate the "little ice age" of the 13th century.

In the most recent wave of globalization, the attempt to re-write the eco-cultural history of North America has been taken up by writers like Leslie Marmon Silko and Karen Yamashita. However, Buell argues that Vollmann's "septet of novels on the (dis)arrangement of North America over the thousand-year period of Eurosettler-Native contact… qualifies as the hands-down boldest attempt ever launched at fictionally historicizing the whole trajectory of modern American 'civilization' from first contact to

the near present."[26] Each novel in this "disarrangement" depicts a different moment (terrain) of conflict and exchange between the indigenous inhabitants of what we now call North America and people of European descent. Beginning this history with the Vinland Vikings offers a non-Columbian genealogy of contact. These clashes are semiotic and material, and are as much over land itself as over the social aspirations the land represents. The goal of *Seven Dreams*, as Vollmann writes, "has been to create a 'Symbolic History'—that is to say, an account of origins and metamorphoses… whose untruths further a deeper sense of truth."[27] This symbolic history speaks to the continuities that define North Americans as the heirs of these struggles in the present.

The Ice-Shirt is not altogether different from the sagas it re-imagines. "The blending of truth and fiction in *The Ice-Shirt*," argues Peter Christiansen, "continues the tradition of the sagas themselves."[28] Christiansen sees Vollmann as "updating Icelandic traditions" in that the saga manuscripts, being themselves a series of reproductions with little claim to an original source beyond question, simply pre-date modern distinctions between fact and fiction on which the generic conventions of realism, and the modern novel, rest.[29] Of course, medieval Icelanders had notions of truth and falsehood; but they also had "synthetic truth" as Steblin-Kamenskij claims, which is different than post-Enlightenment divisions between natural knowledge and cultural construction. Similarly,

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[26] Lawrence Buell, *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2014), 457.

[27] William Vollmann, "Note," *The Ice-Shirt* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 397.

[28] Peter Christiansen, "William T. Vollmann's *The Ice-Shirt*: Updating Icelandic Traditions." *CRITIQUE* 38.1 (1996): 52-67, 53.

[29] Christiansen, 56.

Hutcheon argues that "historiographic metafiction refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity."[30] What this means is that just as environmental historians today attempt to fill out their history by turning to hybrid texts like the sagas, they—like the writers of the sagas themselves—are involved in a creative project, producing narrative knowledge out of numerous sources and accounts. When Vollmann disrupts his narrative with references to particular saga manuscripts and openly considers his authorial decisions within the text, he challenges the "truth claims" of received history. At the same time he includes the reader in a similar project of reconstructing and reframing the "synthetic truth" of the sagas and North American history.

Larry McCaffery observes that Vollmann's "elaborate series of source notes and footnotes" in *The Ice-Shirt* go beyond mere listing of sources, but include "discussions about his intentions in employing his sources and correspondence with experts in the field who comment on (and occasionally disagree with) specific interpretations."[31] He employs "William the Blind" as *The Ice-Shirt*'s internal author to foreground his hand at work in recomposing the world of the sagas. Introducing contingency in his telling of the story is also a way of introducing contingency into the past itself, which may not coincide with the reader's imagination of that past. Different manuscript accounts—e.g.

[30] Hutcheon, 93.

[31] Larry McCaffery and Michael Hemmingson (eds). *Expelled From Eden: A William T. Vollmann Reader* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2004), *xxiv.*

Islendingabók,[32] *Hauksbók,*[33] *Speculum Regale,*[34]—contain alternative details of events and place descriptions. Add to this William the Blind's dabbling in Micmac orthography and their mythology of shapeshifters, and Vollmann has not only challenged the image of a settled past, but has undone the very notion of stable beings and the correspondence of language (or writing) with the world. More "realistic" passages sometimes include badly drawn illustrations of flowers and artifacts (e.g. Freydis' bone comb), as if to remind the reader that the written word is yet another variety of badly drawn reality. Illustrated maps, for instance, include explanatory notes like: "A highly unreliable sketch-map of places mentioned in the sketch-map of this sketch-map;" and trace anachronistic routes and modes of travel: "Seth Pilsk (by Boeing 747)" and "Freydis Eiriksdottir (by Ship)."[35] One of the central themes of *Seven Dreams* is that geographical environments are a palimpsest of imagination, technology, and power. If the past is not settled, if it really is "a different country" and open to interpretation, then the present isn't as settled as it appears.

William the Blind's version of the Vinland sagas places greater emphasis on Freydis Eiriksdottir, a figure traditionally maligned for having murdered other colonists and infamous for frightening off Skraelings by slapping her naked breasts with a sword. Freydis is granted an interiority that is previously absent, but this emphasis on her motivation comes at a price. She becomes the primary human agent of the "coming of the

[32] Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt*, 123.

[33] Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt*, 154.

[34] Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt*, 176.

[35] Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt*, 206.

frost." Her mysterious pregnancy, which only appears in one of the "original" sagas, is explained by her love/hate relationship with demonic glacier beings, Blue-Shirt and Amortortak, as well as by her seduction of the mythical Micmac hero, Kluskap. "What do you really want?" Kluskap asks her, "I want to be rich," she replies. After he recalls the timber, game, grapes, and skins that her people have enriched themselves with—even offering to smooth things out with his "People" over the Skraelings she had killed—Kluksap asks what more she could want. "I want *everything*," she replies.[36] He implants the Frost-Seed in her, marking the passage from coldness as a physical agency of nature to an affect and a relation that circulates among humans within the landscape.

This "exchange" between Nordic woman and Micmac hero is followed by Freydis' dream in which various personified earthly forces across the North Atlantic do battle: Kluskap; the Mountain; the Hill; Blue-Shirt's sea trolls; EARTHQUAKE; COOLPUJOT—the Power of the seasons; Sun; and finally, AMORTORTAK, who attempts to remove Kluskap's shirt so that "the Plant People and Animal People would fade and die and Vinland would become a dull grey rock of lifeless neutrality, which he could then clothe in the Ice-Shirt."[37] By personifying geo-physical forces with names drawn from would-be European colonial settlers and indigenous North Americans the narrator is able to "explain" an otherwise massively distributed climatic process in anthropogenic terms. Were this written in 2014, Vollmann might have included an Indonesian volcano named *Lombok*, whose eruption in 1257 CE is now attributed with

[36] Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt*, 260.

[37] Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt*, 273.

the drop in temperatures across the North Atlantic.[38] His imaginative explanation does not reduce the coming of the frost to any singular act or natural occurrence. However, since Freydis' intercourse with spirits of both Indigenous and Icelandic tradition initiates the "little ice age," the asymmetrical responsibility lies with the Nordic Greenlanders.

Freydis embodies the economic and environmental motivations driving transnational expansion. An economic relation to place pervades the characters' interactions, such as Thorvald's death scene. Thorvald spends his final moments with his son discussing the economic prospects of Breidafjord. "This place will not bring any profit to you," he tells Eirik, "When I die let the glacier creep down over this house." This exchange is followed immediately by a quote from an Iceland Vacation Planner brochure from 1987. It reads: "We're Rich in Viking Heritage, We're Uncommon Good Fun and… We're Very Affordable."[39] A section epigraph from Thoreau's *Walden* reminds readers that coldness is not simply a natural fact, but also a social relation: "The poor man is wont to complain that this is a cold world, and to cold, no less physical than social, we refer directly a great part of our ails."[40] In other words, to the poor person coldness is experienced as a social relation as much as an absolute condition. Adorno would often use "coldness" to characterize the affect of bourgeois morality. The metaphorical slippage of coldness between environmental experience and social affect in

[38] Franck Lavigne, et al. "Source of the great A.D. 1257 mystery eruption unveiled, Samalas Volcano, Rinjani Volcanic Complex, Indonesia," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America.* 110.42 (2013): 16742-16747.

[39] Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt*, 61.

[40] Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt*, 328.

Vollmann's work suggests a historical mediation by an economy that transforms human relations into a new "state of nature."

Indeed, environmental memory is bound up with economic rationality, as we see in the forty year period (ca. 1010-1050) in which timber scarcity in Greenland is supplemented by violent Vinland harvests.[41] A passage written by a visitor to L'Anse-aux-Meadows, Newfoundland, in 1987, describes the mossy, peaceful ruins in a treeless landscape; unidentified bones lay under slabs, close to the surface. "The sun in late afternoon best illuminates thoughts which are melancholy," the visitor observes, "What takes root on this great cold plain of historical remembrance, with its snowdrifts and cold hard outcroppings… Nothing but trees grown bad and grey; and seagulls, icebergs, half-dead grass. The rest is buried or blown away."[42] The abandoned land now seems to bear little capable of engendering either memory or history. This stark absence is its own content in that the trace of past environmental exploitation threatens even the memory of it ever having occurred.

