The Word Hoard
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Editors’ Introduction

Again, this is a border, which is clean here and dirty elsewhere. Dirty: fertile in terms of sense and diversity, opaque in terms of sound and communication.

Michel Serres, Malfeasance 56

How appropriate it is that this volume concerns the unrecyclable. After the publication of Word Hoard Issue 1: Community and Dissent, we could not, of course, recycle the ideas and dialogues of the inaugural issue if we hoped to create a unique and provocative collection of submissions and responsive content. And so we turned to a question by which we were all made suitably uncomfortable: what is unrecyclable, and how might we take up this unsettling concept? Such is the question we posed to our contributors, and we now know it was risky business indeed to ask for answers to the question of what was unrecyclable even as we ourselves were unable to provide a definition of unrecyclability.

In Malfeasance (2011),1 I see Michel Serres preoccupied with an endeavour similar to that undertaken by our contributors, whose various interpretations of what we mean by the unrecyclable forces them to the very periphery of language, of which Serres speaks in the above epigraph. This issue concerns itself with barriers, and with the risk of encountering the unrecyclable both in theory and in practice by coming precariously close to something so horrifyingly other to us. This collection exposes the ways in which the unrecyclable—either in the form of “hard,” material pollution or “soft,” psychosomatic pollution—persists in the collective and individual imaginary as both threat and glamour, as impending catastrophe and as the site of innovative possibility. The unrecyclable has also taken on, for ourselves as an editing team and as a community of critical and creative thinkers, a kind of ambience that engulfs us and leaves us in the precarious position of confronting unrecyclability at the border of what we cannot know but also cannot ignore. However we as editors may respond to the face of the unrecyclable, we are privileged to witness the diverse and inspired means by which our contributors and respondents have resolved to engage with the dilemma of a concept that continues to resist conceptualizing in its ambient lingerings. Through the unique dialogic format that serves as the foundation of each issue of Word Hoard, we are able to gather and present to you a volume that boldly claims the question of the unrecyclable for its own.

The topic of the unrecyclable in this issue begins not with this introduction, or even with the title of the issue, but with the issue’s cover. Created by artist and doctoral candidate Hinson Calabrese, the cover illustrates two acronymic building complexes. Amidst the crisp
black-and-white of these concrete structures, there is no evidence of organic life. In a conversation with Calabrese about the cover, he explained that on hearing about this issue's focus, the Pruitt-Igoe housing project immediately entered his thoughts as the epitome of unrecyclability. Designed by Minoru Yamasaki and completed in St. Louis in 1956, Pruitt-Igoe was meant to serve as a solution to the urban decay of the older sections of the city, specifically the slums to the north and south. Superficially, the high rises of such a public housing project would redistribute a dense population of primarily black lower- and middle-income residents as part of a broader urban renewal initiative.

However, Calabrese interprets Pruitt-Igoe—which was never at full occupancy, and whose vacancy rates continued to increase until the complete demolition of its crumbling thirty-three concrete structures in the mid-1970s—as a failed attempt to marry the active concepts of post-war economics and industrial labour organization. Specifically, Pruitt-Igoe was unrecyclable because it served utopian and frankly untenable desires in the cultural and economic climate. The slightest change to this climate and the resulting shift in architectural thought rendered the entire mass completely useless and too massive to be repurposed. St. Louis was faced with a building complex rendered unsafe, unwanted, and unliveable. The buildings were reduced to rubble. Throughout our conversation, Calabrese noted his love of this style of architecture. Despite our culture's tendency to resist appreciating buildings that withdraw from themselves as decorative or aesthetic objects, what Calabrese finds irresistible about the logic of Brutalism is the way in which it repels insight. We might say the same of the initial confrontation with the unrecyclable. Modernist buildings force subjects inside of them on the building's own terms, and the layout of the structures give the sense of being so explicitly functional that one is not meant to think about the architecture at all.

All of this takes on a much darker tone when Calabrese asks us to consider buildings and structures that have been repurposed yet retain the original spirit of their design, that which we might also point to as unrecyclable. Think of La Cité de la Muette, a modernist urban housing project in Paris consisting of several high-rise towers. Called “The Silent City” for the tranquility its design was meant to produce, this peaceful approach to housing poor workers in the 1930s produced the perfect material and structural conditions for ghettoization, containment, and cultural separation. These qualities were later mobilized by the German military administration of Occupied France in the mid-1940s when The Silent City was transformed into the Drancy internment camp, where over 65,000 French, German, and Polish Jews were detained until they could be transported to extermination camps. Calabrese also reminds us that university campuses in the 1960s and 70s, with their wide-open concourses and high ground, were designed so that a small number of armed individuals could contend
with large numbers of protestors and activists should these groups choose to occupy the university’s grounds. The clear lines of sight and grid patterns of both the campus and individual buildings have also provided optimal conditions for shootings on university campuses by lone perpetrators. Such architectures of social and physical control as we see on campuses and at Drancy portend incarnations of unrecyclability with sinister implications and horrific consequences, the most disquieting being that these structures ultimately serve their original function if not their original destiny. Picking up on respondent Kate Lawless’ interest in W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001), we remember the German writer’s belief that, when we see a massive structure, something of the future can be gleaned from that structure’s unrecyclable architecture, no matter how imposing it seems:

> At the most we gaze at it in wonder, a kind of wonder which in itself is a form of dawning horror, for somehow we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins. (19)

The ruinous architecture of Pruitt-Igoe invoked by the cover artwork is only one of many interpretations of unrecyclability in this issue. Offered too are other frameworks and perspectives, such as Mikhail Pozdniakov and André Bourgeois’s dialogue concerning soundscapes, improvisation, and the listening subject. In addition to the musical and auditory unrecyclable we have also confronted the symbolic, represented in these pages by Joshua Schuster and Matthew Halse’s different takes on embodiment and the biohazardous. Facing what we might ourselves fear, Brad Tabas has envisioned the dark future of the unrecyclable as ambient hyperobject, and Yuri Forbes-Petrovich has responded in turn by imagining the unimaginable, such as the lifespan of the Caesium-135 isotope. Taking this work of the conceptual imagination to a different arena Andrew Wenaus and Andy Verboom give diverging accounts of the paratextual encounter’s transmutable properties. Two writers discuss the terrors of automatons and zombies to consider the unrecyclable’s subversive potential for the political subject, first in Alden Wood’s reading of nihilistic catastrophism and then through Mary Eileen Wennekers’s mobilization of this apocalyptic line of thought. The issue also features the thorny difficulties inherent to postmodern chronotopography, the capitalist subject, and the question of trauma with the contributions of Jeremy Colangelo and Kate Lawless.

Here, thirteen thinkers have responded to the challenge of defining and exploring the question of the unrecyclable. To disseminate these responses in the form of *Word Hoard’s second issue* is a privilege, and to put such thinkers in dialogue with one another in one volume is a pleasure. Without the time and commitment of our peer editors, copy editors, content editors, and faculty advisors, however, the ambitious project of sustaining a graduate-run publication would be impossible, and we are incredibly grateful to this wonderful team of generous in-
dividuals for their talent and dedication.

Go on. Approach the border that lies between ourselves and the unrecyclable, that which frustrates and frightens us, that which defies our ways of thinking and knowing. We have taken you as close as we can: the rest is up to you.

Diana Samu-Visser, Managing Editor
with
Leif Schenstead-Harris
Mélissa LeBlanc
Nahmi Lee

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1 The French title of the original publication *Le Mal Propre: Polluer pour s’approprier?* (2008) impulsively reveals Serres’s intention through a homonym: the adjective *malpropre* means “dirty” or “unclean,” while *le mal propre* translates to “one’s own evil.” Thus, whether we will or no, the unsavoriness of such a thing as the unrecyclable plagues us because even as it is radically other, it also (perversely) belongs to us and subsequently demands our attention.
Works Cited


Two symbols mark the emergence of a contemporary global ecological consciousness: the biohazard sign and the recycle sign. The origins of both are easily traceable. The biohazard symbol was designed by artists hired by The Dow Chemical Company and published in 1967 (Baldwin and Runkle). Researchers with Dow had a contract with the National Cancer Institute and wanted an easily visible and immediately recognizable symbol to identify biohazards (previously, the ambiguous prefix “BIO” was often used). They submitted six criteria for the design of the icon to artists, including that the image be symmetrical. With some designs drafted, they then tested responses to the symbols with a large sample group. The intention was to find the icon that seemed to carry no meaningful association with it, so it would not be confused with other symbols, but also at the same time stick in people's memory. Hence the origin of the motif of three bonded, scar-like crescent shapes with a ring in the background, a vaguely Celtic-looking symbol that is now ubiquitous and has earned an aura of horror.

The recycling symbol is the work of Gary Dean Anderson, who won a design contest launched by the Container Corporation of America in 1970 for a symbol that would indicate which products were recyclable or came from recycled materials (Balboa). Anderson, an MA student in urban design at the time, drew the flowing triangle composed of three arrows, influenced by the Möbius strip. The icon, which appears to move of its own accord, was not copyrighted, but it took over a decade before it gained widespread use.

Here we have icons of recycling and the unrecyclable, the regenerative and infectious, hands on and hands off. Ecology is not just the recycling icon with its redemptive loop; it is also the consciousness that we live in a time of hazard, risk, unknown agents, unforeseen consequences, and amidst materials more or less questionable. Commonly recycled materials like plastics, metals, and oils are noxious substances that can become biohazards if they escape from the tight containment of their commodity form. Furthermore, all biological matter, even that which is perfectly healthy, can become a biohazard once it is externalized from its host.

In the midst of all these newly opened questions about the agency of matter, billions of recycling icons now bloom. The recycling sym-
bol is a fantasy of materials ever transforming, flowing, and becoming, *panta rhei*. No human or discernable agent is present, nor is there really any object depicted, just a procession of arrows pointing ever onward. In this image, recycling appears as if utopian, continuous, effortless and without barriers. It emerges from a world of flow-charts and falls back into a world made of circulating arrows of energy transfer, as popularized by the ecologist Eugene Odum. There is a breezy West Coast feel to the icon, rolling over itself like a wave, not a surprise coming from a student at the University of Southern California.

The biohazard icon, with its three broken rings (hinting at the trefoil symbol for radiation), visually evokes open cells, suggesting something not quite contained. It comes from a Cold War culture demanding control over the ambiguous range of the way things live, fearful of being surrounded by powerful invisible actors. Biohazards are organic matter that destroys organisms. They are beyond remediation, and, like radioactive waste, they are remainders that seem to have no perceived environmental value, even as both radiation and biohazards also occur naturally. The biohazard reminds us of the pains of embodiment and the risks that at every moment surround the exposed and vulnerable body that depends on maintaining the thin and semi-porous barrier between beings wanted and unwanted. Vigilance over the anti-corporeal, or that which cannot be incorporated into any bodily system, appears at the same time as a utopian hope for the continuous body, the effortless system, and the process of perpetual motion that would be the dream of an ecosystem without loss or breakdown. We are caught between these marks compelled to mark everything as the anti-ecological and the endlessly ecological.

Let’s shift to another scene of the overlapping of anti-ecology and ecology in the same decade. I want to propose that one can find in Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) not just a formidable consciousness raising of ecology, but also a rigorous new left political theory. A commitment to political theory associated with a radical tradition of political thought can be discerned in Carson’s book, which is now primarily known as the single work that has done the most to establish the contemporary global environmentalist movement.

Carson’s book begins in a world where the line between biohazard and recycling is no longer clear. But what kind of political theory comes from a writer and ecologist who only found a political calling at the end of her life in a book she felt she had to write? Carson was a trained biologist with years of practice in compiling and assessing empirical data, and was best known up until *Silent Spring* for writing a series of best-selling books about the ocean, a space so vast and biologically complex that she hardly mentioned a human presence. Furthermore, she does not fit the profile of a typically captivating political figure. Her guarded privacy, her fondness for strolling along beaches and tide pools, her celibacy, and her daily care
for her aging mother and nephew left dependent on her do not bespeak of a revolutionary figure who precipitates world-historical events. But there is no reason to dismiss in advance the possible conjunction of banality and radicality, or of every day care and sweeping political intervention. Perhaps as much taking to the barricades, taking a walk, lingering about canals, or gathering little empirical observations in anonymous marshes can set the stage for making powerful claims about the connection of biological life to new political crises.

No one has questioned the power of Carson’s book for environmentalism, but little attention has been afforded to the work’s contribution to political theory.¹ Carson is not a figure much lauded in the pantheon of left political thought, and she herself had made few overt contributions to American party politics (for the curious, she voted Democrat). Carson worked for 16 years at the US Fish and Wildlife Service, which partly explains her mostly non-partisan attitude towards state politics. Wanting to ensure that the larger public would be able to get the information it needed about pesticides, Carson sought to avoid being categorized as a party- or ideologically-affiliated writer. Yet the immediate and vicious response from the right and big capitalism towards her book tells us something about the political nerve her work touched. Carson was of course called a communist and a spinster to boot—a great leftist concoction—supposedly by Ezra Taft Benson, an ex-Secretary of Agriculture. She was accused of wanting to undermine the entire world food system, with the spectre of bread lines invoked as an obvious communist parallel. The book actually had little to say about public policy or political mechanisms directly. What left a chill in the spine of her readers was the vast evidence she compiled of the power of pesticides to harm bodies juxtaposed with the laxity and bountifulness with which these chemicals were spread.

On a practical level, *Silent Spring* directly affected legislation in the US and elsewhere, leading to substantially more governmental oversight of insecticide use and the dispensing of chemical wastes and pollutants. As many have noted, she brought the word “ecology” into everyday household usage. She also showed how one person can establish enough evidence, momentum, and determination to take on massive chemical conglomerates and the food industry, thus paving the way for other local DIY activists. But in addition to this call for action, Carson offers an astute theorization of a politics of ecology for the left.

Indeed, one can hardly open the book today and miss the distinctly biopolitical stakes of the anticipated and unanticipated consequences of attempts to control the life of unwanted species. My task here will be to enumerate some of Carson’s political theory and construct an immanent politics of ecology from her work. She condenses a large swath of ecological knowledge into scenes of local toxification and describes an emergent politicization of this condition. She also puts forward a call to understand ecology as something that doesn’t just coincide with the terms of capitalism. Up to that point, academic ecology had struggled with its usage of ideas from eugenics, higher-yield agriculture, land

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management plans, and governmental policies that favoured controlled extraction of natural resources to meet supply and demand.

Carson’s revelation about the pervasiveness of contamination on the planet begins with an ontological claim about the condition of every being therein: to be is to be toxified. Her opening declaration is that “synthetic pesticides have been so thoroughly distributed throughout the animate and inanimate world that they occur virtually everywhere” (15). Effectively a thin chemical veneer now coats all beings. Various kinds of synthetically-produced compounds are now among the elementary building blocks of animate and inanimate things. Carson’s account of this new political ontology is born of the unknown consequences of a planetary toxic inevitability.