The Ice-Shirt demonstrates that environmental memory is not just something "outside" culture, in the landscape, but is profoundly social and carried through material culture. William the Blind's reference to *Flateyjarbók*—the urtext of *The Ice-Shirt*—as "that poor dead bundle of a hundred and thirteen calfskins," evokes the materiality of environmental memory as it is fashioned out of "elements" of the environment itself.[43] Environmental memory is constitutively bound up with melancholy, a mood that comes

[41] Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt*, 330.

[42] Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt*, 337.

[43] Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt*, 10.

from being unable to properly mourn for the lost object, perhaps because it is not lost. "Do we carry our landscapes with us locked in our ice-hearts," his Newfoundland narrator asks, "and can we fit them over what was there just as we can clothe ourselves forever in the stiff and crackling cloaks that lie in the churchyard permafrost at Herjolfsness?"[44] Herjolfsness is a Greenland settlement that contains an archive of preserved clothing that had been re-fashioned into burial shrouds. Vollmann writes to make this transformation of the material into the metaphorical (and back) visible across time and space. "Carrying our landscapes with us" *is* environmental memory. The internalized material and affective responses to past environments are carried into new terrains; however, these lived attachments to material places and objects can just as easily become death shrouds if they are meant to preserve an unchanging subject. In this way, Vollmann's fiction asserts the prosthetic nature, whether textual or textile, of environmental memory.

Framing (In)Justice in *Imperial*

Whereas *Seven Dreams* is historiographic metafiction that adds a materialist component to the "symbolic history" of North American environments, *Imperial* is metafictional historiography that exposes the politics of frame-making. Ostensibly a non-fiction novel, *Imperial* attempts to tell the history and to represent the *entity*—the spatial, temporal, geographical, peopled, racialized, farmed, financialized, irrigated, polluted, diverted, policed, bordered, militarized, and undocumented, entity—known as Imperial

[44] Vollmann, *The Ice-Shirt*, 340.

Valley, California: the "continuum between Mexico and America."[45] It is as much about the agricultural and labor history of the valley, and the border cities of Mexicali and Calexico, as it is about Vollmann's efforts to tell its story. This encyclopedic novel took over a decade to write and, at over 1300 pages, it "reads" at the very limits of narrative itself. The book is a fragmented and halting assemblage of "post-natural" nature writing, interviews, ethnography, photographs, and short stories, shot through with legal documents, disembodied quotations, and archival ingenuity that builds a composite mosaic of past and present. Vollmann's reconstruction of Imperial's history interrogates how societies and their environments condition one another, and how the memory of that conditioning is created, who creates it, and for whom.

Imperial began as an attempt to tell the story of migrant farm workers seasonally smuggling themselves back and forth across the border but sprawled into a textual monument that threatens to undo itself with each additional vignette and chapter. The central problem of the novel is established in a section titled "Delineations." After having documented the military securitization, violence (both slow and fast), and agricultural pollution that has served to spatially delineate Imperial valley, Vollmann turns his attention to the political implications of *Imperial*, the book. He describes Imperial as "an entity invisible everywhere except in its representations, whose substance is comprised of equal parts imagination, measurement, memory, authority and jurisdiction!" "Delineation," he continues, "is the merest, absurdist fiction, yet delineation engenders *control*"[46] By this he means to question the existence of Imperial apart from its

[45] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 1116.

[46] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 44.

imbrications in the designs of those who have represented it and organized it in their own interests.

As his book is in part a compilation of the ways the valley has been framed in order to exploit it, so too must he include his own effort within that genealogy. Like the valley, *Imperial* the book can also be said to be "invisible everywhere except in its representations," in that the documentary realism of nonfiction often appears as an invisible or transparent mediation. It is not until it is represented as such that the writing becomes visible as writing, that is, situated, enmeshed, or mutually determined in some way by what it is attempting to describe. Vollmann relies on past descriptions and not-so-subtly integrates them into the main text, often italicized, as he does in one of many water-related examples. "A century earlier," he writes, "it had been like this…" He then enters a passage lifted from a 1902 letter published in the Santa Ana Herald:

> *The contrast was noticeable. North of this imaginary line were modern structures, stores, shops and the commodious offices of the Imperial Water company, with vegetation on all sides, while on the south of it the eye rested upon a few Indian brush teepees scattered among the mesquite bushes that spread over a vast desert beyond.* And before that, of course, all this had been Mexico.[47]

Recognized as an "imaginary line" back in 1902, the border becomes a delineating instrument for producing and organizing environmental difference instead of separating already distinct social entities according to their "naturalized" geo-political territory. The border produces an appearance of causality, in that differences of development are seen as the cause of the border rather than an effect of the border. The Imperial Water Company did not settle there because the ground was already lush; the lushness in the otherwise dry terrain is the result of irrigation brought by Imperial Water,

[47] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 42.

irrigation that diverts water north of the border before it continues south to Mexico proper. This delineation rests on the even earlier brutal delineations of the 15th-18th centuries under New Spain. After quoting a 16th century Spanish judge who knowingly plotted the destruction of Indian society through land policy, Vollmann wants his readers "to understand the role which delineation plays in all this—or redelineation, I should say, for doubtless each Indian pueblo had its own shape before it gets enclosed, transected, shattered."[48] "How could the results of redelineation be any different," he asks, implicating his own writing.[49] Vollmann critically understands the mediating role of artistic production within what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe as the deterritorializing and reterritorializing activity of *all* societies; his writing is attentive to the *acceleration* of this movement in capitalist modernization, and the accompanying effects of proliferating technologies of representation.

The understanding of deterritorialization has been muddled by cultural critics who are too quick to associate deterritorialization solely with modernization and global capitalism. Even ecocritic Ursula Heise, in her groundbreaking formulation and defense of (deterritorialized) eco-cosmopolitanism, receives her reading of Deleuze and Guattari second hand, through various modernity theorists ranging from Arjun Appadurai to Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck.[50] The resulting effort repeats a familiar romantic narrative: non- or pre-modern societies (or sometimes just poor people) are implicitly

[48] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 192.

[49] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 193.

[50] Ursula Heise, "Deterritorialization and Eco-Cosmopolitanism," *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 50-62.

figured as embodiments of wholeness and interconnectedness, and "tribal peoples, peasants, or hunters of past centuries, whose subsistence depended on their familiarity with the surrounding ecosystems," are disrupted by the various mobilities of global modernity.[51] While Heise challenges this narrative—familiarity with the surrounding ecosystems is quite different than the Romantic pact between the beautiful soul and the noble savage—the implicit identification of deterritorialization with modernization obscures the territorializing work of the societies in question and risks becoming another iteration of the naturalized "people without history" by positioning subaltern peoples as the static half of a binary: "their" nature to "our" history, "their" being to "our" becoming.

Deleuze and Guattari attribute the conception that "primitive" or non-European societies are "dominated by archetypes and their repetition" to ideologists of "a tragic Judeo-Christian consciousness" that understands the invention of history as a fall. "If what is called history is a dynamic and open social reality," they write, "in a state of functional disequilibrium, or an oscillating equilibrium […] comprising not only institutionalized conflicts but conflicts that generate changes, revolts, ruptures, and scissions, then primitive societies are fully inside history, and far distant from the stability, or even from the harmony, attributed to them."[52] Understanding the historicity of traditional practices and knowledge as something that is actively constructed is what separates the concept of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) from the racist trope of the naturalized non-European. Without such active territorialization, what Deleuze and

[51] Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet,* 55.

[52] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus,* Trans. Robert Hurley, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), 150.

Guattari call a "primitive territorial machine," a *socius* would be impossible.[53] Not unlike Marx's primitive accumulation, which was never historically fixed but appears in neoliberal form as "accumulation by dispossession," the primitive territorial machine is the continuous writing and rewriting of bodily, cultural, and environmental relations within social production. It "injects production into desire, and… inserts desire into social production and reproduction." Rather than juxtaposing history to nature, they argue that memory is the primary means of territorialization. Paraphrasing Nietzsche, territory is described as "a matter of creating a memory for man; and man, who was constituted by means of an active faculty of forgetting (*oubli*), by means of a repression of biological memory, must create an *other* memory, one that is collective, a memory of words (*paroles*) and no longer a memory of things, a memory of signs and no longer of effects."[54]

In Vollmann's writing, one discovers a continent of conflicting territories, in which memory is passively and actively lost as well as reconstituted through documents and through the traces of signs. The most visible of these is the book's dedication to a man whose story we later learn: "In memory of Serafín Ramírez Hernández, unknown, missing, illegal, Mexican," across the page from an Imperial County death certificate of a John Doe, age "about 38," occupation "apparently labor," found dead of heat stroke. The individual accounts of particular struggles over land, water, labor, and life, are

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[53] As Elizabeth Grosz argues in *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), territory as process is not only social (i.e. human) but mammalian; alongside the artist, the bowerbird is a singular example of the territorial production of the refrain in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

[54] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1983), 144.

simultaneously struggles over representation. The presence of legal documents, certificates of ownership, advertizing slogans, and newspaper reports, intervene into and rewrite the lived relations of the place. Rather than an objective mapping of Imperial and all its relations, Vollmann situates himself inter-subjectively. His time spent there over a decade has only complicated his knowledge of the place. Instead of Imperial, it is the Mexicans and Mexican-Americans, "the cabbage-pickers legal and illegal," he writes, "whom it is slowly becoming my privilege to know." "Imperial is what I want it to be, but they are ones who are what they are. The desert is real, as they are," he writes, "but there is no such place as Imperial; and I, who don't belong there, was never anything but a word-haunted ghost."[55] Here, as he often does, Vollmann constructs himself as a figure of memory—a writer suffused with his experiences as a journalist and a traveler who carries the ghostly presences of the people he has known into the places he visits.

The artist is identified as the primary agent of territorialization. Be it pueblo society or imperial Spain, artistic production is linked with possession. "The expressive is primary in relation to the possessive;" Deleuze and Guattari write, "expressive qualities, or matters of expression, are necessarily appropriative and constitute a having more profound than being. Not in the sense that these qualities belong to a subject, but in the sense that they delineate a territory that will belong to the subject that carries or produces them."[56] This provocative passage describes the creation of environmental memory as an appropriation of territory, based on delineation. If reterritorialization is implicit in the act

[55] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 181.

[56] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "1837: Of the Refrain," *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1987); 310-350, 316.

of writing, an invention of despotic rule, one could argue that a transparent despot is no better, and that even where Vollmann quotes and includes other voices, they are still being appropriated by his own literary imagination. However, if the act of expression *that is territory* is simultaneously an act of possessing a situation or arrangement as a kind of property or attachment, this also means accepting responsibility for it—belonging to it in a way that makes one accountable. In striving to be a "better-informed citizen of North America," Vollmann reframes his ethical responsibility to those beyond state borders as a *political* relationship, not in the sense of a relation based on power, but one that takes the freedom and well-being of the other as central to one's own identity and ability to belong. His continuous writing and re-writing of Imperial county illustrates the sheer variety of ways of looking and remembering, of organizing historical and environmental knowledge, that he undoes—from within—the notion of a single delineation or frame on which authority and justice may ultimately rest.

Vollmann repurposes postmodern aesthetic techniques and sensibilities in the service of an empirically informed politics. His unwillingness to a settle on a particular frame as an uncontested foundation for truth is shared with the high modernists, who were, as Heise argues, "redefining the parts of an aesthetic work in their relation to the whole as something other than subordination." This refusal to subordinate parts to wholes (or vice versa) is taken further in Vollmann's account of Imperial; rather than seeing the fragments as fractured parts of an absolute whole, his writing illustrates a shifting whole made possible by partial accounts and perspectives. As in pragmatism, beliefs and experiences are not understood as getting in the way of truth, but rather taken as the enabling condition of inquiry. Vollmann's approach contributes to Heise's "eco-

cosmopolitan aesthetic" in that it does "justice both to the sense that places are inexorably connected to the planet as a whole and to the perception that this wholeness encompasses vast heterogeneities… a kind of collage in which all the parts are connected but also lead lives of their own."[57] For Vollmann's contemporary subjects, it is primarily poverty that marks them—to others—as falling outside modernity, exacerbated by varying degrees of national, ethnic, and sexually defined labor. Rather than relying on sociology that understands "the local" and "the global" as an epistemic problem, readers of Vollmann encounter an ethico-political problem—between particularity and universality—explored through aesthetics.

Vollmann experiments by writing Imperial from different genres and disciplines. There is the xenophobic noir of the border guard who detained him, for instance. He impersonates Flaubert to write the story of his friend, Maria, a well-educated woman from Mexico who now performs manual labor in the US. And there is John Steinbeck's naturalist take on recent confluences of agriculture, racialized labor, and high finance in California. These perspectives allow him to try on different generic constraints, to explore how fiction adds an element of truth to daily life, and to playfully test the literary traditions that might claim *Imperial* as their future heir. These experiments evoke the language of science. "When a scientist embarks on a series of experiments…it is likely that most of them will 'fail,'" he writes, "reality being more complicated than even the most torturous assertion." "In this respect," he continues, "writing is more like science than the other arts…because we can replace one word by another as many times as we like…whereas I have only so many chances to paint over my bad oil painting before it

[57] Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet,* 64.

turns into a sticky brick."[58] *Imperial* weighs as much as a brick, and it is sticky in the sense that one cannot easily pull out or isolate one part without dragging the rest with it. The sheer excess of *Imperial,* like empire itself, threatens to overwhelm the reader's ability to make it cohere.

To alleviate this, Vollmann offers "reprises" that build a "metadata" archive of phrases, sayings, quotes, references, and verbal images, drawn from his fragmentary vignettes and chapters, which become environmental memory for the reader. The "Preface," which appears in chapter 10, opens with an epigraph from the *Salton Sea Atlas*: "The concept of metadata—or data about data—which describes source, method, and appropriate uses… is a growing priority."[59] Through frequent sections titled "Imperial: Reprise," he recollects repeated phrases like "*I think we all feel sorry for 'em*," "**WATER IS HERE**," and "**The Desert Disappears**," that evoke smaller narratives. Each phrase is a verbal short-hand to mobilize clusters of environmental, historical, and affective experience. Vollmann consolidates "Imperial" by playing these phrases off each other in subsequent iterations of the reprise. The fragmented experiences are transformed into a memory of Imperial. In this way, the text performs the act of memory creation (or sedimentation/consolidation) described by Goodbody. Environmental memories, like other types of memory, are never complete but "consist rather of fragments of experience…which must be reactivated in processes linking them up into coherent patterns of information."[60] In these "reprises" one sees what Deleuze and Guattari call the

[58] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 176.

[59] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 158.

[60] Goodbody, 58.

refrain, which they variously liken to a territorializing rhythm or an abode: "there are consolidations that are made afterward," they write, "and there are consolidations of the keystone type that are constituent parts of the ensemble."[61] Making this consolidation process a keystone part of the ensemble is Vollmann's way of doing justice to Imperial as a transnational space, as story, as representation, and as act; it is a story that could appear radically different if framed by other people, and yet would still remain incomplete.

Ever since *An Afghanistan Picture Show, or How I Saved the World* (1992), Vollmann has made the failure of good intentions and cynical sentimentality a theme of his work.[62] Chapter one of *Imperial* opens with an epigraph that exemplifies the way that the liberal politics of empathy, and what might loosely fall under the category of "recognition," can be mobilized against the suffering party. "*I think we all feel sorry for 'em*," says Border Patrol Officer, Gloria Chavez, referring to "illegal aliens."[63] Uttered by a border agent with a Latinized last name, this sentiment prefaces a chapter in which a militarized border patrol hunts down bright bodies lit up through night vision scopes against the black of night. It is 1999 and Vollmann is embedded with the patrol. The Mexicans become "bodies" in the language of the officers. "I got an eye on your bodies, said the nightscope man, whose monitor made the word *bodies* seem chillingly

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[61] Deleuze and Guattari (1987), 329; Guattari later expands on the pragmatics of the refrain in *The Machinic Unconscious: Essays in Schizoanalysis*, Trans. Taylor Adkins (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011).

[62] *An Afghan Picture Show, or How I Saved the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), chronicled Vollmann's personal efforts to help the mujahideen fighters against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. His well-intentioned, yet failed, attempts are a learning experience and become an allegorical critique of US foreign policy in the aftermath of the Cold War.

[63] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 3.

appropriate," Vollmann writes, "for in the green night the aliens glowed white like evil extraterrestrial beings or zombies out of a science-fiction movie." When surrounded by "the hunters" the "*bodies*, hopelessly silhouetted, resurrected themselves from the fresh earth, giving in to capture and deportation. They rose, becoming black on black." The surreal play of bodies, landscape, and night is produced by the monitoring equipment, a technology of representation that makes capture possible. Stripped of any markers of individual, national, cultural, political, ethnic, or gendered identity, the bodies stand as a negative universality.