A modern, ecologically-aware political ontology, then, begins not with evocations of the good life, a theory of justice or fairness, or even with the friend/enemy decision. Instead there is from the outset a universal pollution that makes all life precarious life. Carson sees precarious life, or toxic life, in the throes of two massive risks: the catastrophic potential for extinction due to nuclear weapons, and the everyday, slow death by the gradual accumulation of toxins in plant and animal bodies. “Along with the possibility of the extinction of mankind by nuclear war, the central problem of our age has therefore become the contamination of man’s total environment with such substances of incredible potential for harm—substances that accumulate in the tissues of plants and animals

and even penetrate the germ cells to shatter or alter the very material of heredity upon which the shape of the future depends” (8). The fear of extinction in one spectacular event is inversely paralleled by the banality of miniscule molecules of harm that trickle into cellular matter. Carson describes this universal toxification as a “birth-to-death contact with dangerous chemicals” (172). Pesticides, pollutants, and chemical hazards affect the entire lifespan of beings. They play powerful roles in what bodies are capable of doing, how they live, and how they die. Such chemicals influence the way bodies are formed or deformed. Some of these toxins can cause DNA to mutate and are leading causes of environmentally-induced cancer.

The initial task of a political analysis of this universal toxification is to examine closely the physical, institutional, and rhetorical means by which toxins are made and spread. Pesticides are used to control vitality and reproduction, to demarcate between wanted and unwanted life, to handle whole populations of insects, and to integrate more thoroughly the management of life with economic growth. In effect, Carson is calling for a biopolitical analysis, but scholars or activists attuned to biopolitical conditions haven’t spoken of her work in any depth. In quite specific ways, the equivalents between Carson’s study and Foucault’s framing of biopolitics are striking. Carson links pesticide use with an expansion of war by other means, the mass industrialization of animals and life processes, and global practices of risk management including governmental planning around disease control.
and famine—all of which Foucault addresses as key situations for the spread of this new politics of life itself. Carson calls it “wag[ing] relentless war on life” (99) and labels the chemicals “biocides” (8). Foucault describes biopolitical power as “situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale phenomenon of population” (137). Indeed, pesticides are tools used to practice power over a population and species and were invented at the same time as chemical warfare appeared on the battlefield. The controlled killing of a species with intent to eradicate it to extinction is a new kind of power over life that goes beyond the localized, segmented, and endless Hobbesian battle of man against man. The biopolitics of extinction has an endgame in mind, and in this sense it goes beyond the logic of war, which must always plan for a future war. A biopolitics aiming for constant control over the spectrum of species is necessarily conjoined to a thanatopolitics of de-speciation.

Foucault viewed biopolitics as a new configuration of power made by humans and practiced on humans. More recently, theorists including Giorgio Agamben, Cary Wolfe, and Nicole Shukin have shown how Foucaultian biopolitics are intertwined with human-animal relations.2 We need to add to these analyses Carson's contributions regarding how, to use Foucault's language, “the life of the species is wagered on its own political strategies” (143). Political power applied at the level of the species includes not only techniques and tools developed in the pursuit of control over unwanted species, but also indicates a tightening of the ways power is applied to life at larger ecological and planetary scales. Biopolitical power is the constant application and refinement of power conjoining life-and-planet, with the knowledge that it makes no sense to talk about “life itself” without also talking about habitat, ecosystem, and inanimate materials that course throughout the living.

While Carson provides a stark analysis of the spread of synthetic chemical pesticides such as DDT and dieldrin, which have effects in the farthest reaches of the globe, she also zeroes in on the micropolitical effects of pesticides inside cells. Regulative cellular processes are directly affected by these powerful compounds, which can potentially seep into all the different kinds of tissues of plants or animals. Carson describes a biopolitics of the cell as it becomes soaked with chemicals that were designed to make minute mechanisms of life amenable to the “traffic between the biological and economic spheres” (Cooper 4). A critical analytics of micro-biopower is needed to comprehend what is happening at the smallest ecological levels of the body. Carson writes, “there is also an ecology of the world within our bodies. In this unseen world minute causes produce mighty effects; the effect, moreover, is often seemingly unrelated to the cause, appearing in a part of the body remote from where the original injury was sustained” (189). Mechanisms of power used at a large scale intertwine with this micro-ecology, but in both cases the story of cause and effect is not easily told. Carson seeks new ways of understanding the gaps, displacements, and delays between cause and effect as much as the
an empirically verifiable linkage between things. Peter van Wyck remarks that, “Her work marks a moment when the very equipment of causality changes, when causality itself becomes ecological” (ix). Micropolitical and macropolitical analyses of toxins must work to gather empirical knowledge and provide this information to the public even while grappling with the provisional, incomplete, and incommensurable nature of this knowledge.

The aim of Carson’s biopolitical analysis of pesticides is emphatically not purity, the restoration of a clean bill of health, or the reparation of nature into pristine condition. Her famous opening fable chapter is a vehicle for a science fiction apocalyptic flash-forward rather than a pastoral nostalgia. Carson is aware of the eugenic history of ecology and recognizes how easy it is to slip into biopolitical agendas that promote ideologically-motivated moral claims about cleansing nature of this or that impurity. The toxification of the planet reveals that nature is not a self-perpetuating system that always bears fruit, or an eternal return, or an immortal cycle. To think nature means accounting for irreversibility and uncertainty. It means admitting that there is no clear line now between natural and artificial; instead, one must try to establish baselines for long-term processes of biological life and compare these to short-term changes.

Life, for Carson, is neither the highest good nor the stable centre of politics. Life is an open question, susceptible to breakdown, but also unpredictable and differently embodied. In this chemically-saturated condition, the line between fertility and sterility is being shifted, if not altogether effaced. Such exposed life is enmeshed in agendas of control and crises of proliferation and collapse, “pressures and counter-pressures, . . . surges and recessions” (296). Carson sees nothing promised beyond the impure ecology that all bodies are immersed in. She draws no strict divides between waste and economy or market and pollution. She does not propose an emancipatory politics that would rid the planet of toxins, biohazards, risks, and exposures. She does not think that biopolitical power will simply go away if we start to care more about the planet. Rather, she recognizes that some form of cautious guidance that is not reducible to “the control of nature” (297) is needed. Carson’s political outcome is not freedom for bodies simply to be themselves but a more informed awareness of how bodies work in conjunction with animate and inanimate processes and how these processes themselves are affected by the rapidly escalating production of new synthetic materials. Her political ontology attends to how bodies are exposed, formed, and deformed, and also how bodies come together to make worlds in common, that is, ecologies. Toxins are now universal, but we do not know what this means. As Bruno Latour remarks “the fundamental discovery of the ecology movement: no one knows what an environment can do: no one can define in advance what a human being is, detached from what makes him be” (197). Out of Carson’s analysis of the knowable
and unknowable causes and effects of pollutants comes a call for a counter-universal ontology of this indeterminate ecology in common.

The subject of political action Carson assumes she is working with is still the liberal human subject posited in the Enlightenment. This person can occasionally play an active, direct role in politics but mostly presumes that the representative process works and that the job of the government is to look after public interests, mediating between private business and the public good. Carson’s view of politics is essentially bottom-up in that she views the public as both the source of political activity (even if they delegate change to elected officials) and the recipients or subjects of events that involve some form of consent or participation. Yet as Carson makes clear, this liberal human subject is traversed now by ecological events, making consent, political representation, and adjudication not at all clear. Nor is it the case that the human subject is alone in the political realm, as ecology definitively means that “the public” is created in the enmeshment of human and non-human entities, such as, in this case, animals, water, chemicals, and social mores about the greenness of lawns and apples. In the midst of the ecological immersion of the liberal subject, Carson calls for a “right to know” for this newly hatched public regarding what is being dumped into fields and watersheds. “It is the public that is being asked to assume the risks that the insect controllers calculate,” Carson writes, adding: “The public must decide whether it wishes to continue on the present road, and it can do so only when in full possession of the facts” (13).

Carson’s book helps further to constitute this public by showing how to politicize a wide variety of objects and systems previously thought to be largely outside the frame of liberal politics. She describes how inanimate things such as chemical compounds, radiation, plastics, practices of recycling, and suburban lawns become involved in biopolitical processes. She then shows how these processes are interwoven with a politics of action, representation, and institutionalization. By calling for pesticide-free food, she ties her argument to the emerging organic food movement that is politicizing agricultural modes of production. Carson brings this politicization of toxins both to small-town neighbourhoods and urban dumps, to visits to family doctors and cancer wards. Finally she calls for ongoing scrutiny of the sources of knowledge about chemicals and toxins. She questions how discourse about risk is spread, who is speaking, and what biases of university research, which is funded sometimes openly and sometimes covertly by chemical industries.

The language Carson uses in these politicizations is not opposed to the rhetoric of the sentimental or natural beauty, but she also resolutely drags her reader through minutiae of trade journals, biochemical formulae, newspaper clippings of painful injuries and death, and statistical and empirical information collected by an amalgam of experts, governments,
and amateurs. Carson wants discussion of pesticides to seep into conversations that occur while on a stroll or while talking nonchalantly with neighbours. She creates room for political action to occur in a variety of formal and informal circumstances, and on small and large scales, from the shelves of suburban homes to her own testimony in US government inquiries, from DIY activism to calls for international treaties and agencies to monitor and perhaps ban chemical production and waste. This is not a politics of taking to the barricades or forming a party (but there is no reason these would be excluded either). This is also neither a politics articulated at the level of rights or law nor a politics of representation exclusively for humans. Rather, Carson’s revelation is that ecology is already politicized, and the task is to work out a counter-politics from within, using tools that range from the empirical to the conversational, the governmental agency and the amateur witness, the universal and the particular.

Reading Carson, you start to feel your eyes itch, turning watery, and needing to be rubbed. You are reading a book about how toxins enter the body and accumulate slowly in fatty tissues, knowing that every body today already has toxins in it. There are many conduits for the feedback loop between toxic chemicals and a toxic planet. Reading Carson, you begin to see how these conduits flow. They pass through our books, our minds, and our bodies. Carson’s work calls for a careful politicization of each of these passages.

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1 Discussions of Carson in a political context usually address the role of Cold War rhetoric in her work. See Craig Wadell, ed. *And No Birds Sing: Rhetorical Analyses of Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring*. See also Sideris; Murphy.

2 Carson wrote a short preface late in her life that excoriated the industrial factory farm treatment of animals: “To Understand Biology / Preface to Animal Machines” in *Lost Woods: The Discovered Writings of Rachel Carson*. 
Works Cited


Biohazards and the Queer Sexual Imagination
by Matthew Halse

The biohazard reminds us of the pains of embodiment and the risks that at every moment surround the exposed and vulnerable body that depends on maintaining the thin and semi-porous barrier between beings wanted and unwanted.

Joshua Schuster

We need contact.

Samuel Delany

Alongside the dismal toll of death, what many of us lost is a culture of sexual possibility.

Douglas Crimp

I.

This is a city easy to romanticize. It’s spring-time in Montréal, my home of the last decade, and the streets of our city’s gay village are being prepped for another season of tourists, people watching, and revelry: two gloriously butch artists are constructing a mosaic square-by-square on the construction hoarding next to my café; I can hear the sound of hammers erecting the patio at Apollon across the street, a space in which I imagine myself spending a good deal of time. The café in which I sit is a well known local hangout; there is as much reading here as there is purposeful staring—queer choreography at its finest. The boy next to me is really cute.

My desire in these paragraphs, as and beyond a response to Joshua Schuster’s essay, is to dwell upon the symbols of recycling and biohazards as pictorial and metaphorical...
demarcations of the queer sexual imagination. The biohazard in particular, I posit, not only governs the limits of queer sexual possibility but forever pushes those limits in continual extension—an extension not in the service of a well-trodden argument concerning identity, inclusion, and open-mindedness but instead pertaining in this essay to the importance of that extension as ontological process, in this case through the subcultural practices of barebacking, determined risk and, more radically, the purposeful transmission of HIV commonly known as breeding that the biohazard symbol has come to represent. While the jump between my rather innocent café and breeding may seem like a stretch, my purpose here is to demonstrate that these practices, contentious as they are, ultimately dictate the parameters of queer sexuality and what I’ll call the queer sexual imagination: barebacking, HIV, and the purposeful transmission of the virus are the radical others by which queer space and queer sex are known as such. I want to show that the increasing academic interest in such practices, beyond how barebacking relates to the normalization of HIV resultant from medical advances known as antiretrovirals, is a reaction to the shifting horizon of queer sex, a horizon shaping the contours of my café experience. My presence in this café, or more accurately the kind of environment that this café represents within queer culture, is conditioned by the possibility of barebacking subcultural participation.

II.

There exists, most certainly, an understandably large contingent of people of all sexual orientations who would, and are most welcome to, find my subject rather reprehensible. At the heels of a devastating epidemic—one that is ongoing, unending—it is hardly difficult to understand such a point of view. But it is undeniable that barebacking-as-subject (as opposed to barebacking-as-practice) has become increasingly investigated in both queer theoretical interventions and empirical social and scientific research: the former being most famously exemplified in Tim Dean’s Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking and his subsequent essay, “Bareback Time” from which this present essay takes its cue. My goal here is not to romanticize or glorify the virus known as HIV and its eroticization, but instead to map the ways in which unencumbered and unsafe sexual practices impress upon, and are in turn impressed upon, the everyday lived experience of queer sexuality. Thus, in anticipation of resistance, and in an effort to pinpoint my topic with a greater exactitude, I’d like to forward three caveats before, as it were, delving in. First, the conditioned sexuality that I mobilize in this essay principally, but not exclusively, belongs to queer men—though “queer” can be taken in its variety of connotations beyond its limited “gay” and overly sanitized “men who have sex with men.” Let us not forget, though, that the discourse of sexual safety is not limited
to the presence of the phallus. Second, the lived experience of queer sexuality—café cruising and rather way beyond—differs enormously, including how the manifestation of that sexuality may be accessed and performed. Third, in rather a banal way, I want to press for a form of analysis free of judgement; as much as possible, I’m attempting to neither advocate for nor condemn the plethora of sexual desires, actions, and subcultures here considered—though I recognize that that may be easier said than done.

As I’ve mentioned, the biohazard symbol in queer culture has become the iconographic signification of barebacking, or the purposeful omission of condoms during penetrative sex. The term, originating from the equestrian act of riding a horse without a saddle (one of many glorious puns appropriate within queer lingo), has undergone a resurgence in queer culture in conversation and in practice, is no longer the taboo it once was at the apex of the AIDS crisis. In fact, “barebacking” is now an acceptable choice of preferred sexual activity listed on individual profiles in sex and dating sites, including Squirt.org, thereby signalling, for better or for worse, a newfound commonplace character of the term. As symbol, the biohazard has become co-opted in gay pornography, notably by Treasure Island Media, a leading production company of bareback videos, and pornstars including Ethan Wolfe, who has the symbol tattooed directly above his penis. In its more overt connotation, the biohazard symbol has come to signify “gift-giving,” often known as breeding, in which participants “give” or “pass” (or, more often than not, continuously re-enact such giving and passing) HIV from a seropositive top to a seronegative bottom. As such, in Wolfe’s case, the symbol’s traditional prophylactic connotation has been reversed to signify an intentional disavowal of safety. In Unlimited Intimacy, Dean emphasizes how breeding “represents a way to repeat the unrepeatable, to make seroconversion something you can practice. Bug chasing fosters an illusion that one is the master of, rather than completely subjected to, his erotic destiny” (53). Essentially, the biohazard represents, within queer iconography, the limits of “erotic destiny,” and, as such, comes to equally represent how the queer sexual imagination contains within it the possibility of controlling, dictating the parameters of, and surpassing those very limits.