Vollmann quickly integrates the patrol's language of bodies, always italicized, into his narration, accentuating its dehumanizing mode of reference. "[T]he *bodies* stood wide-eyed in the light, all in the line, with their hands obediently behind them. Coughing, shuffling, they began to cross the fields." While they walk, a patrolman insults the bad breath of "one of the *bodies*." "The *body* was silent," he writes. "In the nightscope it had been as white as one of the freshly dead fishes in the cool green poison (or should I say 'reputed poison'?) of the Salton Sea. Now it began to reveal itself to be brown—Hispanic, sunburned and field-stained." The humanity of the captured border crossing workers comes into view with their *particularity*. The nightscope is an agent in the scene, depicting their existence in the landscape in a non-neutral frame of representation. By abstracting to color and shape, the nightscope presents migrant workers as beings without lives and histories. This abstraction—at the level of the sensible—simultaneously makes their negative universality visible, as *bodies*, but the same abstraction allows Vollmann to establish metaphorical connections between the conditions of migrant laborers and the poisoning of fish in the Salton Sea by toxic waste and agricultural runoff. A single frame,

the nightscope monitor, that in one instance engenders control over people through visibility, can become, through the work of the artist, an abstraction that makes broader patterns of environmental exploitation and injustice visible. If "criticism is a matter of the correct distancing," as Walter Benjamin wrote, the artist must risk the ambiguous cruelty that accompanies acts of abstraction and redescription.[64]

Gloria Chavez's quote, "I think we all feel sorry for 'em," opens the novel as a challenge to the liberal politics of recognition based on sympathetic feeling. It returns throughout the text and as part of the reprise as a transhistorical emotional posture that continues to play a constitutive role in the development of the region. Chavez may be able to feel individual sympathy (or perhaps just pity) for the arrested migrants, however her institutional location—her employment—necessitates an abstraction that makes her work possible. Where the intention of the speaker would seem to matter—is she naïve or merely hypocritical?—Vollmann's inclusion and repetition of her quote in later contexts suggests that even if Chavez, and by no small stretch of the imagination, the reader, feels sorry for 'em, it does not do 'em much good.[65] Firstly, the apostrophe would seem to

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[64] Walter Benjamin quoted in Bruce Robbins, "Culture and Distance: On the Professionalizing of Literary Criticism," *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, Culture* (New York: Verso, 1993), 57-83, 57.

[65] The distinct phrase "I think we all feel sorry for 'em," appears at least fifteen times throughout the novel, each either clearly referencing or otherwise evoking Chavez. On page 165, the line threatens to "silt up" his narrative flow just before the novel is reintroduced as authored by an immigration officer; on page 246, the phrase links the 1848 border and the 1948 All-American Canal: the "ecological, economic and moral effects of the line will become ever more hurtful to the portion of Imperial which remains on Southside;" on page 309, the phrase is included in "Imperial Reprise (1781-1920)" alongside a reference to the forced marrying and sexual exploitation of women; on page 373, the phrase links Mexican workers with Chinese workers in 1924 as the El Centro headquarters of the Border Patrol are established as part of the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act; on page 366, "Imperial Reprise (1905-2003)," the phrase first refers to laborers, and then implicates the narrator: "*He sold out at a fancy price.* I think we all

deny the collective pronoun a specific reference, as a kind of verbal hand-waving. "Them" would already imply a collective; "'em" apostrophes some portion of this collective out of existence. At times, this casual erasure of individual lives evoked in a statement of pity becomes a means to open "'em" up to include the narrator, agriculturalists, police, and others. Secondly, the readers are primarily located in the "we" defined in relation to the 'em of Chavez's statement. We find ourselves implicated in the varying degrees and contexts of sympathy, hypocrisy, and institutions whose historical relationships to places and peoples he is interrogating. Like much of Vollmann's writing, *Imperial* takes as a central concern the possibility of intention and the limits of that intention in the context of state institutions and a transnational economy. He does so not to criticize the tenuous warm feelings beyond the nation or group identity, feelings required for any lasting institutional solidarity, but to catalogue the ways that these feelings enable the reproduction of the cruelty to which one is opposed.

This awareness of writing's complicity with economy and power extends to the landscape itself. Here, the problem of reading texts is linked to reading the history of landscapes, in that both are bound up with territorializing significations of production. An

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feel sorry for 'em. God, so that's my life;" on page 602, the phrase is used to deflate the dominant memory of World War II: "And here comes a second happy ending: Japan bombs Pearl Harbor, and the Okies' problems explode into bits! They can join the army or work in a factory… what about the Mexicans? I think we all feel sorry for 'em;" on page 956, the phrase evokes sarcastic pity as 'em is made to reference agricultural firms whose environmental fees for irrigation are the most expensive in the country; finally, in "Imperial Reprise (1901-2004)," the phrase is at this point a sarcastic counterpoint to naturalization of the death rate of border crossers and the "die-off" of fish, meanwhile an asterisk includes a 1924 quote from Dashiell Hammett: "I always feel sorry for them…" he says referring to "detectives who have not become callous, who have not lost what you might call the human touch;" chapter 207 closes with Chavez's phrase added to an earlier (unnamed) Imperial narrator standing "by the grave of that infant civilization, which blossomed, amidst such hardships, upon a desert" (1124).

epigraph by the archaeologist Joan Aruz informs us that, "the main reason we cannot read these early [Mesopotamian] texts is the fact that writing initially was nothing more than a means, more comprehensive than those employed before, of recording the details of economic transactions."[66] Writing becomes, for Vollmann, a means to trace the non-narrative, "asignifying" inscription of Imperial's landscape into the actions and imaginations of the county's residents. Various "subdelineations" chapters trace these economic and ecological histories through particular crops. The chapters move from lovescapes, bookscapes, paintscapes, and scrollscapes, to waterscapes, lettucescapes, cottonscapes, poisonscapes, orangescapes, and in part thirteen titled "inscriptions:" moneyscapes. Each subdelineation traces the material and environmental histories of the region through technologies of inscription, writing, and representation. These inscriptions of landscapes into the global economy depict processes which define the local, the regional, the national, and the global.

In "Subelineations: Lettucescapes" for instance, one would not expect to find a graph of cantaloupe prices (Gross vs. Per Acre); as the melon has replaced lettuce in recent decades its price has skyrocketed. The inscription of landscapes by economic representations and market calculations produces as many contradictions as Vollmann's own titles and epigraphic frames. Imperial Valley entered the 20th century as "The Winter Garden of America," but soon overproduction of lettuce led to price collapse: "*in 1934, the equivalent of 300,000 crates of lettuce were unharvested in the Imperial Valley*."[67] By 1938, the combination of rich Imperial soil and Arizona's competition drove the price

[66] Joan Aruz quoted in Vollmann, *Imperial*, 531.

[67] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 533; italics in original.

below cost for the entire year, effectively bringing it to an end. A classic crisis in capitalist production links 20th century California with Jean-Jacques Rousseau of 1754, who interrupts the narration, remarking that "*I have seen men wicked enough to weep for sorrow at the prospect of a plentiful season; and the great and fatal fire of London which cost so many unhappy persons their lives or their fortunes, made the fortunes of perhaps ten thousand others*."[68] The rule of exchange value writes its material history in the ecology of place. The movement of crops and prices in far off locations like Arizona significantly shape the valley's internal landscape, water politics, and labor relations. Putting human faces to these abstract processes, "Lettucescapes" closes with court proceedings from the late 1950s in which monopolists testify to the benefits of maintaining a risky market in lettuce: "[Mr. Campbell] wants lettuce to continue to be speculative because *when you reduce your risk you invite more competition,* and what canny agribusinessman craves that?"[69] Bringing us to the present, "Subdelineations: Moneyscapes (1989-2005)" opens a survey of income inequalities in California with a passage from George Eliot that summarizes his dilemma: "Attempts at description are stupid: who can all at once describe a human being? We recognize the alphabet; we are not sure of the language."[70] Whereas Eliot's subject was people, Vollmann's is the landscape (which includes people). Vollmann's difficulty here, as elsewhere, is in understanding the language—the uses—of the signs, whose "scaping" effects he is attempting to interpret.

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[68] Vollmann, *Imperial,* 534; italics in original.

[69] Vollmann, *Imperial,* 536; italics in original.

[70] Vollmann, *Imperial,* 1055.

One of these effects is the ghostly presence and absence of water. Throughout *Imperial*, the phrase "Water is Here"—often in bold—challenges the metaphysics of presence. When telling the history of Imperial Valley, "Water is Here" is repeated almost as a mantra; it is a performative utterance in that the announcement enables different mechanisms, whether imaginary or economic, to mobilize Imperial's space in different ways. "Water is here" can be announced to signal the coming of new irrigation systems, the promise of untold wealth and future prosperity, or to provide reassurance when one is in doubt (and drought). Timothy Morton's neologism, *agrilogistics,* refers to this obsessive need to reassert presence as a metaphysical effect of the agricultural revolution of the Fertile Crescent.[71] Not unlike Imperial, those early agriculturalists were necessarily obsessed with water, infrastructure, and the reproduction of a class society.[72] The

[71] Timothy Morton, "She Stood In Tears Amid the Alien Corn: Thinking Through Agrilogistics," *Diacritics* 41.3 (2013): 90-113.