In Schuster’s essay on the tensions between symbols of recycling and biohazards, he posits that the biohazard reminds us of the pains of embodiment and the risks that at every moment surround the exposed and vulnerable body that depends on maintaining the thin and semi-porous barrier between beings wanted and unwanted. Vigilance over the anti-corporeal, or that which cannot be incorporated into any bodily system, appears at the same time as a utopian hope for the continuous body, the effortless system, and the process of perpetual motion that would be the dream of an ecosystem.
without loss or breakdown. We are caught between these marks compelled to mark everything as the anti-ecological and the endlessly ecological. (9)

I here gamble drawing too overt a parallel between ecological and sexual risk, barriers and the discourse of safe(r) sex, as well as the “anti-ecological” and HIV, but I’d like to argue that the tension through which Schuster understands the “anti-” to inform the “ecological,” including the ecological’s possibility of being ecological (ultimately manifested as the “dream” of purity, the “dream” of perpetuation) exists in comparable relation to how the queer sexual imagination is caught between sexual practices which place participants at risk of acquiring HIV—undeniably seen as “impure” in its stigmatization—or re-enacting its acquisition, and the discourses which foreclose the possibility of such practices. This essay considers what’s at stake in such foreclosure.

III.

As I’ve already alluded, the tension between my café experience and (the subcultural act termed) breeding naturally exists in concordance with the tensions inherent in discourses of safe(r) sex. Put succinctly, there is on the one hand a form of sexual freedom, or what Douglas Crimp has overtly termed promiscuity, through which queer cultural participation has defined itself and promoted as forms of responsible queer livelihood, and on the other, a discourse of sexual restraint, monogamy, and chastity harkening to the early 1980s at the onset of AIDS-related deaths. I must, though, emphasize from the beginning that the tension is not (solely) between safe and unsafe sex, but instead the positive and negative valences between which sex and sexuality are imagined within our collective queer culture—Crimp will ultimately demonstrate the possibility of a concomitance of sex-positivity and the promotion of safe(r) practices.

We might productively emphasize this tension through the words of playwright Larry Kramer and art scholar Crimp, two activists at notorious political odds despite their years of participating in relatively similar activist initiatives. Kramer, in *The Normal Heart*, his 1985 autobiographical play depicting the creation and early activities of the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, has Ned, the character purported to represent Kramer himself, proclaim to the group’s other members: “Do you realize that you are talking about millions of men who have singled out promiscuity to be their principal political agenda, the one they’d die before abandoning?” (qtd. in Crimp 56). Kramer, through Ned, is here drawing a distinct parallel between queer sexual abandon and political irresponsibility—so much so that he has Emma, a doctor treating gay men, demand that Ned tell his friends (and, symbolically, queers everywhere) to stop having sex until the epidemic effectively concludes: “if having sex can kill you, doesn’t anybody with half a brain stop fucking?” (Kramer 27). (Moreover, it is not insignificant that
The Normal Heart has recently been restaged, this time on Broadway. These sentiments continue their ever present resonance vis-à-vis contemporary sexual practices.) Emma and Ned’s words ought to be compared to Crimp’s who, in the introduction to his collected essays on AIDS, contends that

responsibility may well follow from sex. This has obviously made sex terribly paradoxical for gay men during an epidemic of a sexually transmitted deadly disease syndrome. The paradox has meant that we’ve had to live with an especially heavy burden of conflict, with deep and enduring ambivalence. And we’ve had to discern and resist the easy answers that moralistic attitudes toward sex would provide to falsely resolve our conflict and ambivalence. (16)

In contrast to The Normal Heart, Crimp renders sex—that through which gay men have come to identify the richness of their lives—as responsible, a term usually hurled at queers dictating what they ought to be and, more often, what they are not. That members of the queer community heeding “moralistic attitudes toward sex” can only do so in bad faith bolsters Crimp’s overarching project in an essay entitled “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic” in which Crimp attempts to outline how safe sex requires sex to, well, happen. Promiscuity, as I will show, is for Crimp both an ethics through which queerness is defined but also, on a more practical level, an assertion that denying sex and sexuality leads us to performing sexual practices in unsafe, and unseen, ways. Put flatly, denial doesn’t work. At issue in relation to my discussion of barebacking, however, is neither an argument pertaining to health nor to an inward responsibility to the self or personal wellbeing; instead, Kramer and Crimp provide counterarguments on queer political participation, sexual culture, and what we might think of as relationality—the attitude and disposition of one queer body toward another. The opposition formulated here metonymically speaks to the greater tension between a form of queerness true to its sexually liberated origins versus a radical shift towards what opponents of the movement would term sexual negativity. We might say, though, that this sexual negativity deploys safe(r) sex to bolster its argument, as opposed to safe(r) sex leading to sexual negativity; that is, beyond its essential mandate of safety, the discourse of safe(r) sex is being deployed in the service of regulation, stigmatization, and normitivization. At stake between the two positions is the way in which queer sex is imagined—the way in which sex and sexuality have shaped the contours of queer life, the communal social imagination by which we measure ourselves to be and, dare I say, empower such being.

Peggy Phelan takes up the relationship between the discourse of safe(r) sex and queer corporeality, most specifically how such corporeality is enacted and performed over the course of AIDS in its specific instantiations (as in, artists who chart the course of their own illness) and in its global scale (as in, the course of the epidemic at the levels of community, nation, world). In Mourning Sex, Phelan writes
The possibilities opened up by the sexual revolution, we have been told, have been foreclosed by the onslaught of AIDS. This claim is both shockingly inaccurate and deeply true. The reasons for the foreclosure of those possibilities are many and AIDS is, among other things, a *tabula rasa* for the projections of multiple myths . . . As we go about making new sexual sexualities in the technologies and misprisions of “safe(r) sex” we also mourn the loss of the “liberation” (however phantasmatical) that stands behind this remaking. (5)

Integral to this passage is the manner in which Phelan frames AIDS as a remaking of the queer sexual imagination, a beginning anew of what “the sexual revolution” had previously sought to establish, and in large measures, had established. The “foreclosure of those possibilities” is both “deeply true” in that sexual practices had to be changed but “shockingly inaccurate” in that practices either continued to exist—a topic I’ll return to—or, more often, were adapted and transformed. Speaking in relation to Crimp’s hope for queer sexual practices, José Esteban Muñoz notes that “many gay men have managed to maintain the practices that Crimp lists, as they have been translated in the age of safer sex” (34). This translation has markedly shifted sexual possibility, and our—returning to Phelan—“making new sexual sexualities” carries with it the connotation of re-learning exactly what being queer means. David Gere echoes this sentiment, albeit in a highly gendered way, when he writes that “Our bodies, our gay bodies, our American male bodies, our 1980s and ’90s homosexual bodies, were made in their current forms, mapped by their current desires, through a set of practices we learned and then unlearned and then perhaps relearned” (259-260). It is my attempt, here, to show that the process of relearning is conditioned by the other we learn from.

Sex without the possibility of fluid transmission, Phelan writes in an earlier text, “is sex as only secret. Secret sex. The sex of secrets. Safe sex as the end of shared secrets? The fluid body converted into a solid, impervious to porosity: safe sex reversed the orderly chemistry of sexual exchange—from solid to fluid—and remains solid” (*Unmarked* 38). While “remains solid” is perhaps at odds with Gere’s “relearned,” I’d like to pause on how Phelan characterizes sex either prior to or beyond secrecy: fluid, porous, and in a sense open, leaky. I question, though, the extent to which we can be, or ever will be, “solid.” Have we achieved a rigidity and prudishness so stolid and unforgiving as to inhibit “shared secrets”? What are the conditions by which fluidity becomes possible once again? Or, alternatively, has the fluidity never really left us? How has fluidity—even if only in memory, if only beyond our individual sexual practices—shaped our sexual selves?

The issue, though, with safe(r) sex is best characterized by the increasing frequency by which the “(r)” is added to “safe”: safer not safest. Traditional “family values” would have it that safest denotes abstinence, though Crimp
and (most) queer activists would quickly respond that saying “no” is hardly a preventative measure, and, if political scandals have taught us anything, monogamy is best maintained in theory rather than practice. Thus, through AIDS, and in a significant act of community building, the gay liberation movement, in Crimp’s words, “made it possible to meet the epidemic’s most urgent requirement: the development of safe sex practices” (61). My point is twofold: that, first, these practices were developed in the service of an ethics of sexual promiscuity whereby promiscuity is, and can only be, understood through a positive valence, and second, that it was and continues to be invented and reinvented only in relation to the widest gamut of sexual possibility: both the queers to which Crimp points (more often than not working for AIDS service organizations such as the Gay Men’s Health Crisis) and those surrounding me as I type these words, needed then and need now to develop practices of safer sex that maintain access to the wide range of sexualities and sexual possibilities that make us queer in the first place.

Before turning, once and for all, to my topic at hand, I’d like to emphasize Crimp’s deployment of (what Phelan called) fluidity as it relates to the adaptation of sexual practices after AIDS. “Our promiscuity,” writes Crimp, taught us many things, not only about the pleasures of sex, but about the great multiplicity of those pleasures. It is that psychic preparation, that experimentation, that consciousness work on our own sexualities that has allowed many of us to change our sexual behaviours . . . very quickly, and very dramatically. It is for this reason that [Kramer’s attitude] about the formulation of gay politics on the basis of our sexuality is so pervasively distorted, why they insist that our promiscuity will destroy us when in fact it is our promiscuity that will save us. (63; original emphasis)

The hard truth is that the biohazard, I argue, as much as we justifiably rail against the transmission of a virus that haunts us still, is the radical other thought in concomitance with “the promiscuity that will save us.” Only by imagining the conditions of the biohazard, only by imagining a place for barebacking in the panoply of queer sexual possibility—even if that place is strictly one of personal fear and avoidance—does queer sexuality become imaginable, does queer sexuality come into being.

IV.

Generally speaking, the discourse of barebacking, for Dean, is part and parcel with the discourse of sexual promiscuity: “Barebacking epitomizes promiscuous sex: it mixes bodies and semen and blood without compunction. Barebacking is the next logical step in the enterprise of gay promiscuity” (Unlimited Intimacy 5). Again, that word: promiscuous. Again: promiscuity invoked parallel to an ethics of
queer sex, of queer meaning making. What is the “enterprise” of gay sexuality, and how might we identify both its logic and logical sequence? How can practices which defy the discourse of safety queers have been attempting to establish over the thirty some-odd years of an epidemic represent “the next logical step” in the course of queer sexuality? (Spoiler alert: this may be exactly the point.)

My goal, here, is to frame the practice of barebacking beyond the subcultural community itself, instead focusing on how such practices relate to, inform and in turn be informed by the ever-growing and ever-shifting totality I’ve called the queer sexual imagination; though, perhaps, that sense of (inward, contained) community must be noted: “unprotected sex had become the basis for a distinct subculture. After two decades of safe-sex education, erotic risk among gay men has become organized and deliberate, not just accidental” (ix). In Schuster’s essay, the proliferation of poisonous insecticides and other pollutants reminds us, “from the outset” of “a universal pollution that makes all life precarious life” (Schuster 11); in my own context, though I in no way am attempting to frame HIV as pollutant, the possibility of harbouring the virus, from the outset, makes all sex precarious sex. “Thanks to its construction as a taboo, something that officially remains impermissible under any circumstances,” Dean later writes, “unprotected anal sex among U.S. gay men has come to seem transgressive and thus amenable to fetishization, when it otherwise might be regarded as ordinary or simply ill advised” (Unlimited Intimacy 157).

That this “fantasy of risk” (Unlimited Intimacy 17) can be subject to fetishization in the first place is important: Dean understands its fetishization to exist as such only because of a vaguely defined set of sociocultural norms dictating the parameters of sexual acceptability. There are two ways we might frame this occurrence: first, as ultimately queer, so long as we understand queer to connote divergence from normative expectations, and thus formed in reaction to the codification of sexual possibility, and second, as that codification’s radical otherwise: what the sociocultural norm fears the most. As such, fantasizing risk both informs and is informed by more (socially and legally) legitimated sexualities. There is, however, a second characteristic: the subcultural practice of barebacking as understood by Dean carries with it, and importantly so, an ethics of sexual openness: an openness to sexual practice and an openness to sexual participants: “In bareback subculture, promiscuous sex thus entails a particular kind of fidelity” (Unlimited Intimacy 60). The “unlimited intimacy” in Dean’s title overtly refers to a deeply personal, deeply connected sexual practice, not unlike that which has been lost from the queer sexual revolution so lamented by Phelan, Gere, Crimp, and Muñoz.

My point is aporetic: any restriction as to how (and who, and where, and why) the contours of the queer sexual imagination may be mapped, as to how (and who, and where, and why) queer sexuality can and ought to be manifested with any sense of social legitimacy, on one hand, leads to the development and fetishization of sexual acts beyond that social
legitimacy’s determined bounds. Queers have found the cracks and fissures within such confinement, and have come to create new subcultures and practices within that space. That which falls beyond determined bounds, as I hope to have shown, is ultimately queer, thus these bounds are the conditions of possibility for queerness itself—that which queerness can react against, can transgress, and surmount. But on the other hand, this transgression is feared by the generations of queer men and women (with an emphasis on the now-plural generations) who have had, as Muñoz put it, to “translate” the parameters of their collective sexuality through and by which they have come to define themselves. HIV, for many gay men in particular, remains that which dictates who with and how sexual contact occurs. (We need only think of the proliferating problematic terminology of “poz,” “neg,” “clean” on the very sex sites that have included barebacking as a ‘clickable’ option of sexual preference.) Essentially, barebacking, breeding, and, more generally, HIV, have simultaneously become that which creates the alternative sexualities upon which queerness is predicated and become that which is feared and thus sexually constraining. This, in effect, is the tension through which barebacking constrains queer environments and our governing sexual imagination.

V.

I’m now in a café in New York’s West Village, and the spectre of my topic has haunted me for some weeks now. I have just finished talking about this paper to the (queer) man next to me; in fact, I can’t really seem to stop talking about it. (He, too, is really cute.) Like my café in Montréal, this is an environment oozing sexual possibility—which is not to say actual sex. The rolled up sleeves of the barista, the way the boy next to me maintains his posture, the gossip emanating from the corner all speak to a certain queer tenor. I like this place.

The sexual openness I took Dean as valuing in his analysis of barebacking, both in the form of open-mindedness and acceptance of the other, may also be located in Samuel Delany’s writings on New York’s famous cruising spots along Forty-Second street, an area (even more famously) decimated during the construction and expansion of Times Square in the mid-1990s. Delany’s operative premise in Times Square Red, Times Square Blue is that “there are as many different styles, intensities, and timbres to sex as there are people” (45), which he renders through descriptions of the area’s porn theatres, gay bars, and a cast of characters including hustlers, food vendors, and shoe shines. In fact, the sheer magnitude of “styles, intensities, and timbres” of both sex and people depicted in Delany’s work may prove the expansiveness by which I understand the queer sexual imagination to be as a vast understatement. Delany’s net is cast rather wide indeed.