[72] Morton, however, fails to cite his interlocutor, John Zerzan, whose anthropologically informed, "anarcho-primitivist" critique of civilization long ago identified the way domination is produced through domestication, and institutionalized through agriculture. For Zerzan, symbolic culture—art—is a practice that not only mediates hierarchies in the division of labor, but provides the means to subordinate both humans and nonhumans to the logic of abstract equivalence and sacrificial exchange. Zerzan's "origins" essays on Time, Number, Art, Agriculture, and Language, are collected in *Elements of Refusal, 2nd Edition* (Columbia: C.A.L. Press, 1999); while his *Running on Emptiness* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2002), extended the critique of symbolic culture to include postmodern philosophers and technocultural theorists. A recent turn to Zerzan's green anarchist milieu as a potential source of ecological posthumanism can be found in Mick Smith's *Against Ecological Sovereignty: Ethics, Biopolitics, and Saving the Natural World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). In his exchanges with and about Zerzan, Morton refuses efforts to directly transform or undo technological and agricultural domestication—in Derridean fashion, any concrete effort to challenge social institutions and material arrangements is dismissed in advance as a totalitarian obsession with presence.

metaphysics that provided the philosophical foundation (or cultural justification) for society followed from the material relations.

Using the text-mining program, *Voyant Tools*, I analyzed a digital version of *Imperial* to trace the presence and absence of water throughout the text. The word "water" appears 1603 times in this 1300 page book, or roughly 1.2 times per page. Rather than searching for the exact phrase, "water is here," I traced the appearance of "water" and "here" relative to one another. If "here" refers to *presence*, a present place or time (even if used ironically), it would hold that water should follow. Yet there are extended passages in *Imperial* in which "here" appears without "water," and where large spikes of "water" occur with little change in the designation "here," suggesting that the water in question is referring to a different place and time: a *possibility* of water rather than its active presence (see figure 1). *Water as possibility* has, as Vollmann illustrates throughout Imperial's history, served as motivation to colonize, to redraw boundaries, to transform ecologies, and to reinscribe national identities. What one finds when looking at the graph is that the presence of water—whether real or speculative—far outstrips the present in the discourse of Vollmann's novel. While much more digital work might be done on the spatial, temporal, and material references of *Imperial*, we can see that water is written as a non-contemporary and discontinuous, disruptive presence in the text, testifying to historical efforts at controlling its material agency.

If one is looking for actual, physical, empirical, water in Vollmann's *Imperial*, one may have only a slightly better chance of finding it in Imperial Valley. Much contemporary ecocriticism recognizes the aesthetic, epistemological, and ontological difficulties of realism, the very kind of difficulties that Vollmann's metafiction takes as

its central concern. To say that he must rely so heavily on the existence of fragmentary documentation and partial testimonies of historical experience, memory, desire, and translation, is to suggest that there was ever anything other than *this* as a basis of making a common, knowable, world.

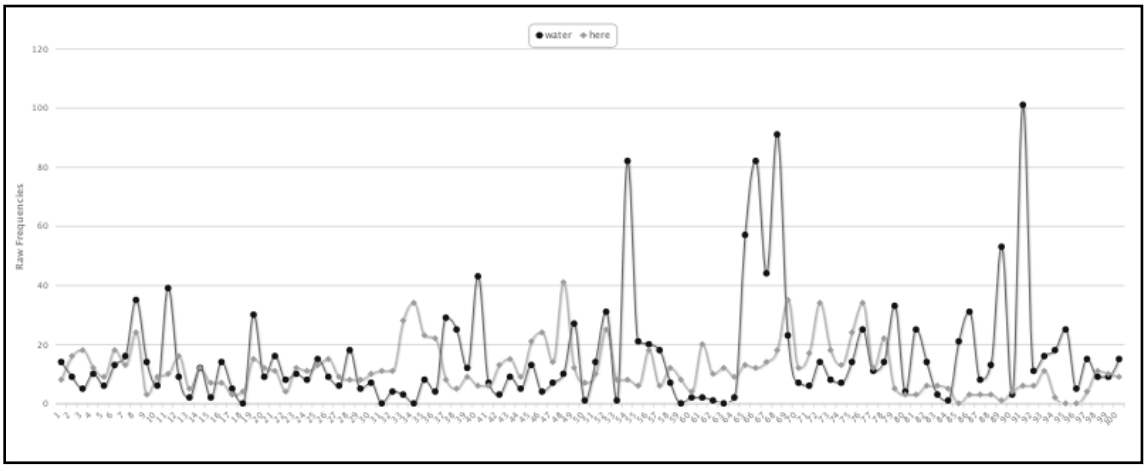

Figure 1 - Graph of "Water" (Black) and "Here" (Grey) in *Imperial*.

Vollmann writes that if literature "is valuable in and of itself," a premise he doubts, then "opening windows [between people's worlds] is one of the most valuable things it can do."[73] One such world is the one built by early 20th century Chinese immigrants to Mexico. An extended chapter on "The Chinese Tunnels" recounts Vollmann's journey into the mythical existence of underground tunnels connecting bordertowns, created and populated my immigrants ostracized by Mexicans and Americans alike. His reliance on translators and oral history eventually leads him to restaurant basements, where letters and poetry support not only the existence of the tunnels and their importance in the marginalized economies of Asian America, but offer a

[73] Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with William T. Vollmann," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 9.

glimpse into the lives of people who lived and died there.[74] The tunnels are not simply a metaphor, but a historical territorialization by a population excluded from the ethno-national and cultural binaries dividing the space of Imperial. Its ghostly memory haunts the xenophobic imaginations of Mexicans and remains an unspoken trauma, "like a haunted house," among workers in Mexicali's Chinese-owned service and restaurant industries. As Vollmann wades through unreliable translators, racist rumors, and textual fragments, he affirms the importance of material memory in spite of its fallibility:

> Those old, old letters, partially rat-eaten, and the memories of old men, the myths of farmworkers and drunks, the lies of Mr. Auyón and the evasions of Chinese and Mexican business owners alike, the photographs in the Archivo Histórico del Municipio de Mexicali and the passages in old books, they all added up to something beautiful, stinking, empty and infinitely rich, like Imperial itself.[75]

The Crisis of the Knowable Community, Now

Before they became ossified and parodied, the aesthetic innovations of modernism were an attempt, according to Raymond Williams, to respond to a crisis of experience that accompanied mass, industrial social formations, and new relations of the metropolis to the periphery in the late nineteenth century. Williams labeled this the "crisis of the knowable community."[76] While one can argue that modernity itself is a long crisis of what constitutes community and what qualifies as its knowability, the historical development of the novel has played a role in the effort to make social experience legible, to "grasp one's time in thought" so as to transform it. "Most novels are in some sense

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[74] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 451.

[75] Vollmann, *Imperial*, 481.

[76] Raymond Williams, *The English Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 16.

knowable communities," writes Williams.[77] That is, they offer legible experience within a believable context. "What is knowable is not only a function of objects… It is also a function of subjects, of observers—of what is desired and what needs to be known." Thus, novels not only present new means of representing communities as objects, but also new forms of subjectivity, new organizations of desire and attachment that define those communities. The formation of this subjectivity can be itself an object of narrative. At the turn of the 21st century, the uneven distribution and scale of crises from the ecological to the economic and technological transect borders and publics, creating a new need for the production of "knowable communities." These crises have also called into question the practices of producing both community and its knowability, practices which Vollmann's work narrates and dramatizes.

The new expressions of global capitalism that emerged with the trade deals of the 1990s and after produced an unknown terrain, and a need to redefine knowable communities in the post-Cold War world. In a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, Vollmann explains the transnational political economy that drives his fictionalized North American history. McCaffery gives voice to Vollmann's concern about the power of multinational corporations over contemporary life, in that they "manipulate[e] different aspects of our country (our economy, our relationship to our natural environment, etc.) in ways that aren't tied to our national identity."[78] In response to this, new identifications and forms of solidarity need to be fashioned. Unfortunately, the traditional way

[77] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 165.

[78] Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with William T. Vollmann," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 9.

Americans have imagined self-transformation has been spatial, moving to (or colonizing) a new place. Transformation is thus a by-product spatial mobility, which many lack. And besides, Vollmann notes: “Most of this continent's transformation is over with. What remains can be extrapolated from forces that are now already in place.” “I'm not trying to make an Hegelian argument that history is coming to end,” he continues, referring then to Francis Fukuyama’s recently published *The End of History and the Last Man*,[79] “or suggesting that I know what's going to happen in the future.” Rather, Vollmann argues that the new can be produced by recognizing the multiplicity of the present. It will come out of a deepened pluralism and expanded sense of belonging to a world shared with others.

“People would be better off if they realized that their own particular world is not privileged,” Vollmann responds. “Everyone's world is no more and no less important than everyone else's. To have as many worlds as possible that are invested with interest or meaning is a way of making that point. I've gradually begun to see that I can use even my footnotes and glossaries and other sorts of materials to create some of this sense.” We can draw two conclusions from this passage. The first is that while Vollmann does not explicitly say what he means by “better off,” he affirms the moral, rather than epistemological, importance of literature. One will act in different ways, perhaps more

[79] Francis Fukuyama’s Kojévian thesis of *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992) has been hotly debated and often mischaracterized as a triumphalist interpretation of liberal democracy over the various bureaucratic, single party-state, and totalitarian forms of modern politics; however, much of the book, whose opening chapter is titled “Our Pessimism,” is spent discussing the “immense wars of the spirit” that will follow once liberal democracy is the norm—these wars are characterized by Nietzschean *ressentiment* and identity-based, ethno-cultural nationalisms, driven by reactionary efforts to reterritorialize the globalizing tendencies of the market. While Fukuyama has recently rejected his initial thesis about history, much of the book’s latter predictions have come to fruition, even in the bastions of liberal democracy.

humble ways, if one does not take one's own experience as the foundation of all meaning. That is to say, unlike some theories of "situated knowledge," Vollmann is consistent in that he does not end up claiming that one particular location is better suited to "see the truth or the whole for what it really is." As Richard Rorty puts it, "take care of freedom and the truth will take care of itself."[80] Increasing the freedom of exchange of worlds is a sounder way of producing both community and its knowability. The second conclusion is that his pluralism recognizes the material attachments and engagements through which social relationships are imagined and critiqued. Rather than emphasizing literature's epistemological capacity for objective representation or cognitive mapping, literature is understood as a descriptive (and redescriptive) tool for collective engagement and world making. Rather than truth understood objectively as the view from nowhere, Vollmann, through metatextual techniques like footnotes, glossaries, and competing accounts, gives us truth as a greater inter-subjective solidarity about history and its meaning. He dramatizes the effort (and failure) of constructing an official vision or frame at the margins of the continent.

Vollmann's aesthetic is not animated by the modernist impulse to explore the limits of the medium. Rather, he explores the ethical and political limits of narrative practice that makes a "knowable community." Critics have often compared Vollmann with James Joyce on account of the style—its frenetic hyper-referentiality, stream of consciousness, and usage of portmanteaus—but, as I suggested earlier, I believe a better comparison is Henry James. It is James that moves beyond a transparent realism in which everything is in its place. "What really matters in James," argues Williams, "is that act of

[80] Eduardo Mendieta (ed), *Take Care of Freedom and the Truth Will Take Care of Itself: Interviews with Richard Rorty* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).

signifying in which the novel becomes its own subject."[81] By dramatizing the act of signification through which the novel takes on and performs the memory it is trying to create, Vollmann puts forward an ethics of memory making that expands membership (and what it means to be a member) of an inescapably environmental political community. Vollmann's referential fireworks situate him as a professional middle-class knowledge worker—his first novel was written while moonlighting as a computer programmer. As post-Fordist communicative labor intensifies the distinction between the communicative act and its signifying content, the material and political effectivity of reference and representation takes on a renewed importance. It is an example of literature's singular aesthetic contribution to knowable communities in the difficult geography of the contemporary, a distinction Williams helps us make:

> Sociology can describe social conditions more accurately, at the level of ordinary measurement. A political programme can offer more precise remedies at the level of ordinary action. Literature can attempt to follow these modes, but at its most important its process is different and yet still inescapably social: a whole way of seeing that is communicable to others, and a dramatization of values that becomes an action.[82]

Both *Imperial* and *The Ice-Shirt* communicate a way of seeing—of producing the visible and legible—which is a thoroughly value-laden action. As he consolidates his own experiences and research into a meta-data archive of Imperial Valley, Vollmann's metafictional historiography leaves readers with multiple frames of environmental memory. These frames turn our attention to the transnational materiality of our relations and to the violent exclusion of these relations from the political frames which seek to redress social and environmental injustice. Similarly, current efforts by scholars like

[81] Williams, *The English Novel*, 135.

[82] Williams, *The English Novel*, 58-9.

Ariel Salleh to expand left-environmentalism to include the "embodied materialism" of female labor in the southern hemisphere, or Andrew Ross' work to popularize the concept of "climate debt" in the post-2008 financial crisis, each expand the frame of politics to see how power and agency are constituted through the environment. As Etienne Balibar writes, "all political practice is *territorialized*. It identifies or classifies individuals and populations relative to their ability to occupy a space, or be admitted to it."[83] The sheer excess of Vollmann's writing might thus be taken as evidence that other experiences and memories of these matters are excluded from the public frames of self-understanding and contestation. His self-description as a "citizen" of North America implies a relation to others through democratic institutions, yet the North America that he is a citizen of remains an entity that exceeds the narrow delineations of those institutions.

Fraser argues that many political theories are "preoccupied with first-order issues of distribution and/or recognition" and have "so far failed to develop conceptual resources for reflecting on the meta-issue of the frame."[84] By addressing the act of framing that includes, excludes, or otherwise recombines or reterritorializes relations of representation, critics can shift the focus from *constituted* power to *constitutive* power. The claim of ecocritics like Goodbody, Buell, and Heise, that literature can be at the forefront of confronting meta-issues of scale gains currency as novels mobilize various *personal*, *biogeological*, and *collective* narratives within a contested *national* tradition. Environmental memory, properly understood as a prosthetic composed out of multiple discourses and material contexts, serves as a "conceptual resource" for redressing

[83] Etienne Balibar, *Citizenship,* Trans. Thomas Scott-Railton (London: Polity, 2015), 68.

[84] Nancy Fraser, "Reframing Justice in a Globalizing World." *New Left Review,* 36 (December 2005): 69-88, 72.

economic and cultural injustices both within and beyond the nation-state. Too often, contemporary art risks leaping to sublime global processes that seemingly have no discernible agent, and with it comes an equally abstract "infinite" politics—the romance of total and evental transformation. Vollmann does not strive for total knowledge but to be "better informed." *The Ice-Shirt* and *Imperial* place readers in the difficult middle ground, using postmodern techniques that previous generations of politically committed writers and critics wrote off as a refusal of social reality. Instead, this metafiction is more attentive to that reality in that it foregrounds the composition and the uses of environmental memory to reframe struggles over economy and culture.

CHAPTER VI

CODA: LABOR, ECOLOGY, UTOPIA

> [S]o many of our intellectual efforts, though masquerading as an attempt to understand nature, are really anodynes for justifying our hopes and calming our fears.
>
> Stephen Jay Gould[1]

> Nevertheless, metaphors are serious things. They affect one's practice.
>
> Stuart Hall[2]

As Michael Denning and other historians of the American left have observed, people have "quarreled over the relation between pragmatism and Marxism" throughout the twentieth century.[3] This project has attempted to situate a pragmatist approach to environmental literature, culture, and discourse, within the broadly Marxian analysis of late-twentieth century modernization provided by cultural studies. My hope is that these two approaches compliment rather than undermine one another. One of the benefits of this approach to environmental humanities, I believe, is that it is comfortable with the relative autonomy of the sciences and humanities. It is thus at ease with the abstractions of contemporary Earth System sciences which study what Marx identified as a metabolic rift in the biophysical cycles of nature and the accumulation cycles of capital—cycles which operate according to differing degrees in intensity, rhythm, and speed.[4] It is at ease with the arguments of speculative realist philosopher, Ray Brassier, for instance, who

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[1] Stephen Jay Gould, *An Urchin in the Storm* (New York: Norton, 1987), 226.

[2] Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 267.

[3] Michael Denning, "The Dance of Pragmatism and Marxism," *Solidarity,* July-August 1998, Web Accessed 21 June 2016.

[4] John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth* (New York: MR Press, 2010).

draws both on eliminative materialism in the cognitive sciences and Quentin Meillassoux's mathematical cosmos of atheistic *arche-fossils* to affirm Enlightenment alongside extinction.[5] It is at ease with scientific discourses like these because it feels no need to use them as a final frame of reference or absolute ground of meaning. The sciences exist basically to predict and intervene in the world through description, experiment, and redescription. The work of literature, as *poiesis*, lies elsewhere, in the making of new subjectivities, articulations, and collective desires.