Consider, though, the manner in which Delany understands the regulation of sexual acceptability—how and why certain acts are deemed appropriate over others. Prior to calling safe(r) sex “a notion that currently functions much the way the notion of ‘security’ and
‘conformity’ did in the fifties” (122)—and like my argument above, at issue isn’t the actual measures we’ve adopted as ostensibly “safe” but instead how that safety is articulated within and enforced at the level of our collective sexual imagination—Delany writes:

Starting in 1985 for the first time, in the name of “safer sex,” New York City began specifically to criminalize every individual sex act by name, from masturbation to vaginal intercourse, whether performed with a condom or not—a legal situation that has catastrophic ramifications we may not crawl out from under for a long, long time. This is a legal move that arguably puts gay liberation, for example, back to point notably before Stonewall—and doesn’t do much for heterosexual freedom either.

This is a rhetorical change that may well adhere to an extremely important discursive intervention in the legal contouring of social practices whose ramifications, depending on the development and the establishment of new social practices that promote communication between the classes (specifically sexual and sex-related), are hard to foresee in any detail. (120)

The legislation and criminalization here is a result of three intertwined phenomena: (1) the commercial desire (by the city, by the financial backers of Times Square) to push all “undesirable” sexual activity to the city’s waterfront, (2) the increasingly pervasive condemnation of that desire, and (3) the legal codification of sexual norms, often using the specter of AIDS as its method of justification. Interestingly, Delany draws a parallel between sexual regulation and “communication,” hindering what he, at the outset of his book, calls “contact.” Like Phelan, Delany understands the “sexual world” as being remade—and this in a manner which forecloses sexual possibility in favour of sexual proscription. Delany’s point is simple yet vastly underestimated and increasingly unheeded: constraining sexual practices, even those we might not agree with, is tantamount to constraining our relationality, the possibility of our being in community. Tom Roach mimics this sentiment in his recent book on AIDS, in which he writes that “anonymous sex . . . allows subjects to free themselves from the shackles of identity and relate to one another in ways that run counter to the modern demand for self-knowledge” (35). Roach’s and Delany’s is a call, rhetorically and in practice, for an openness to possibility and to each other, the products of which “are hard to foresee in any detail.”

What do we make of all this? Barebacking, as I’ve said, has shifted the parameters of what it means to be queer; barebacking has opened a space of tension between openness and acceptance, and responsibility, between (often radically) rejecting normative constraint and prevailing over an epidemic through which we’ve lost countless friends, lovers, and a generation of memories, between a new-found ethics of safety and the hard-won gains of sexual liberation. But it is undeniable that the
practices of barebacking and breeding, insofar as they continually demonstrate the queer sexual imagination as unconstrained and uncontainable, condition the possibility inherent in everyday queer lived experience—including, but not limited to, my café experiences. The purposeful looks, the allusion-filled conversations in this café are tinged, and even made brighter, by the sexual possibility that barebacking has come to represent; yet, at the same time, these conversations, these yearnings are contained through the anxiety and estrangement the acquisition of HIV imposes. The biohazard emblematizes the meeting point between our ultimate freedom and ultimate fear, between the ‘safety’ we’ve come to adopt and the (radical) openness to new sexualities and to each other upon which we’ve defined ourselves. Subversion and community, the making and unmaking of a sexual imagination beyond its conceivable limits.

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For the Marxist cultural critic David McNally, the proliferation of cultural forms utilizing the character-trope of the zombie points to a deep-seated social anxiety about the catastrophism undergirding the dominance of late-capitalism. He argues that the figure of the zombie, or the living dead, aesthetically mirrors the death-like alienation from one's own existential experience of living within late-capitalism. Thus, the prolongation of “life” beyond death is complicit in the pervasive proliferation of late-capitalist power dynamics, but it also paradoxically acts as the very ontological transformation that precludes the dissolution of such domination. The French philosopher Georges Bataille treats the notion of death as the fundamental reality that acts as a delimiting force exerting itself upon life. For Bataille, death is inherently restorative as it dissipates the existential interruption he posits is caused by life. The French autonomist-Marxist journal Tiqqun argues that the only recourse to the totalizing domination of late-capitalism is to embrace the latent nihilism inherent in late-capitalist power dynamics as a way to negate these very forces. In their essay “Silence and Beyond,” Tiqqun argues that since late-capitalism is already a social space which is inhabited by the living dead, the only position of attack left to anticapitalists is one which paradoxically attempts to negate the very nihilism inherent within late-capitalism itself. By situating such an argument against McNally’s analysis of the living dead, and tempered by Bataille’s treatment of death, Tiqqun’s position here begins to appear as one that eschews prescriptive affirmations of non-capitalist alterities (arguing that there is no ontological or political outside to the dominance of late-capitalism) and instead argues that only the affirmative negativity of late-capitalism’s complete nihilistic destruction can usher in the very prerequisites for its transcendence.

According to both McNally and Tiqqun, a definitive logic of nihilistic catastrophism has begun to emerge within the sociopolitical space of late-capitalism. It is a space in which capitalist commodity exchange relations have effectively created a rhizomatic network of dominance.
across the entirety of the world in the twenty-first century; so much so, that as Tiqqun claims, it is now the era of the “authoritarian commodity” or the completion of capitalism’s quest for “real subsumption.” For Marx, “real subsumption,” as opposed to “formal subsumption,” constituted the historical moment in which there were no longer any pre-capitalist forms of production to be forcibly integrated into the capitalist schema.\(^1\) For Tiqqun, the era of the “authoritarian commodity” is that in which the commodity-fetish, that metaphysical obfuscation of exchange relations taking the place of authentic social relations, becomes normalized and totalized. It is within this sociopolitical space of catastrophism that the horizon of death ominously looms as the only possible outcome of the destructive impulses of late-capitalism. Paradoxically, death itself becomes the final ontological obstacle, which late-capitalism attempts to overcome through the complete codification, delineation, and dominance of this last “othered” existential space. Thus, implicit within the rhetoric surrounding discourses of catastrophism is the coalescence of the two supposedly distinct spheres of life and death. This coalescence reveals that life within late-capitalism’s era of the “authoritarian commodity” is death itself, and the individuals experiencing this existence as the “living dead” qualitatively lack any traces of authentic life.

In his essay, “Land of the Living Dead: Capitalism and the Catastrophes of Everyday Life,” McNally argues that the “earliest modern images of the zombie are tied to figures of mindless labor” (114). He goes on to claim that “this image carried a latent but powerful social criticism: the idea that in capitalist society the majority become nothing but bearers of undifferentiated life energies, dispensed in units of abstract time. The *raison d’être* of zombies is the labor they perform” (116). It is precisely this reduction of lived-experience to abstract labour potential, which informs the figurative death of such individuals within late-capitalism. They are dead in so much as their living is qualitatively devoid of meaning beyond the production of exchange value, which is already metaphysically removed from use value.

McNally describes two dominant representations of the zombie that are explicitly tied to the development of neoliberalism—those of “crazed consumers and lifeless laborers” (117). He argues that the older representations of the zombie, specifically those that trace their lineage from Haitian lore by way of the Western Congo, did not involve the characteristics of cannibalism that have become all but ubiquitous in Western representations of the zombie. McNally traces this development to the rise of consumer culture in the 1960s, specifically in the United States, and argues that it is not until this historical context that zombies begin to mindlessly crave the flesh of the “living.” There is something inherently self-negating in the ever increasing lust for the consumption of living flesh as embodied by the cannibalistic zombie trope of American/European cultural production, as consumption and scarcity differentiates it from the “colonial” form of the “lifeless laborer” zom-
The cannibalistic “consumer” zombie encounters problems of scarcity, for it ostensibly ceases to exist itself if it cannot consume living flesh. This problem of scarcity seems to mirror the ecological concerns of resource allocation, procurement, and sustainability so prevalent in late-capitalist discourses of catastrophe. Thus, in the same way that the logic of late-capitalism creates an irreconcilable schism between the realities of consumption in a finite physical world and the theoretical impulses which underlie late-capitalism’s quest for profit accumulation, so too does the cannibalistic “consumer” zombie embody the contradiction of its need to consume more living-flesh and the scarcity which begins to manifest as the direct result of such consumption.

McNally hints at the inherent possibility within such cultural renderings of the zombie as a figure that evokes catastrophic anxieties. He argues that “the clash of the manic flesh-eater and the laboring-drone also hints at another startling zombie capacity: rebellion” (123). While his analysis of the emergence of the two types of zombie cultural forms, the cannibalistic consumer zombie of “developed” countries and the mindless-labourer slave zombie of “developing” countries is compelling, his depiction of “the truly subversive image of the zombie revolt” is prosaically emblematic of past utopian visions. He uses the image of zombie rebellion as a metaphor for the “everyday work of resistance,” arguing that “revolution grows out of ordinary, prosaic acts of organizing and resistance whose coalescence produces mass upheaval” (123). In critiquing the catastrophic opposition to his prescriptive perspective on the manifestation of revolutionary politics, McNally argues that the other “apocalyptic scenario, in which a complete collapse of social organization ushers in a tumultuous upheaval, is ultimately a mystical rather than political one” (124). This dismissal of the mystical, of the messianic, in favour of a purely political rendering of revolt falls into the reductive trap of positing an affirmative counter-logic to capitalism within a social space which is already completely contained, delineated, and dominated by late-capitalism as a space which has no ontological outside.

McNally fails to acknowledge that in the figurative-representational space of the zombie, the only act that can negate the cyclical violence of the zombie’s consumption (and by extension the logic of late-capitalism) is the self-negation of the zombie by its own nihilistic consumption, which inevitably leads to absolute scarcity and the impossibility of its own continued sustenance. McNally’s approach is clearly concerned with the earlier stages of the zombie’s historicocultural development. Thus, his dichotomized and relatively undifferentiated conception of the zombie as a cultural form overlooks the way in which many zombie representations are currently being depicted across many contemporary cross-cultural genres. The zombie is undergoing a transition in which it is seemingly synthesizing its folkloric incarnation’s ability to exist indefinitely without the consumption of flesh with the popular Western incarnation’s insatiable desire for the living. The result is a new zombie form that no longer needs to consume.

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flesh to sustain itself, yet it continues in its attempts to consume the living. This problematizes both McNally’s scarcity-consumption argument and his calling for a “conscious” uprising of the living dead.

McNally misconstrues Marx when he argues that “just as, to paraphrase Marx, the working class must negate its own alienated condition if it is to emancipate itself, so zombie rebels must de-zombify themselves and acquire consciousness and identity in the process of overturning their degraded state” (126). The form of the consumer-zombie already contains within itself the inevitability of its own destruction, and further, its own transcendence. It possesses this internal potentiality for self-negation precisely because it encounters the very limits of scarcity and causes its own destruction through the mindless act of sustaining itself—the death of the already-dead. Thus, taking this cultural form and transposing it onto the dispossessed subjects of late-capitalist domination, it is not a question of how to “acquire consciousness and identity” but rather an anti-political, mystical embracing of the nothingness that is latent within the nihilistic contradictions at the core of late-capitalism. This destruction of the nihilism undergirding the contradictions of late-capitalist logic through the adoption of nihilism itself as an ethical position is precisely the course that Tiqqun argues for in their essay “Silence and Beyond.”

Tiqqun essentially agrees with McNally in the catastrophic analysis of late-capitalism, yet their respective recourses to such a bleak future could not be more divergent. Whereas McNally argues that the zombie/disenfranchised/proletariat subject of late-capitalism must “acquire consciousness and identity,” Tiqqun argues that this logic fits precisely within the confines of the biopolitical fabric of late-capitalist domination. Borrowing from Foucault’s work on biopower, Tiqqun argues that with the historical development of capitalism, the disciplinary practices of sovereign power where the “tyrannical enemy . . . draws its power from its ability to shut people up” have given way to a form of power (biopower) which expresses “its aptitude to make them talk [. . . and as a result] has moved its center of gravity from its mastery of the world itself to its seizure of the world’s mode of disclosure” (70). Thus, McNally’s claim that in order to effectively challenge late-capitalism all one has to do is analyze its “mystified social relations [. . . as a means to] disclose what they tell us about the genuinely monstrous, deadening, and zombifying processes to which wage-laborers are subjected in modern society” (127) fails to acknowledge that such modes of disclosure are already codified according to the very logic of late-capitalism itself. Tiqqun argues that through the domination of biopower as the delimiting power dynamic concomitant with the rise of post-industrial late-capitalism, all attempts to speak to or disclose “truth” within it merely function to serve late-capitalism’s primacy.

Tiqqun is writing from the temporal position of Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history,” a position contextualized by the failures of so-
cial-democratic reform, the communist state, and the new left—all impotently opposed to the supposed totalizing triumph of capitalism. It is within this quasi-fatalism that Tiqqun argues that “even contestation [against capitalism] proves daily how incapable it has been of supporting itself on that modernization’s uninterrupted avalanche of defeats” (70). Tiqqun argues that such antagonistic contestations have failed precisely because anticapitalists have attempted to engage late-capitalism using its own modes of disclosure and recognition. They claim that the hypermediated discourse of late-capitalism “only recognizes as a truly existent opposition the opposition that is willing to speak; that is, to speak its language, and hence to subscribe to the alienation of the Common” (71). Here contestation takes on a meta-linguistic component, in that through biopower’s coercive institutional apparatuses, any attempts to contest without the language of political demands have been relegated to the impractical, insane, and anarchic. Yet, what Tiqqun elucidates at this theoretical juncture is the need to confront the metaphysical nothingness underneath the veneer of “real” late-capitalist social relations with a negating form of nothingness that is conscious of itself as such. For as they claim:

the real hostility, the metaphysical hostility, which allows neither language nor the moment it will express itself to be controlled, and which moreover prefers silence to any speech, has been pushed back into the shadows of what does not appear and hence does not exist. (71)

Thus, according to Tiqqun, the project for the antagonist aligned against capitalism becomes one that must simply be affirmative negation, without any prescriptive qualifiers positively arguing for something to replace capitalism (such as state socialism, alter-globalization, green or sustainable social-democratic welfare states, etc).

It becomes apparent then that Tiqqun believes “all ‘social struggles’ are ridiculous” (72), because “they are merely serving what they think they’re challenging” (71). Within such a perspective, a conscious and active nihilism begins to align itself as, to borrow from Engels, the negation of the negation. Here, an active nihilism conscious of its own potentiality to bring about the destruction of the passive nihilism latent within late-capitalism’s own contradictory nature begins to manifest. The formal distinction between active and passive nihilism is merely a question of intentionality. According to this argument, capitalism produces a passive nihilism within the forms it subsumes, as its very logic of control and domination is one that seemingly negates all potentiality for alternatives to capitalism. Active nihilism is therefore first the recognition of this passive nihilism latent within capitalism and the impossibility of escape, followed by an enacting of the program-less destruction of this very negation. Tiqqun writes: “Capitalism produces the conditions for its transcendence, not that transcendence itself” (70). Thus paradoxically, Tiqqun at once embraces and eschews the collapsist rhetoric of late-capitalist catastrophism. Inherent within the late-capitalist contradiction
between the theoretical impulse to maximize profit amidst the reality of finite resource scarcity is the production of the “conditions” for capitalism’s “transcendence.” Yet Tiqqun seems to be articulating that if such conditions are not met with a conscious ethical force aware of its potential to hasten the destruction of capitalist relations, then the passive nihilism within late-capitalism will have run its course—resulting in something akin to a series of ecological, social, and political collapses. It is in this way then that Tiqqun claims that “among those we encounter, we appreciate nothing more than such cold resolution to ruining this world” (70).

Tiqqun’s assumption of an active form of nihilism within “Silence and Beyond” is paradoxically both an unwilled reaction to the totallizing encroachment of late-capitalist social relations as well as an ethical position which is consciously possessed. Because of this schizoid-like occupation of such an anti-political position, Tiqqun’s active negation of the metaphysical nature underlying late-capitalism as “the way for crossing the line, the way towards the exit from nihilism [. . . and the way] beyond it” (74) proves to be a position that takes on an inherently ontological and existential dimension akin to Georges Bataille’s conception of death.

For Georges Bataille, there is a certain existential wholeness that exists outside of the limits that death imposes on life. Bataille scholar Michael Richardson claims that Bataille’s sensibility is essentially tragic: he refused to accept any possibility of an escape from the human condition. In the end we are condemned to death, and to the annihilation of our being. Indeed, far from striving against this condition, he believed we should accept it. Tragic it may be, but it remained the only truth of our existence. (202)

At face value this essentially pessimistic view of life seems in stark opposition to the potentiality of transcendence that Tiqqun posits, yet upon closer juxtaposition both Bataille and Tiqqun are speaking to the way in which being must ultimately negate itself.

For Bataille, the ontological whole that exists apart from life, in death, is quite similar to Tiqqun’s messianic conception of the communism, which manifests in the active negation of capitalism in its entirety. For Tiqqun, communism is irreducibly rooted in the becoming-of-negation, the communality that emerges when the predicative identities, individual subjects, values, and moralities all beholden to the simulacra of late-capitalism are stripped away—leaving “only a total, existential hostility” (75). This destruction of predicative, simulated ontologies, “by removing them from their temporal element, strips nude the truth of our times” (Tiqqun 73). This destruction, the active nihilism aligned against late-capitalist domination (passive nihilism), informs the journal’s very namesake, as they claim: “In the Sabbatean tradition the moment of the general destruction of things was given the name Tiqqun. In that instant, each thing is repaired and removed from the long chain of suffering it underwent in this world” (77). This is very similar to the way that Bataille views the emergence of cognizant life as a finite interruption from the
pure continuity of infinite existence. Thus, death acts as both the moment of repairing the separation of life from death by reintegrating dead-life back into the infinite totality of death and as the totality of death itself. For Bataille, death is at once a singular moment (an act) and a complete and infinite totality (state of being). In the same way then, Tiqqun’s advocacy for the active destruction of late-capitalism is the singular moment (the act) that repairs and reintegrates forms-of-life into the complete and infinite totality of communism (state of being). This is a destruction of the vestiges of the self en masse, done in a communal process of becoming-nothing-together.

In “Silence and Beyond” Tiqqun uses Bataille’s work to elucidate what they deem as the importance of destroying the present state of things. They quote Bataille from Theory of Religion: “All the subsistence existence and toil that permitted me to get there were suddenly destroyed, they emptied out infinitely like a river into the ocean of that one infinitesimal moment” (Tiqqun 77). Thus death, as the moment of the existential destruction of the self as well as the moment of reintegration with that which is beyond the narrow confines of human life, is a messianic bearer of truth—a tenuous position to hold in the midst of postmodernity. Bataille argues that “death actually discloses the imposition of reality, not only in that the absence of duration gives the lie to it, but above all because death is the great affirmer, the wonder-struck of life . . . Death reveals life in its plenitude and dissolves the real order” (TOR 46-47). This dissolution of “the real order” through death finds its parallel in Tiqqun’s contention that “whoever has never experienced one of those hours of joyous or melancholic negativity cannot tell how close to destruction the infinite is” (77). Thus the act of destruction, of an active nihilism, hints at the possibility of transcending the falsity of the temporal present and the reintegration with the infinite.

For Tiqqun late-capitalism and all of the affects bound up within its own displays of simulacra and biopower must be destroyed to be overcome, much in the same way that death for Bataille forms the basis of the reconnection with the existentially infinite. Bataille writes in Inner Experience that “it is by dying, without possible evasion, that I will perceive the rupture which constitutes my nature and in which I have transcended ‘what exists’ . . . Death is in one sense the common inevitable, but in another sense profound, inaccessible” (71-72). Thus, life for Bataille is a “rupture” which separates and isolates, while death is a “rupture” which joins and repairs. Similarly for Tiqqun, freedom first comes from the death-like finitude presupposed by existing within the confines of late-capitalist power dynamics and, secondly, from attempting to destroy such an ontology. They claim that there are indeed those who are “applying nihilism to nihilism itself,” yet “they still retain, from their prior state, the feeling that they are living as if they were already dead; but from this state of indifference concerning the raw fact of
being alive, they draw the formula for the greatest possible sovereignty, a freedom which is incapable of trembling in the face of anything anymore” (76). It is thus in this way that Tiqqun’s program is precisely the abandonment of the very idea of such positive programs, in favour of a revolt or insurrection that is fundamentally negative, without demands, silent, and invisible. It is a conception of struggle firmly rooted in the metaphysical negation of everything in “this enemy world” (77).

Through articulating such a highly contentious theoretical position, Tiqqun acknowledges that such beliefs warrant placing “a high importance on the form of the manifestations of negativity that invent a new active grammar of contestation” (72). Central to this “new active grammar” of negativity is an evasion of language’s imposition of meaning. Tiqqun argues that all previous social movements aligned against late-capitalism mistakenly attempted to speak to late-capitalist domination on its own terms, entering a discourse in which all of the language is already effectively controlled. They contend that “the greatest possible demands don’t allow themselves to be formulated” (76), and in so doing they create an antagonistic position which, through its own inarticulation, evades the propensity of late-capitalist power dynamics to impose meaning and subsequently exert control over that which is being signified. Tiqqun claims that between the passive nihilism inherent in the contradictions of capitalism as first outlined by Marx himself and the active nihilism which seeks to destroy all that exists within the late-capitalist ontology is “the line. And that line is the unspeakable, which imposes silence” (76). This “line,” the demarcation between real/simulacra, life/death, capitalism/communism, must be shrouded in silence, for that which actively negates all that exists must necessarily be complete and total absence, existence’s lack, the void that threatens to assert itself and thus rejoins the interruption of life, in Bataille’s terms, to the infinite nature of death. Thus, the lack of language and the signification or imposition of meaning that accompanies it manifests itself as a negative ethical hostility, which is existentially “the unspeakable” (Tiqqun 75).

Tiqqun’s argument for silence, a radical negation of all that exists without the prescriptive expression of utopian fantasies, proves to be markedly different than the silence/voicelessness that typifies the cultural trope of the zombie. David McNally’s zombies are reduced to the living dead; they are stripped from both language and existence. They are the mirrored metaphor of an ontology under late-capitalism which embodies the complete expenditure of human labour-power entirely for the production of exchange values. Ironically, the only creature capable of existing purely as limitless human labour-power is precisely the figure of the non-human. Transposing his metaphor of the zombie as the dispossessed worker/consumer of late-capitalism, McNally argues the zombie’s voicelessness and lack of language is an expression of its innate oppression. Thus for McNally, the zombie and, by figurative
extension, the late-capitalist proletariat merely needs an “awakening to consciousness” to turn “the world upside down” (123).

Tiqqun’s position is radically opposed to this view of silence, as they revel in the conscious silence of a nihilism aligned against late-capitalist domination. They argue that silence is an offensive position that does not allow “struggle” or “resistance” to enter into the very language and logic of late-capitalism. By consciously disavowing the propensity of resistance to late-capitalism to articulate its political, social, or economic demands, Tiqqun’s silent antagonism evades the trap of language and the imposition of meaning that accompanies it. It is precisely in this way that the rejection of demands and the resulting conscious silence appears very similar to Georges Bataille’s theoretical conception of death. For Bataille death acts as the transcendent moment in which the interruption of life is finally reintegrated with the infinite. This parallels Tiqqun’s own communist transcendence, as they claim that only a conscious nihilism can transcend the totality of late-capitalist relations. They write that “we cannot transcend nihilism without realizing it, nor realize it without transcending it. Crossing the line means the general destruction of things as such, or in other words the annihilation of nothingness” (77). Therefore, any sociopolitical model that exists alongside capitalism posturing as an “alternative” to it is still within capitalism’s totalizing realm of being. Only capitalism’s complete destruction can foment the beginnings of a post-capitalist alterity. To annihilate the nothingness is the realization of a metaphysical negation of a negation, and according to Tiqqun it is only through such an act of Bataillean “death” that communism can be realized.

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1 Refer to Section II of “Results of the Immediate Process of Production” included as an appendix in Marx’s Capital: Volume 1.


3 See Fukuyama’s The End of History and the Last Man.

4 See Engels’s Anti-Dühring: Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science.
Works Cited


Prior to an American legislative measure that came to be known as the Nixon Shock, paper currency was anchored in a mass of gold named the ‘Federal Reserve.’ But, in 1971, a performative utterance closed, or, more precisely, shattered, the ‘gold window,’ annihilating the signifying dialectic between the American dollar and its material referent. As a result, the several European, and, by extension, colonized, currencies that had been tied to the American dollar were also unmoored, and operated thereafter as a system of free-floating signifiers guaranteed by the shifting discourses of national governments rather than by any direct relationship to an object-cause. These currencies continued to be exchanged against one another on a globalized market, but after this primal scene of late capitalism, the shocking and traumatic origin of the signifier of monetary value was irreparably lost. Nonetheless, this circuit of exchange continues to function as if money was ontologically linked to material production, becoming, in the absence of the gold standard, a fetish for the operation of reference itself.

George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*, released seven years later, registers the automatic and mathematical set of economic exchanges symptomatic of late capitalism. The film’s establishing shots are organized as a montage that metaphorically yokes communication to biology: scenes of the radical disruption of circuits of broadcast media are interspersed with scenes of the radical disruption of the biological life-cycle of the subjects who inhere in this context. The signalling of check-in points by a local television station remains on the air continually, because it is held that to alter the information conveyed would require a momentary disruption of information flow. The static time of a repressed apocalypse is imposed upon the broadcast,
signalling the ascendancy of the form of dead air, one that is parasitical and yet, in the dialectic of media, rising, continually, again—an unlife caused by an automatic imperative to ‘continue to communicate, regardless of the content.’ Filmed in the station, filmed in this context, the film presents a mise-en-abyme in which an academic figure hysterically reports upon the unnatural nature of the behaviour of the undead: “The people it kills get up and kill!”

That the film presents the cause of the disruption after its original manifestation calls attention to the structural mutation of circuits of signification under late capitalism: The representation of value precedes that which it claims as its origin.

Because they are the protagonists of this initial scene, Steven and Francine escape, joined at the moment of departure by Peter and Roger. In their search for fuel, the four locate themselves, with elegance, within a shopping mall—a centre of commodity consumption. What makes their subsequent engagement with the phantasmagoria with which they are confronted horrifying is their repetition, in acts, of a seemingly unthought desire to remain in the fortress of commodities. In this environment, the very idea of shopping becomes terrifying precisely because there is no reason to do so. And yet all four do, and all four enjoy it, quite happily. Well, until there is nothing left to do.¹

This horror is congealed, heartbreakingly, in the scene in which one protagonist succumbs to a viral imperative. During a tactical manoeuvre pursued at the shopping mall where our four brave survivors have established an uncanny domesticity, Roger is bitten, and infected, with undeath. While begging his friend Peter’s cooperation in realizing an end to life that will be a termination, Roger enacts a visceral repetition of his biological form precisely through his allusion to the automatic nature of the return to animation experienced by the “living dead.” “Don’t do it till you’re sure I am coming back. I’m gonna try not to. I’m gonna try not to come back. I’m gonna try not to,” he implores. This repetitious method of iterating his terminal desire manifests a recognition that this return is, precisely, a repetition. It acts as an incantation deployed to block the biological and extra-biological function that “coming back” entails.

Roger’s subsequent reanimation demonstrates a proposition that I will, eventually, return to: Incantations are a form of labour, and therefore do not work.²

As Sigmund Freud,³ and those that follow the analytic laid out in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” observe, the compulsion to repeat is the substantive manifestation of the death drive. The repetitive cycle, or rather re-cycle, defining this temporality emerges most remarkably in an uncanny scenario. The scene in which Peter and Stephen engage in a game of blackjack in which they bet the currency they have lifted from the cash registers of the shopping mall is an exemplar of the automatism peculiar to this drive and to capitalism itself. Given that the contents of the mall itself are no longer on the
market as commodities, since they have, by virtue of economic collapse, been removed from any circuit of exchange, the use of monetary currency as a representation of value has no logical justification.

At the level of the particular and incidental, the game is still an exercise in capitalist relations, mimetic of Peter and Stephen’s economic-historical context. It involves little reference to its players, for the outcome of each serial round is a function of a recyclical structure that organizes synchronic dispersal of value while operating independently of any non-abstracted subject-position. Further, the interaction of the players is caught in a particular circuit, between the poles of the player(s) and the dealer. And, in the end, this circuit is determined by finitude. The goal is to hit, for a moment, the quite arbitrary value of twenty-one, making both the means and then end of the game an encounter with finitude. Crossing the line drawn between the values of twenty-one and twenty-two results in the abjection of the subject from the game—at least for that cycle. By virtue of metaphoric transposition, this game of blackjack can be understood as a schematization of modern subjectivity: “Modern man [sic]—that man assignable in his corporeal, laboring, and speaking existence, is possible only as a figure of finitude” (Foucault 318).

Blackjack illustrates the retrograde temporality of modernity, which predicates its limits—its circuit—upon an origin that is only called into being as a retroactive effect of desire. The etymological origin of “cause” betrays its relationship to what might be translated, in Lacanian terms, as the desire of the Other. In old-timey Greek, arche is both a temporal and an imperative term. It can be translated as ‘origin,’ or, in its more substantified linguistic movement, as ‘originary cause’; power; requirement. In blackjack, twenty-one is the arche, acting as the signifier that makes the game possible, which is precisely the observation that Lacan expresses when he states that the subject “depends upon the signifier and that signifier is first of all in the field of the Other” (Four Fundamental 205). Writing in these terms, cause gets tangled with subjectivity: the signifier “I” inheres in the space of the Other, the ‘reserve,’ who is the guarantor of the possibility for this signifier to hold meaning.

Games do not exist, per se, before they are engaged in, although they cannot be played until they exist. So when nominating herself as “I,” the subject must stabilize her subjectivity in the Other’s recognition—she is a player in this game. But, people believe in luck, in their ability to confront an automaton on subjective terms. And so, to place a bet on each round seems inevitable; but, that moment of luck, the twist that convinces the subject engaged in this mechanical process that she is the only one with a handle on it, makes manifest the desire that both marks and masks her understanding of the game. The screen of fantasy, that this game is something that can be won, supports the object of desire (here, luck). The impossibility of luck as a cause is dependent upon the interference of the unconscious, a subvening topography that
lurks in all its negativity with the energetic potency of a black hole, only visible in the effects it produces: The players keep betting.