Some may argue that this project could have engaged more with the scholarship on environmental rhetoric, such as Brendon Larson's *Metaphors for Environmental Sustainability*, or Killingsworth and Palmer's classic, *Eco-Speak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America*.[6] Opening up this rhetorical dimension would allow for a different way of tracing the changing metaphors and images apart from literature. However, it would risk becoming a dissertation on rhetoric—the instrumental uses of language—and shift the project's focus away from its intended object, which is the way that ideas of nature in literature are mediated by contemporary experiences of modernization and modernity. I have found that rhetorical analyses often treat language as more arbitrary than it is, and bracket both the larger historical contexts and the literary uses of language. I could also have engaged the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, philosophers of discourse and articulation, who have been influential in cultural

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[5] Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, Trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2009).

[6] Brendan Larson, *Metaphors for Environmental Sustainability: Redefining our Relationship with Nature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014); M. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer, *Eco-Speak: Rhetoric and Environmental Politics in America* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2012).

studies theorizations of rhetoric, coalition building, and hegemony.[7] However, as Stuart Hall has argued, Laclau and Mouffe's effort to escape economic determinism reduces everything upward, locating antagonism in the realm of discursivity rather than embedded in material production.[8] My hope is that the preceding chapters have offered a useful frame for understanding the contexts in which writers take up certain rhetorical images of the environment, and the potential consequences.

The modern novel has proven one of the most dynamic genres for staging the polyphonic multitude of voices and discourses within a historical setting. The novel is capable of incorporating, interrogating, transforming, and re-articulating, competing discourses across individual perspectives, highlighting the often conflicted desires and material interests of characters. Lukács rightly called it an "epic in a world abandoned by God" as it plays in the dangerous intersections opened up by the disintegration of earlier unified epochs. Like Guattari's three-fold "existential territory," the novel operates at the unresolved gaps between personal (un)fulfillment (mental ecology), political (dis)harmony (social ecology), and the metaphysical (dis)unity of the world of Nature (environmental ecology, or sustainability). McCarthy (chapter one) dramatizes this through the "death of Nature" as the locus of the good, the true, and the beautiful, through an exploration of a young radical's maturing consciousness in the context of Vietnam War-era administration. For Updike's aging character (chapter two), Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, the energy crisis becomes a metaphor that links his life and the

[7] Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics, 2nd edition* (New York: Verso, 2001).

[8] Jennifer Daryl Slack, "The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies," *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies,* Eds. Morley and Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 112-127, 121.

nation together, in the absence of a future, with a metaphysically satisfying image of entropy and decline figured by deindustrialization in small-town Pennsylvania. The affirmation of disruption and irresolution in the science fiction of Crichton and Butler (chapter three) are articulated to two quite different sets of politics; the former is aimed at naturalizing free-market approaches to industry in the context of climate change while the latter is articulated to a politics of multiethnic environmental resilience in the context of emergent, un-checked corporate power. None of the writers I have studied in this project have explored the discursive and textual limits of the novel more than William Vollmann (chapter four) who, in the context of NAFTA-era transnational capitalism, attempts to construct a "knowable community" at the limits of the contemporary nation-state and novel-form. Reconstructing the environmental memory of a place requires the ethical interrogation of such an act, as well as the necessary inclusion of voices which, for Vollmann, explode efforts at reconciling the various territorializations of those who compose the territory. Depending on the genre, novels can provide a form that embodies a particular articulation of culture and politics. Alternately, they can expose the act of articulation through metafiction or through characters that live out the contradictions of a particular idea of the world.

I argue that the most useful way of articulating "ecologies" within the conjuncture is by tracing them through sites of production. This is not an intuitive move for many environmental critics. Richard White argues that the tendency within environmentalism to discount or bracket work as a category of thinking about environmental relations has hurt the movement. In White's mind, this leads some environmentalists to unfairly

criticize those whose labor is directly associated with destructive forms of extraction.[9] White's argument is that labor embeds us all in the ongoing environmental destruction and that immaterial labor is no less culpable for the energy and resource use that is obscured by distributed networks. Yet White's analysis stops short at considering the way that different forms and locations of labor—such as that of the knowledge-class—generate different ideas of nature and, recalling Williams, ideas of kinds of societies. The emergent cultural formations are marked by both the forms of production and those who rise to positions of dominance with them. Work may be the difference between the pastoral and the georgic, but it is also the difference between utopian and practical conceptions of historical change. The refusal to foreground *production* results in what André Gorz calls an "abstract radicalism" that relies on normative conceptions of the good (ecological) society without considering what it would take to transform it. Writing in 1991, Gorz finds an opportunity for the post-industrial, ecological left to rethink itself through the transformation of work. It is worth quoting at length.

> The conception of work integrated in community life has served—and continues to serve—as a norm in the definition of the "good life." That norm provides the basis for the radical critiques and condemnations of industrial society. But the reproach Habermas leveled against Hannah Arendt is also valid here: that radical critique remains purely abstract; its only points of reference are medieval or exotic models of society and it cannot draw, within our societies, on any experiences or practical possibilities which would enable it to *be embodied* in acts of social transformation. It is content merely to oppose fundamentally different cultural models to the industrial systems which currently exist. That opposition

[9] Richard White, "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?: Work and Nature," *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, Ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1996), 171-185. Rebuttals to White's characterization can be found in accounts of Earth First!'s Redwood Summer and Judi Bari's labor coalition of loggers and activists; see Jeff Shantz, *Green Syndicalism: An Alternative Red/Green Vision* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2012) and John Bellamy Foster, "The Limits of Environmentalism without Class: Lessons from the Ancient Forest Struggle in the Pacific Northwest," *Ecology Against Capitalism* (New York: MR Press, 2002).

> remains undialectical, ineffective, "utopian" in the bad sense of the word. It simply calls for the whole existing state of things "to be swept away, root and branch." As to *who* might be able to effect such a thing, or when and how, no answer is given; such considerations are disdainfully rejected with a "you just have to…". It is this practical impotence, this abstract radicalism, which causes the advocates of a return to the agrarian community and subsistence economies ultimately to invoke in support of their case not the normative ethical and political value of their reference model, but the imminence of a catastrophic collapse of industrial civilization: radical de-industrialization is presented as an unavoidable necessity on ecological grounds; only the fraction of humanity converted to it would be able to survive catastrophe.
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> To exist politically, an ecological Left has, consequently, an urgent need for *mediations* between the existing industrial system, its wage-workers and its jobs, on the one hand, and, on the other, post-industrial forms of society which comply both with ecological demands and with individuals' aspirations to liberate themselves *from* work as it exists and find *in* work as great a potential for self-determination as possible. We have to start out from what work *is* and what it really means today in order to transform it, reduce it and expand the scope of autonomous activities, production for one's own use, and self-realization for everyone.[10]

Gorz argues that efforts to pose a radically other (or older) social order to the present are a kind of desperate utopianism. The posing of speculative worlds (in theory) is shored up with a kind of blackmail in practice: the threat of ecological collapse. Faced with such a totalizing demand, one's imagination drifts toward apocalyptic and millenarian, which is to say *authoritarian*, solutions. As the Russian novelists illustrated, there is no more modern a figure than the disappointed idealist animated by a despairing nihilism who sees the ongoing present as the ultimate catastrophe, yet has no practical way to change it. Philip Roth called the post-sixties, US expression of this the "indigenous American berserk."[11] While campaigns and movements for environmental

[10] Andre Gorz, *Capitalism, Socialism, Ecology* (New York: Verso, 2012), 64.

[11] In Roth's *American Pastoral* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), the main character's radicalized daughter blows up a post-office, killing a local post-man, in protest of the Vietnam war, "transport[ing] him out of the longed-for American pastoral

justice often make their own infinite demands, they begin where people "live, work, and play," and are thus better situated to perform the kind of mediating function between the present and future that Gorz describes. This sentiment in the second paragraph is without a doubt the same shared by Carolyn Merchant (to return to our example from the introduction), as well as a great many others who believed that a more humane, creative, and flexible workplace should be created, only to have those aspirations perversely realized in the form of chronic insecurity. Where environmental critics like Merchant and Gorz differ is on the question of mimesis. What Gorz describes as the freedom to individuate in conditions of democratic control over production, Merchant sees an emerging ecological form of interaction. As I illustrate in the introduction, organizational concepts in environmental sciences (as in brain sciences) are often influenced by metaphors and models from organizational imaginaries of production. These imaginaries are free to adopt the aesthetic forms of what Boltanski and Chiapello call the "artistic critique" of "1968" without changing the exploitative arrangements excoriated in the "social critique" that accompanied it. Considered *dialectically*, the liberated—which is to say socially secure—workplace would be composed of people who imagine the categories of nature, culture, and the relation between the two, quite differently. Yet this, I still argue, would not mean that they are any closer to the True Reality of Nature. Marx's materialist interpretation of history holds: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their

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and into everything that is its antithesis and its enemy, into the fury, the violence, and the desperation of the counterpastoral—into the indigenous American berserk" (86).

consciousness."[12] This is often lost on environmental critics who believe the ecological crisis is the effect of having the wrong idea of nature.