The temporality of the commodity is also characterized by a particular relationship to finitude, expressed concisely in Marx’s deployment of the concept of ‘dead labour.’ Under the sign of surplus value, and as David McNally sums neatly, “living labour (the concrete activity of productive humans) becomes a mean of expanding dead labour (the means of production created by past activity)” (141). Thought in anthropological terms, the subject-form of capital, for McNally, inheres in a metaphoric substitution:

Capitalism thus involves ‘transubstantiation,’ a process in which a quality—in this case life—is transferred from one substance to another. In awakening past labour, living labour raises it from the dead, makes it undead. Indeed, only the vital activity of labour keeps capital from lapsing into a death state: ‘Living labour must seize upon these thing, awaken them from the dead.’ (161)

Since the decoupling of the gold standard from monetary capital and the concomitant expansion of the derivatives market, the temporal- ity of the commodity, and consequently of the subject under capital, has become at least once removed from its originary anchor in biological finitude. Biological finitude, embedded as it is in the register of the natural, is correlated in the register of the commodity form to the notion of use-value; in our moment, both serve as the natural resource reserve where capitalism finds its new sites of exploitation. Parodically, just as the undead are driven in Romero’s film by “some kind of instinct. Memory? What they used to do?” to return to that shopping mall, the circuits of exchange determining the terrain of the unconscious in late-capital mimesis gives the memory of the now-original system of exchange as a referent. McNally diagnoses the presence of this repetition of temporality in the derivatives market:

Derivatives, or at least their proliferation in late capitalism, thus reflect a profound transformation in the form of money, in which currencies are no longer linked to a past labour (embodied in gold) but largely to future labour, to acts of production and exchange that are as yet unperformed. In this sense, they express a decisive mutation in the form of money in late capitalism. (161)

Derivatives, not unlike living labour in the moment of abstraction, are expressed in the grammar of the future perfect, the it-will-be. In this manner the derivatives market reiterates the primal scene of the commodity-form that Marx calls the process of valorization. Still, given that the valorization of derivatives takes place independently of the material congealing of abstract labour in a productive process, it seems a phenomenon analytically distinct from the commodity form itself, not unlike Lacan’s automaton, which functions without the necessity of the cogito’s implication.
II.

The real has died of the shock of value acquiring this fantastic autonomy.

Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 7

This recent public service announcement was provided by HSBC, a major global banking concern. It represents an imaginary desire for the future-perfect subsumption of the “food chain” (nature, or, perhaps, use-value, that signifier of nature in the great capitalist chain of being), under the signifier of the supply chain. This event is represented ekphrastically through the agency of a bar code, which appears to have been genetically incorporated into the very body of the trout.\(^8\)

The economy of signification within which binary codes circulate is profoundly non-human, a technique of incomprehensibly rapid exchange signals that could only be thought temporally as automatic. The messianic tilting of this method—the “in the future”—remarks a satisfaction in the accomplishment of what Baudrillard titled “The Perfect Crime”: “Today the law of value no longer lies so much in the exchangeability of every commodity under the sign of a general equivalent, as it does in a much more radical exchangeability of all the categories of political economy (and its critique) in accordance with the code” (*Symbolic Exchange and Death* 16). In this fantasy of valorization, the supply chain, undead, literally eats the food chain. To observe this is to encounter Lacan’s often misquoted observation that “it is the whole structure of language that psychoanalytic experience discovers in the unconscious” (“Instance of the Letter” 139). In other words, valorization, the process that Marx discerned as that which makes value, emerges in the commodity-form, but is, illogically, precedent to it, as is exemplified by this photograph of an image of a trout.

Marx tells us that as bearers of exchange value, commodities are “crystals of this social substance which is common to them all,” identifying labour as the origin of value, as the “value-forming substance.” (129). This seemingly straightforward observation takes on a particular resonance when it is understood as one term of a Hegelian dialectic: The subject (here, value) acts upon its substantial predicate (here, labour) but only inasmuch as the predicate’s mediation of the subject posits that subject’s identity. If substance “is truly realized and actual only in the process of positing itself, or in mediating with its own self in its
transitions from one state or position to the opposite” (Hegel 80), then value and labour are two terms that exist only through their mediation with one another. In this sense, the valorization process can be thought of as analogous to an unconscious drive towards signification: “Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic” (Marx 167).

McNally reads Marx in Hegelian fashion, interpreting the negating movement of abstraction as a dialectical relationship between subject and substance: “The capitalist economy thus effects a real abstraction in which products become bearers of an invisible substance (value) and concrete labour only becomes the bearers of an invisible substance, labour in the abstract” (123). Accordingly, as Romero’s undead relentlessly enact their own inauguration in pursuit of their desire for the living, the subject of capital lends both impetus and the topographic lines of force to endless, compulsive repetition, whether she will or not:

By incorporating labour into their lifeless objectivity, the capitalist simultaneously transforms value, i.e. past labour in its objectified and lifeless form, into capital, value which can perform its own valorization process, an animated monster which begins to ‘work,’ as if its body were by love possessed.’ (Marx 302)

The reference to the hysterical symptom (it’s quoted from a song in Goethe’s Faustus about a rat poisoned in a kitchen, delivered in response to two rather sardonic love ballads) presents a homology between the valorization process and the primal scene. The hysterical symptom is a physiological, that is, objectively discernable, phenomenon for which there is no discernable physiological cause. The cause for this symptom is, in psychoanalytical thought, that of a trauma that has been repressed, which, while inaugurating the symptom, emerges after the fact as its cause, and is thus an effect. The first grief was tragical, the second farcical, not unlike the image of an undead man fishing pennies from the fountain in his prospector gear (Romero). In late capitalism the process of valorization functions in exactly the same manner.

Marx describes exchange value “as the necessary mode of expression, of form of appearance of value” (128). In our moment, this takes on an intensification on several registers, including the scopic. Gruppe Krisis, critiquing the position of organized labour—and the fantasy that productive labour is the moral origin of value—remarks, “As a mirror image of labour, simulated by means of coercive measures imposed by labour administration authorities, a simulation of capital valorisation developed from the speculative uncoupling of the credit system and the equity market from the actual economy” (19). However, Gruppe Krisis here is making a misstep. At this historical juncture, there is no “actual economy,” no gold standard of
reference that can be traced back by virtue of the tracks of a metaphorical chain of substitutions. Late capital is, rather, organized along metonymic lines. At the level of the valorization process it seems entirely possible that what Baudrillard describes as the “structural law of value” is the Other to which subjects are now referred, in a recycling of the previous pluperfect tense—the it-will-be—of commodity production.

III.

On a beam which supports the ceiling of Brecht’s study are painted the words, ‘Truth is concrete.’ On a windowsill stands a small wooden donkey which can nod its head. Brecht has hung a little sign up around its neck on which he has written, ‘Even I must understand.’

Walter Benjamin, “Conversations with Brecht” 89

Brecht’s toy donkey has hung around its neck a particular albatross—an instrumental notion of linguistic value as and upon a sign. Just as the commodity bears its abstraction, so the donkey bears the demand for its proper negation by the signifier. A utilitarian approach to aesthetic praxis espoused by Brecht in his early years led him to insist on a politics of representation that, in the final analysis, was as much a form of interpellation as any other state apparatus precisely because it assumed the ontological status of the subjectivity of the proletariat. This tendency has been sharply criticized by Tiqqun, and by Gruppe Krisis. The latter describes the working-class movement as one that doesn’t so much “struggle against the imposition of labour” as “develop[s] an over-identification with the seemingly inevitable” (14):

The political left has always eagerly venerat-
ed labour. It has stylised labour to be the true nature of the human being and mystified it into the supposed counter-principle of capital. Not labour was regarded as a scandal, but its exploitation by capital . . . Yet the social opposition of capital and labour is only the opposition of different (albeit equally powerful) interests within the capitalist end-in-itself. Class struggle was the form of battling out opposite interests on the common social ground and reference system of the commodity-producing system. It was germane to the inner dynamics of capital accumulation. (Krisis 8)

Tiqqun further observes that this repetition of the ontology of capital—even in the case of the 1986 “unemployed worker’s movement”—is at a tactical level an insistence on a reiteration of labour subjectivity even in revolutionary praxis:

For all those that experienced them from within, not a single one of them wasn’t emptied of all substance and removed from all contact with reality by a sub-policelike para-trotskyist activism that repeatedly “let itself be carried away by the trend it intended or pretended to oppose: bourgeois

The Unrecyclable
instrumentalism, which fetishizes means because its own form of practice cannot tolerate any reflection upon its ends” (Adorno, *Critical Models*). (Tiqqun)

This is, unfortunately, the all-too-common operational application of the idea that ‘direct action gets the goods’—a resistance to capital whose end is precisely an intensified access to the commodity-form. A mode of praxis that fails to reject the reification of labour subjectivity, and instead valorizes it as the only site of emancipatory potential, is doomed to recycle capital precisely because this subjectivity is homologous with, an effect of, and a necessary condition for the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production (Althusser 7). Perhaps this is most tragically demonstrable in a common occurrence during mass mobilizations in North America. The communist tendencies repeat in a profoundly alienated (and alienating) manner slogans that were not written by them, and which, by virtue of their progeny as recycled enunciations of Maoist-type marches, are the very stuff of linguistic abstraction, producing a symptom of this form:

Quite quickly, it ceased to exist in fact as a practical contestation beyond an unanimous parrotlike repetition on the one hand (“let’s all chant together now!”) and the mute autism of direct action cut off from all substantial life on the other . . . The former abandoned itself to its natural inclination: repetition to mask its aphasia and aphasia to mask its repetition. (Tiqqun)

This set of observations, which perhaps provoked Lacan’s famous retort to May 1968 revolutionaries in Paris—“What you aspire to as revolutionaries is a Master. Very well, you shall have one!”—has been incorporated into the radical critique of subjectivity that ‘theory,’ arguably, performs. What is crucially important, what drives this project, is the proposition that even in Althusser’s narration of identification, the subject does not exist as perfectly identical to the singular person interpellated into such abstraction. There are gaps, spaces, remainders which are not subsumed by the recycling of the phenomenon of human existence into subjectivity:

The new theory claimed that the crux of the problem resides in the “subject-form” common to all those who live in the commodity society, although this does not mean that this form is the same for all subjects. The subject is the substrate, the agent, the bearer that the fetishist system of valorization requires to assure production and consumption. It is not completely identical to the human being, who may on occasion feel the subject form as a straitjacket. This is why Marx called the subject of valorization of value the “automatic subject.” (Jappe, emphasis mine)

This observation is at the heart of Lacanian praxis: psychoanalytic theory unspools a logic of subjectivity, and a corresponding notion of causality, that presents instrumentality, or one-to-one correspondence, as a misrecognition obtaining at the ontological level. This project
destabilizes, precisely, the Law—the law that renders exchange supposedly intuitive, the law of history that describes the proletariat’s subsumption under the capitalist mode of social relations as inevitable, the law that would demand that the subject may exist only within the boundaries of subjectification. It does so, however, not by merely denying the existence of the Law in a psychotic autism. Rather it works towards an absurd, tragic, and emancipatory relationship to the law that dissolves the consistency of one’s subjectivity without dissolving the possibility of intersubjective ethics. The inaugural proposition, accordingly, does not deny the existence of cause or the law, but rather places them in a peculiar dialectical relationship: “Cause is to be distinguished from that which is determinate in a chain, in other words the law . . . In short, there is cause only in something that doesn’t work” (Lacan, Four Fundamental 22).

In addition to providing the text for an elementally amusing anti-flag, Lacan’s observation provides one possible pharmakon by which to treat the tendency of insistently class-oriented mobilizations to “[fall] into the reductive trap of positing an affirmative counter-logic to capitalism within a social space which is already completely contained, delineated, and dominated by late-capitalism” (Wood 31). Alden Wood finds the counter to this double bind in an anti-political, mystical embracing of the nothingness that is latent within the nihilistic contradictions at the core of late-capitalism.

I would argue, rather, that the mysticist tack Wood takes by reading Tiqqun’s radical refusal through Bataille’s notion of death is an overcorrection, failing as it does to take account of the very real material suffering that subjects of labour, subjects of colonization, subjects of forced reproductive labour, all subjects under capitalism find their existence characterized by. Still, a dissolution of subjectivity, as composed along the lines of force established by capital, seems the only means by which to avoid the recyclical nature of, for instance, the communist revolutions of the twentieth century. In this context, Žižek’s observation that “the very existence of the symbolic order implies a possibility of its radical effacement of ‘symbolic death’—not the death of the so-called ‘real object’ in its symbol, but the obliteration of the signifying network itself” (Sublime Object 132) identifies the possible dissolution of the structures of exchange, representation, and identification in which capital manifests at the anthropological level.

The homology between structures of subjectivity and the commodity-form are grounds for the heuristic proposition that the negation of negation at the level of the symbolic must be understood as a primordially political act.
This observation runs counter to a general “apolitical” tendency in some strains of radical thought. Tiqqun, for instance, collectively appears to advocate against political action of any sort. Still, it’s possible that this is a function of the fatigue that they, among others, experience when confronted with a notion of the political that is configured explicitly within the inevitability of capitalist social relations, antagonistic though these relations may be understood to be.

Against this mode of resistance, Tiqqun then militates for the deployment of silence as “a critical metaphysical sabotage device directed against the triumph of positivity and the defeat of Being by its forgetting,” and explicates this programme in terms that render an account of the mutated form of capitalist ideology that accompanies the ratcheting up of the valorization process after 1971: “The fact that our tyrannical enemy no longer draws its power from its ability to shut people up, but from its aptitude to make them talk—i.e. from the fact that it has moved its center of gravity from its mastery of the world itself to its seizure of the world’s mode of disclosure—requires that a few tactical adjustments be made” (Tiqqun).

The refusal to speak, this ontologically-targeted silence, is correspondent to an existential hostility to subjugation, an absolute refusal to function as one of two terms under the sign of dead labour.11 It also characterizes the difference between a traditional strike, in which labour is withheld as a bargaining method for achieving better working conditions, and an unlimited general strike, which is not deployed as a tactical operation within capital but as a fundamental opposition to the practice of labour itself:

Strike for strike’s sake is the condition of the contemporary struggle. Unmotivated, with neither objective nor political referent, it is the oppositional response adopted against a production which is also unmotivated, with neither a referent, nor a social use-value, nor any finality other than its own—production for production’s sake, in short, a system which has become only a system of reproduction, revolving around itself in a gigantic tautology of the labour process—a re-cycle. (Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange 27)

At the semiotic level, an unlimited general strike takes the form of a refusal to represent, of the advancement of an aesthetics of failure that is the direct inversion of Brecht’s instrumental-ity. In such conditions, the sign cannot be exchanged for its referent, and, in manifesting this very failure, manifests in representational substance the negation of the negation.

This is in a very real sense the danger of literature—its failure to enact the law, its alignment with the cause that does not work—that Maurice Blanchot describes in his work on “Literature and the Right to Death”:

Literature is not only illegitimate, it is also null, and as long as this nullity is isolated in a state of purity, it may constitute an
extraordinary force. To make literature become of this emptiness inside, to make it open completely to its nothingness, recognize its own unreality, was one of the tasks undertaken by surrealism. (30.1)

The effect produced by literature of this nature is profoundly unsettling. As an exemplary text, Ror Wolf’s “Nothing Was Said,” a series of reportages mimicking the incident report that is the bureaucratic state’s stock-in-trade, links the aesthetics of refusal to, precisely, silence. Still more precisely, the title’s grammatical ambiguity opens up the possibility not just that nothing was said, but that nothing was said—that what was articulated, represented, was, somehow, precisely negativity. This, as one vignette indicates, is metaphysically dangerous:

An Almost Complete Portrayal of the Conditions in Maybe Waabs

A man, whose name I’ve thankfully forgotten, came up to me and said something that I’ve thankfully forgotten. It happened in a city whose name escapes me, on a day I don’t remember, or on a night I don’t remember. I also can’t say what happened later. I know nothing about the beginning and even less about the end. I did, however, notice that never in my life had I experienced anything quite as dangerous as I had in this moment. But I forgot about it. (Wolf)

This nullity is very much an extraordinary force. Literature itself, and, in particular, bourgeois realism, has performed an ideological function in that it may act, by virtue of the reader’s identification with the subjectivity organizing the text, to naturalize current social relations and the epistemology which they are embedded in and produce. Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose texts work directly against this process, describes such texts as “linked to an entire rationalistic and organizing system whose flowering corresponds to the assumption of power by the middle class” (32) and, as a result, an arena of the attempt to subsume all experience completely under its signification (his word is “master”). The inverse operation, enacted by texts such as Wolf’s that refuse representation, makes possible a praxis that fundamentally destabilizes subjectivity, producing an unguaranteed—and thus unvalorizable—subjectivity.