Consider Timothy Morton's astonishing claim that a cynical attitude—one that he associates with Marxism and modernity—is actually what is responsible for the ecological crisis. For Morton, a "belief about belief," wherein one feels that one has exited an illusory way of seeing the world, has damaged the planet's ecosystems, rather than several thousand years of expanding economies based on extraction and mass accumulation. "*This attitude*," he writes, "is directly responsible for the ecological emergency, not the corporation or the individual per se, but the attitude that inheres both in the corporation and in the individual, and in the critique of the corporation and of the individual."[13] For liberals like Morton, environmental crises are crises of attitudes and affective dispositions (We should feel more ambivalent! We should recognize the weirdness of our bodies and the objects that compose what we used to call a world!); and the solutions are likewise individual or one of "corporate culture." If there is a truth-kernel in approaches like Morton's it is that it speaks to the experience of young, culturally-literate and environmentally-conscious people who are recognizing that the stable background of Nature and consumer society are have disintegrated, and who are distanced enough from its effects to take a certain aesthetic pleasure in this derangement.

The triumphalism of some environmental critics over past ideas of nature is not altogether different from the modernist "attitudes" from which they wish to break.

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[12] Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," *Marxists.org* (1999) Web Accessed 6 June 2016.

[13] Emphasis in the original; Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 155.

Frederick Buell, for instance, argues that, "the idealized natures of the 1970s lost their claims to ontological status, becoming, at best, specific, progressive nature-cultures to be cherished and reinvented and, at worst, reactionary ideologies to be dispensed with."[14] However, Buell's "idealized natures" have been replaced by a new idealization in boutique eco-modernist, sidewalk-crack and garbage-pile ecologies that appeal primarily to the environmental (and design) sensibility of young urban creatives, or "yuccies."[15] It is a de-industrialized, vibrant ontology for rust-belt romantics, which offers more immediacy than the transnational flight of capital that created so many inner-city farming opportunities for the children of the white middle class.[16] The belief that today's "natures" are any less idealized, any less idyllic in their melding of the natural and the cultural, or any less traditionally liberal in their individual-scale fixation on ethical consumption and in the special appeal of "community" felt by those who are mobile, conceals a shared *habitus* between the academic and activist worlds.[17] Given the indebted, precarious employment situations of many recent graduates, and the eclipse of the professional-managerial class (that they might have joined in previous decades) by

[14] Frederick Buell, "Global Warming as Literary Narrative," *Philological Quarterly* 93.3 (2014): 261-294, 271.

[15] David Infante, "The Hipster is Dead, and You Might Not Like Who Comes Next," *Mashable*. 9 June 2015, Web. Accessed 19 January 2016.

[16] Greg Sharzer, *No Local: Why Small-Scale Alternatives won't Change the World* (London: Zero Books, 2012); Emma Marris, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011).

[17] Ben Davis, "How Political Are Aesthetic Politics?" *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2013), 63-74.

the financial-managerial class, this sensibility constitutes what might be called a *post-managerial class* aesthetic.[18]

A direction I have gone with my research outside of this dissertation is to look at the "peripheral industries" surrounding energy production. In a 2015 paper I presented at the *Association for the Study of Literature and Environment* (ASLE) titled, "Oil with a Human Face: Energy Democracy beyond Neoliberalism," I drew inspiration from the transnational organization, *Trade Unions for Energy Democracy* (TUED).[19] This is an organization of energy-industry trade unions from around the world, facilitated by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, organizing for democratic control over energy infrastructures and production. Their argument is that through asserting their materially-specific power as energy workers, they are capable of transforming the economic and environmentally-destructive practices of energy companies and, thus, redistributing privately-concentrated power over the life and health of society. As Timothy Mitchell has convincingly illustrated, there is ample historical precedent for their beliefs.[20] As I was writing that paper, the United Steelworkers were engaged in one of the longest strikes in decades over working conditions at US oil and gas refineries. Over five thousand oil workers went on strike at refineries in "California, Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Texas and

[18] Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "Death of a Yuppie Dream: The Rise and Fall of the Professional-Managerial Class," *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung*, February 2013, Web Accessed 6 June 2016.

[19] "Resist, Reclaim, Restructure: Unions and the Struggle for Energy Democracy," *unionsforenergydemocracy.org*, November 2012, Web Accessed 6 June 2016.

[20] Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2011).

Washington."[21] As friends of mine who work in the steel industry prepared for the strike to spread through Indiana, I recognized similar "immaterial" demands for safety, community health, and environmental responsibility, in both USW and TUED. The strike was not over threatened cuts to wages and benefits, but for transformed working conditions in which worker exhaustion and low industry standards in technology would cease to threaten the health of workers, communities, and the environment. I turned to the depictions of financial labor in Teddy Wayne's novel, *Kapitoil*, and the depiction of industries surrounding fracking in the Smithsonian Channel reality-show, *Boomtowners* (e.g. concrete and sand, trucking, road building, welding, housing, education, and policing), to argue that these "peripheral industries" are necessary components to the "main event" of resource extraction.[22] If it is true, as Mezzandra and Nielson claim, that the period of post-Fordist deterritorialization is being replaced by an emergent set of crises defined by the reterritorializing operations of "extraction, logistics, and finance," these texts may help illustrate or illuminate this shift.[23]

For instance, *Kapitoil* (2010) is set in 1999, and its main character is Karim Issar, a young computer programmer working for the hedge fund Schrub Equities, who moves from Doha, Qatar to New York City to prepare their systems for Y2K. The novel's hyper-reflexive and sincere narration are modeled on International Business English. It is

[21] Rebecca Burns, "Striking Oil Workers Say They're Fighting Deadly Working Conditions," *In These Times* 11 February 2015, Web Accessed 6 June 2016; "Welcome to the Oil Strike Newsletter," *United Steelworkers,* 12 February 2015, Web Accessed 6 June 2016.

[22] Teddy Wayne, *Kapitoil* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010); "Boomtowners," *Smithsonian Channel* (2015), show accessed online at *Amazon.com.*

[23] See Sandro Mezzandra and Brett Nielson's special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114.1 (2014).

composed out of a series of first-person journal entries that tell the story of Karim's rise, and subsequent exit, from the social scene of high finance in the late nineties. *Kapitoil* is a petrofiction centered on virtuosic labor at the highest levels of finance, where production based on computer-modeled speculation and immaterial networks of personal relations is simultaneously predicated on violence in Middle East oil producing states. The novel's epigraph is a quote from Marx's *Capital*: "There is a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things." Readers are thus primed for a materialist interpretation whereby increasingly commodified and "refined" forms of social exchange are understood as the reflection of economic and power inequalities between characters and nations.

On the other hand, *Boomtowners* expressly avoids politicizing the environmental effects of fracking in order to trace the various industries and people who are struggling in the context of the ongoing recession by "making it" the Bakken Shale boom. The reality show may be "character driven," but the characters are driven by economic uncertainty. An air of gold-rush naturalism is the prevailing mood of the series, as lives hang on the volatility in the price per barrel of oil. The pioneer spirit quickly becomes an entrepreneurialism taken up out of desperation. Even the people who are making money are struggling emotionally to put down roots, find partners, and create lives outside of the rhythms of industry. The show depicts how individuals and families adapt to the overburdened domestic infrastructure of cities like Williston, ND and Sidney, MT, as they are overrun by the massive influx of labor the industry requires, and as oil companies gain increasing hold over the affairs in local government. In this, *Boomtowners* follows the "social critique" of fracking in documentaries like Oscar-

nominated, *White Earth*, and *The Overnighters*. The show was filmed summer of 2014, when oil prices were high. By the last episode its singular fracking company, Liberty Oilfield Services, is laying off over six hundred workers and shutting down drill sites after the price per barrel of oil dropped fifty percent over a sixth-month period. One of the laid off workers consoles himself saying, "when you're in a boom you're one day closer to a bust and when you're in a bust you're one day closer to a boom." For many "Boomtowners" who live in the cities and employed on the periphery of the oil industry, the states of boom and bust exist simultaneously. The show's strength lies in its depiction of the extended social infrastructure that makes fracking possible.

I have periodized the works in this project as existing "after Fordism," which up until quite recently could have been another way to say post-Fordism. Debates still continue on whether post-Fordism is (or was) itself a coherent period or regime of production. We will only know once it is over and we will only know when it is over in hindsight. One cannot wait for a transformational event or new "disruptive" idea of nature to change everything. Rather, it will develop immanently, through the sites and narratives of production: nature industries. If history and nature are to have any meaning it will be that which we give it.

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