This moment is dramatized in Lacan’s reading of James Joyce as an identification with the sinhhome as that fourth strand binding the Borromean knot of the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary, lending subjectivity as such its consistency (an operation he describes as manifest in the act of writing) (Sinhome 61).

Slavoj Žižek extends this concept in a formula that can be applied as a qualification to what Tiqqun identifies as the necessity of silence—“refusal to take recourse to any of the codes, to any of the accepted signifiers or meanings” (Tiqqun)—that does not preclude the possibility of a negative political act:

What we must bear in mind here is the radical ontological status of symptom: symptom, conceived as sinhome, is literally our only
substance, the only positive support of our being, the only point that gives consistency to the subject. In other words, symptom is the way that we—the subjects—‘avoid madness,’ the way that we ‘choose something’ (the symptom formation) instead of nothing (radical psychotic autism, the destruction of the symbolic universe), through the binding of our enjoyment to a certain signifying symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency to our being-in-the-world. (*Sublime Object* 74)

To be signified: to identify with the signifier; to be translated; recycled into the order of things; to be interpellated—this is the event producing the necessity of a tactic of *symbolic* resistance. Not a total refusal of signification but an insistence on the gap that the negation of this negation opens up. Perhaps a general economy of subjectivity, for it is possible, even within an episteme conditioned by finitude, that the operation of interpellation is never entirely complete. There remains the untranslatable, the unsubjectifiable, the unnameable, the unrecyclable, and the possibility of a subjectivity that in a “heretical relationship to lived experience,” (Tiqqun) binds its *jouissance* not to the speech of the Other but to metaphysical silence instead:

This double, self-referential negation does not entail any kind of return to positive identity, any kind of absolution, of cancellation of the disruptive force of negativity, of reducing it to a passing moment in the self-mediating process of identity: in the ‘negation of negation,’ the negativity preserves all its disruptive power; the whole point is just that we come to experience how this negative, disruptive power, menacing our identity, is simultaneously a positive condition of it. (Žižek, *Sublime Object* 176)

To take this position is to encounter the event of subjectivity in the mode of production and to designate that site where its impossibility manifests—where it *shows*—as a ground for resistance.

This operation is embedded in its history, designated by Foucault as the project of philosophy in the modern *episteme*:

In this form, the *cogito* will not therefore be the sudden and illuminating discovery that all thought is thought, but the constantly renewed interrogation as to how thought can reside elsewhere than here, how it can *be* in the forms of non-thinking. The modern cogito does not reduce the whole being of things to thought without ramifying the being of thought right down to the inert network of what does not think. (324)

Here Foucault, designating the inert nature of that which does not think, invokes the automaton, “the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs” (Lacan, *Four Fundamental* 53-54). The real, presenting itself “in the form of that which is *unassimilable* in it—in the form
of trauma, determining all that follows, and imposing on it an apparently accidental origin” (53-54) appears by virtue of its own repression. Although the automaton of valorisation is also at work in the network of signifiers invoked by all writing, the representation of the refusal to represent, and the jouissance that this produces, opens a valve onto a new ground of subjectivity, one that is suspended from an identification with the symptom provoked in us by our dependence on the Other, rather than by that Other’s recognition.12

IV.

We place a high importance on the manifestations of a negativity that invent a new active grammar of contestation.

Tiqqun

Throughout all of the discourses that this writing knits together, finitude—death, as drive, as substance, as principle of exchange or repetition—enacts a boundary around the space of subjectivity and provides the motor, in absentia, for the automaton. But, returning again to the mechanics of identification with the sinthome, death in the form of the dissolution of subjectivity takes up the status not so much of a circuit as a horizon, dangerous though its pursuit would prove. The psychoanalytic process that apprehends the negative ground of a subjectivity is dangerous, too, but may be a means of fatal exchange with the structural law of value:

Lacan’s emphasis is not on the supposed incapacity of the self to reflect, to grasp its own conditions—on its being the plaything of inaccessible unconscious forces: his point is that the subject can pay for such a reflection with the loss of his very ontological consistency. It is in this sense that the knowledge that we approach through psychoanalysis is impossible-real: We are on dangerous ground in getting too close to it; we absorb suddenly how our consistency, our positivity is dissolving itself. (Žižek, Sublime Object 68-69)13

This movement is, in the psychoanalytic topography of subjectivity, a function which does not attempt a ‘supercession’ of the negative movement of abstraction, of interpellation. It is rather an “experience of the fact that negativity as such has a positive function, enables and structures our positive consistency . . . it is a negative moment which opens the very place where every positive identity can be situated” (Žižek, Sublime Object 176-77). So, if the structure of subjectivity, homologous with the structure of the commodity-form, is an ontology of the contemporary mode of production, then it is possible that an aesthetic grounded in this condition, but not entirely mimetic of it, offers a method of both critique and praxis. Possibly, even, a poesis.

Blanchot writes of the possibility of negation in the register of aesthetic signification and the symbolic death that this entails. Then, in a second movement of negation, he indicates
a potential means to evade the double bind of labour resisting capital as labour. This concept of literature graphs a topography of the refusal of the labour of representation. But more crucially, perhaps, through its praxis, this refusal becomes visible. It shows; it “makes visible.”

In the economy of the commodity form, one might imagine the “it shows” as the relationship of price to the valorisation process—the former manifests the effect of this process, in a quite arbitrary signifier, marking the hole punctured in the notion of value-as-meaning borne by the commodity form by making visible on a different register the marks left by the violence inherent in this abstraction. So also, with literature:

This refusal to mean anything, a refusal immersed in words turned to salt; in short, this destiny which literature becomes as it becomes the language of no one, the writing of no writer, the light of a consciousness deprived of self, this insane effort to bury itself in itself, to hide itself behind the fact that it is visible, all this is what literature shows. If it were to become as mute as a stone, as passive as the corpse enclosed behind that stone, its decision to lose the capacity for speech would still be legible on the stone and would be enough to wake that bogus corpse. (Blanchot 329)

Why is the corpse bogus? Because even at the moment of negativity, the negation of negation that writing inaugurates exchanges death with death and thus engenders a reversion which disrupts the compulsive repetition or recycle of the automaton. This action renders the corpse fundamentally different from the corpse-like substance of value, since it is an ontological disruption of the valorization process. Under the structural law of value, such a corpse would be, indeed, illegitimate.

Thus the danger of literature. Operating in this manner, it performs a “scrupulous reversion” (Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange 5). But, as subjects under ideology, if we already exist, as labour, in a state of death deferred, how can this gesture be accomplished—how can death be fended off with undead hands? Perhaps by the assumption of a symbolic death, one which can be accomplished by a refusal of the symbolic existence of the Other, a recognition of this linguistic placeholder as the mark of the automaton:

What is at stake in this ‘destitution’ is precisely the fact that the subject no longer presupposes himself as subject; by accomplishing this he annuls, so to speak, the act of formal conversion. In other words, he assumes not the existence but the nonexistence of the big Other; he accepts the Real in its utter, meaningless idiocy; he keeps open the gaps between the Real and its symbolization. The price to be paid for this is that by the same act he also annuls himself as subject. (Žižek, Sublime Object 230-31)
So, then, a sort of death, in that it is a “repulsion of one’s very own existence as a subject of labour and competition and the flat refusal of a life on an ever more miserable level” (Gruppe Krisis 25).

Referring to literature, Slavoj Žižek has made insistent reference to refusal as a particular political position that avoids the endless repetition of the structure of capital as an antagonism between two terms. He derives this from a peculiar, unsettling tale by Herman Melville. The narrator of “Bartleby the Scrivener” relates an inverted *bildungsroman*, describing the narrator’s experience of undoing provoked by his interaction with a clerk who refuses the task of recording, in written signification, the transactions of capital. Bartleby, as an allegorical representation of a cause that does not work, is only apprehendable to the narrator by his repeated utterance, “I would prefer not to.” This inversion of the compulsion to repeat that characterizes the valorization process does not function as a subjective negation of the predicate. Rather, it is an affirmation of a non-predicate:

This is how we pass from the politics of “resistance” or “protestation,” which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation . . . This is the gesture of difference . . . its political mode, Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” is *not* the starting point of “abstract negation” which should then be overcome in the patient positive work of the “determinate negation” of the existing social universe, but a kind of *arche*, the underlying principle that sustains the entire movement: far from “overcoming” it, the subsequent work of contradiction, rather, gives body to it. (Žižek, *Parallax View* 381-82)

It is in a similar matter that we might understand the power of the Tahrir Square Book Club. In the wake of violent repression in Turkey of a resistance to both neoliberal and fundamentalist legislative measures (the two are not mutually exclusive, given as they are in a radically positivist apprehension of their respective texts), a series of silent protests emerged. Sometimes those who are assembled are reading (Henton). In doing so they un-assume the identity of labourers remonstrating with the state for a more bearable version of capital. Their refusal to “do work” is not oriented towards life under capital, but towards capital’s symbolic death, one that “ought never to be understood as a real event that affects a subject or a body, but as a form in which the determination of the subject and of value is lost” (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange* 5). This silent reading, this absolute refusal, and this making visible of refusal, is the *poesis* that must necessarily accompany *praxis*, a ‘negation of the negation’ that lends positive content to symbolic resistance. As a mode of resistance, it traverses the fantasy masking valorization, and, perhaps, approaches the horizon binding what is now global capital in a murderous compulsion to repeat. Of course this understanding is not extraordinarily heterodox, not to anyone who has ever insisted upon bread and roses.
When Fran, Roger, Stephen, and Peter arrive at the shopping centre by helicopter, it is, initially, to be a short stop, to acquire supplies—objects of use-value and use-value alone. And yet even as the mode of production collapses under the weight of a biological articulation of its configuration of finitude, the fascination—the phantasy—retains its lure, trapping the four in a frightful repetition of capitalist desire. The automatic composition of this desire is made unavoidably evident by the living dead who also continue this practice, repeating it even in their unlife. Fran, consistently uneasy at the consequence, observes of the men’s refusal to leave, “You’re hypnotized by this place.” And yet, Fran and Peter are able to escape; and they are able to escape because they are no longer compelled by an unconscious relation to finitude but by a willingness to risk their lives in confronting it. As the helicopter ascends over the scene of murderous consumption they have fled, Peter asks Fran, “How much fuel do we have left?” She replies, “Not much”; he, “Well, all right.”
“Do” meaning an act of productive labour. Consumption is also a labour, given that it produces surplus value. That’s why they can keep working. Boy howdy, malls are exhausting.

I am here failing to do justice to the representation of people of colour in this film, including Peter, that for me are very important topics of discussion and are a big part of making Romero’s film one for the books. This is partly because I am not inclined to appropriate or project analyses of the subject-positions of people of colour, since I am not one, and partly because when someone does this it would, I imagine, be a whole other article.

Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle.”

The full deck is deployed in each round and shuffled. Counting cards is extraordinarily difficult.

“The past exists as it is included, as it enters the synchronic net of the signifier—it is this elaboration which decides, retroactively what they ‘will have been’ . . . the symptom as a ‘return of the repressed’ is precisely such an effect which precedes its cause (its hidden kernel, its meaning)” (Slavoj Žižek, Sublime Object, 56).

The expression of abstract labour in the commodity-form exists in the immediate and the immediate future perfect tense: “All labour contained in the yarn is past labour and it is a matter of no importance that the labour expended to produce its constituent elements lies further back in the past than the labour expended in the final process, the spinning. The former stands, as it were, in the pluperfect, the latter in the past tense, but this does not matter” (Marx 294).

Dominic Rushe, “New York Stock Exchange Sold to Derivatives Company in $8bn Takeover: Sale of Nearly 200-Year-Old Institution to Intercontinental Exchange Comes Amid Historic Shift to Electronic Trading,” The Guardian. 20 December 2012. First as tragedy (the NYSE), then as farce (ICE), if you will.

I took this photograph on 3 June 2013, at the Vancouver Airport. This airport is built upon treaty land, and the relationship between the state agents and the nations who require that they hold to treaty are characterized by an imperative towards the subsumption of all economic activity under capital by the former.

“Capital no longer belongs to the order of political economy: it operates with political economy as its simulated model. The entire apparatus of the commodity law of value is absorbed and recycled in the larger apparatus of the structural law of value, thus becoming part of the third order of simulacra (see below). Political economy is thus assured a second life, an eternity, within the confines of an apparatus in which it has lost all its strict determinacy, but maintains an effective presence as a system of reference for simulation. It was exactly the same for the previous apparatus—the natural law of value which the system of political economy and the market law of value also appropriated as their imaginary system of reference (‘Nature’): ‘nature’ leads a ghostly existence as use-value at the core of exchange-value. But on the next twist of the spiral, use-value is seized as an alibi within the dominant order of the code” (Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange 2).

Itself a telling nomination, one that ascribes the subjectivity of labour even to those who are not engaged directly in capitalist production!

The Unrecyclable
11 “It makes this rupturing energy which would shatter the relations of production into a term homogeneous with the relations of production, in a simulation of opposition under the sign of dead labour. From now on a single hegemonic agency (dead labour) divides into capital and living labour” (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange* 35).

12 The latter is the operation of interpellation, as Althusser has deduced: “We observe that the structure of all ideology, interpellating individuals as subjects in the name of a Unique and Absolute Subject is speculary, i.e. a mirror-structure, and doubly speculary: this mirror duplication is constitutive of ideology and ensures its functioning. Which means that all ideology is centered, that of the Absolute Subject occupies the unique place of the Center, and interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects in a double mirror-connexion such that it subjects the subject to the Subject, while giving them in the Subject in which each subject can contemplate its own image (present and future) the guarantee that this really concerns them and Him” (“Ideology” 54).

14 In the visual register, Lacan describes the “spot” or “stain” on the screen, the visual analogue to the space of the fantasy, as that which covers over the pure negativity at its centre (*Four Fundamental* 96-97).

15 Revolutionary queer praxis is another manifestation of this position—the refusal of heternormativity is not then overcome by a normalization of or creation of an abstract properly “queer” subject but, rather, is an establishing gesture that opens up a space for the practice of an eros that does not take heternormativity as a referent at all.

16 The “standing-man” actants do not participate in remunerated labour. Nor are they—either as “protestors,” operating as logistical technicians if of higher rank, or “boots on the ground” if of lower—valorized in the economy of resistance by virtue of being the corporeal manifestation of Struggle (maybe the Geist?) that feeds on the life of their bodies as surely as the spectre of mechanized labour would: “Let’s all chant together now.”
Works Cited


The Unrecyclable


Media ecologies, like natural ecologies, are remarkable entities both in their fecundity and in their complexity. And our relationships to such environments are equally intricate in their delicacy. “The environment is that which we experience and we, in turn, are that in which the environment is experienced,” writes Vilém Flusser. He continues:

Reality is a web of concrete relations. The entities of the environment are nothing but knots in this web, and we ourselves are knots of the same sort. We are linked to these entities; they are there for us. And the entities are linked to us; we are there for them. Both the environment and the organism are abstract extrapolations from the actuality of their entwined relations. An organism mirrors its environment; an environment mirrors its organisms; and if the arena of their relations is altered in some way, neither the environment nor the organism will be left unchanged. (Flusser and Bec 31)

And so, in consideration of media ecology, we may add that the reader mirrors its texts, and the texts its reader; we are linked to text because the text is there for us. The two levels adapt to one another and, as a result, transform and mutate one another. Furthermore, the entwined relation that establishes this procedure itself becomes a third diegetic space. That is, the processes that constitute the mutative plasticity of such interpretive environments become an inter-diegetic entity, a third text. This third text is imaginary, the lived experience of reading, the experience of the in-between of primordial texts in relation to one another. It is, in other words, the third extrapolation from the actuality of entwined relations. Such experience discloses...
itself as finite, a kind of mutation that, when discussing his computerized cellular automata Game of Life, mathematician John Conway calls a “still life,” a mutation that “cannot change or patterns that oscillate forever. Patterns with no initial symmetry tend to become symmetrical. Once this happens the symmetry cannot be lost, although it may increase in richness” (Gardner 120). Think of this process as the infinite spiral that manifests as a mirror reflects itself in another mirror. When discussing such procedures in the context of cross-media adaptation, the novel and film versions of 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968) by Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick, respectively, are certainly unique: that is, the works are both adaptations and collaborations. We may consider collaboration a kind of adaptation in real-time. Or, Clarke’s novel, Kubrick’s film, and the experience of the relation between the two, operate as entities in an environment and are nothing but knots in this web. The symmetries of the tangled knots are non-linear and dynamic; however, they also constitute adaptation as a process of illusory fecundity, of text and experience galvanized, an ecology of ambient feedback and ubiquitous mutation. In short, the collaboration process that constitutes 2001 suggests inter-diegetic cyclical interaction when, instead, it is a demonstration of imaginary mutation by the disclosure of an imaginary third text: a diegetic still life.

Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky, develops what he calls “rhythm science” as a means of considering complex, non-linear modes of remix, adaptation, and, in the case at hand, primordial collaboration. Miller’s definition: “Rhythm science . . . Think of it as a mirror held up to a culture . . . that has released itself from the constraints of the ground to drift through dataspace, continuously morphing its form in response to diverse streams of information” (5). Cultural material is there for Miller’s mirror; the procedure through which the mirror comes to reflect itself so as to spiral, mutate, and drift away from the constraints of materiality is itself the third extrapolation from the actuality of tangled relations. Simultaneously freeing and mutative yet inward and diminutive, the strange directionality of these relations ultimately orients itself in an abstract nowhere: dataspace, the diverse streams of information, the imagination of a reader. The collaborative process between Clarke and Kubrick on the two works is rather convoluted yet discloses itself to itself in a way similar to Miller’s speculation. George Edgar Slusser in The Space Odysseys of Arthur C. Clarke (1978) suggests that “in more ways than one the novel betrays its composite nature—a work of earlier bits and pieces, put together after the fact to explain a film” (57). There are source texts for 2001 from which the novel and film are adapted—Clarke’s short story “The Sentinel” and the 1965 screenplay by Clarke and Kubrick, for example. Clarke himself once noted that any record of the collaborative process is, at best, simply an “approximation to the complicated truth” (Rabkin 36). And, yet, this complexity is the essence of the procedure itself, the continuously morphing and mutative drifting of texts in relation to one.
another both during the process of conception and, later, during their lives as interpretive artefacts. Ultimately, studying the inter-diegetic relationship between Clarke’s novel and Kubrick’s film discloses an interpretive clearing whereby the knotted relations manifest themselves as a kind of conceptual paradox.

The two works, as distinct modes of media, give rise to a single work ever enmeshed with itself and its sources. This is perhaps more palatable if one accepts that there are actually three works involved in this discussion. The first is Clarke’s novel—excessively detailed at the denotative level with very little connotative mystery. Second is Kubrick’s film, also excessive in its detail; however, the film’s excessive specificity operates in quite a different way than it does in Clarke’s novel. Kubrick’s excessive detail gestures almost exclusively toward connotative mystery by eschewing denotative explication. Whether through visual signification or spoken dialogue, the meaning of Kubrick’s narrative is seldom, if ever, explicit. The third work introduces the paradox. Its existence is not one of priority, but of posterity. That is, the paradoxical third version of 2001 may only exist after experiencing the novel and the film, each, simultaneously, operating as source text and as adaptation.

This aberration is an example of a feedback phenomenon, a kind of reflexivity Douglas Hofstadter calls a strange loop. Hofstadter writes in Gödel, Escher, Bach (1979) that the phenomenon of a strange loop “occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves back where we started” (Hofstadter 10). A strange loop is not a physical circuit but an abstract loop in which, in the series of stages that constitute the cycling-around, there is a shift from one level of abstraction (or structure) to another, which feels like an upwards movement in a hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive “upward” shifts turn out to give rise to a closed cycle. That is, despite one’s sense of departing ever further from one’s origin, one
winds up, to one’s shock, exactly where one had started out. (Hofstadter, I am a Strange Loop 101-02)

The abstract quality of the strange loop is perhaps more easily understood by examining the visual realization by Dutch artist M. C. Escher. Escher’s 1961 lithograph, Waterfall, is an excellent visualization of a strange loop. Indeed, Hofstadter writes that “the most beautiful and powerful visual realizations of this notion of Strange Loops exists” in the work of Escher (Gödel, Escher, Bach 10). “Mathematicians were among the first admirers of Escher’s drawings,” Hofstadter explains, and this is “understandable because they often are based on mathematical principles of symmetry or pattern” (11). However, he continues, “there is much more to a typical Escher drawing than just symmetry or pattern; there is often an underlying idea, realized in artistic form. And in particular, the Strange Loop is one of the most recurrent themes in Escher’s work” (11). Hofstadter asks the reader to examine the flow of water and its simultaneous “endlessly falling loop” with its “endlessly rising loop” (11); Waterfall seems to mock the recycling that characterizes the patterns of a natural ecology. Mischievously named because their cycles are closed, the strange loop itself is in fact an oscillation: its beginning and end are the same point. The knotted and tangled configurations that constitute strange loops resist the beginnings and ends, directionality, cycling and recycling, and linearity of adaptation. Indeed, like Miller’s mimesis representing mimesis, continuously morphing its form in response to diverse streams of information, and Flusser’s mirrors reflecting mirrors, strange loops shimmer in complex symmetries, oscillating and mutating, contributing to mathematics of chaos where the sum of collaboration seems vastly to exceed its constitutive parts. That is, strange loops are indeed the shimmering symmetries of Conway’s “still life”: those entities that increase in richness and complexity and yet, paradoxically, do not change or have an effect on the media ecology in which they are manifest.

Extending this phenomenon to 2001, one finds that the third version of 2001 is indeed autonomously departing further from the original novel and film while it surprisingly loops back or paradoxically crosses the levels between the different versions of 2001, and thus both digress from, and inform, the diegesis of its sources yet has no effect on their materiality. Therefore, of the three versions of 2001, two are concrete—the novel and the film—and the third is an abstract oscillation: spiralling, mutating, resisting directionality, mocking the progressive logic of cycles. On the one hand, this third version can only exist after one has experienced both the film and the novel. Yet once it does exist, it is no longer bound by the logic of posterity. Rather, this imaginary oscillating version of 2001 exists in paradoxical relation to the novel and film versions of 2001; it is always moving away from the novel and the film, and is concurrently looping back, embedding itself invisibly within them.

The effect the strange loop version has on our experience of the novel and the film versions is quite striking. Reexamining the descriptions of Clarke’s novel and Kubrick’s film,
the significance of this strange loop version may be more apparent. John Hollow, in *Against the Night, the Stars: The Science Fiction of Arthur C. Clarke* (1983), documents the unfortunate critical nature of the relationship between the novel and the film: “[c]omments on 2001 tended to concentrate on the film, using the novel only as a sort of aid to explication, especially of the ending; which has prompted more than one critic to complain that a film ending that needs a novel to explain it is not a success” (148). This kind of critical misunderstanding is rooted in the unwillingness of critics to treat the relationship between the works as a paradox. The two works are successful insomuch as they are considered as two autonomous parts of the same work of art. The writing in Clarke’s novel can be described as an endlessly rising flow of explicatory information—that often reads like popular science nonfiction—countered by an endlessly falling sense of mystery. Kubrick’s film, on the other hand, provides an endlessly rising impression of awe and mystery counteracted by an endlessly falling sense of explanation as to what the beautiful sequence of images may mean. There are, therefore, two media levels at play here: written explanation, exemplified by Clarke, and visual sublimity, mastered by Kubrick. The imaginary third version of 2001, however, is characterized by loops and level-crossing; therefore, the strange loopy version plays unpredictable games between the levels of explanation and mystery in Clarke and Kubrick, respectively. The mutative quality of this strange feedback version accounts for the otherwise simple reason why, once one has read both Clarke’s novel and watched Kubrick’s film, one cannot help but visualize Kubrick’s imagery when rereading Clarke’s version and, alternatively, one cannot help but fill in the explanatory absences with Clarke’s clarifications when re-watching Kubrick’s version.

Chapters 13 and 14 in Clarke’s novel—“The Slow Dawn” and “The Listeners,” respectively—are of particular interest. Chapter 13 describes the scientists’ encounter with the monolith TMA-1, Heywood Floyd’s musing on the significance of extraterrestrial life, and the photoshoot that is interrupted by a “piercing electronic shriek,” the “hideously overloaded and distorted time signal” (Clarke 99). The setting is a “dusty moonscape,” “glimmering in the earthlight” (96). What is evident in Chapter 13, “The Slow Dawn,” however, is Clarke’s tendency toward explanatory digression, what Rabkin describes as the “suspenseful unfolding of scientific detail” (37). As Floyd follows Michaels through the lock “[w]ith a cautious, waddling movement” (96), Clarke avoids the primacy of metaphor—we may expect the waddling to be equated with the infantile status of professionals in such a strange environment. Rather, Clarke seizes the opportunity to celebrate the naturalness of human success of adjusting to an alien environment: “It was not hard to walk; indeed, in a paradoxical way the suit made him feel more at home than at any time since reaching the Moon. Its extra weight, and the slight resistance it imposed on his motion, gave some of the illusion of the lost terrestrial gravity” (96). The passage is exemplary of Clarke’s prosaic terseness. Rabkin suggests that 2001 “is
Clarke’s mature amalgamation of his compelling interest in scientific detail and his spiritual commitment to a homocentric and optimistic vision” (36); the confidence in the success of science and language, continually highlighted throughout the novel, expresses Clarke’s fascination with the explanatory and pedagogical possibilities of narrative. As the setting changes and the dusty glittering moonscape “burst[s] into flames” as it catches “the first rays of the hidden sun” (97), a potent metaphor remains in the shade. This, Clarke assures us, is the stuff of scientific phenomenon:

Though the stars, and the half-earth, were still as bright as ever, the fourteen day lunar night had almost ended. The glow of the corona was like a false moonrise along the eastern sky . . . A thin bow of unbearable incandescence had thrust itself above the eastern horizon. Though it would take more than an hour for the sun to clear the edge of the slowly turning moon, the stars were already banished. (97)

To extrapolate on Clarke often yields the sense of redundancy; what Clarke does achieve, however, is a homeostatic balance between the curiosity that galvanizes inquiry with the sense of assurance that this impulse, a unique trait of rational animals, will triumph.

On the level of character, we are given little. We learn that Floyd, as he walked, in “reverie,” “slowly down the ramp toward the black rectangle . . . felt a sense not only of awe but of helplessness. Here, at the very portals of Earth, man was already face to face with a mystery that might never be solved” (97). Indeed, the reaction the characters exhibit toward this event of such magnitude is tempered. Floyd’s reflections are almost exclusively scientific: he is curious about the manner in which the monolith seems to “absorb every particle of light as if it had never been” (97); the temperature inside the monolith that “must be rapidly cooking” (97); and the reason why alien intelligence would be “crazy enough to bury a sunpowered device twenty feet underground” (99). Clarke will not permit his characters to experience elation or anxiety as this would disrupt the systematic narrative exploration of the scene. Thus, “Floyd turned his full attention to the ebon slab—walking slowly around it, examining it from every angle, trying to imprint its strangeness upon his mind” (98). That is, here, there can be no self-reflection, only methodological inquiry toward alterior phenomena.

The examination of the monolith is largely dispassionate and professional. Floyd’s perambulating is slow and calculated: analysis of the monolith is priority. However, he is confident that his cursory analysis will not yield any novel data; he has the utmost confidence in the ability of his colleagues: “He did not expect to find anything, for he knew that every square inch had already been gone over with microscopic care” (98). Again, the affective dimensionality to Floyd’s philosophical musings is almost exclusively absent. Floyd is in reverie as he first approaches the monolith—a curious state of mind for such a poignant event. Later Clarke suggests that “the political and
social implications were immense; every person of real intelligence—everyone who looked an inch beyond his nose—would find his life, his values, his philosophy, subtly changed” (99); subtle, indeed. And this is when Floyd's wool-gathering is interrupted with a loud electronic shriek. Nevertheless, the possible disorientation associated with this event is again avoided in Clarke's narrative; though Floyd fumbles involuntarily (99), Clarke retains his detachment and narrative composure. “All around the crater, figures were standing in attitudes of paralyzed astonishment. So it's nothing wrong with my gear, Floyd told himself,” Clarke explains, “everyone heard those piercing electronic screams” (99-100). Again, Clarke's poised diegetic style reclaims the potential commotion of the episode. That is, at the moment Clarke introduces an event of disorder, its semantic ambiguity is promptly absolved. Indeed, Clarke ultimately explains the electronic noise: “After three million years of darkness, TMA-1 had greeted the lunar dawn” (100).

And yet, as if Clarke's initial elucidation of the nature of the electronic interference is insufficient or too indirect, the following chapter, “The Listeners,” explains this electric distortion with precision, ensuring the noise is, both within and without the diegesis, indeed a signal. As in the previous chapter, Clarke digresses into technological descriptions of a satellite, Deep Space Monitor 79:

A hundred million miles beyond Mars . . . Deep Space Monitor 79 drifted slowly among the tangled orbits of the asteroids. For three years it had fulfilled its mission flawlessly . . . A delicate spiderweb of antennas sampled the passing waves of radio noise . . . Radiation detectors noted and analyzed incoming cosmic rays from the galaxy and points beyond; neutron and X-ray telescopes kept watch on strange stars that no human eye would ever see; magnetometers observed the gusts and hurricanes of the solar winds, as the Sun breathed million-mile-an-hour blasts of tenuous plasma into the faces of its circling children. All these things, and many others, were patiently noted by Deep Space Monitor 79, and recorded in its crystalline memory. (101)

Description in this chapter is narratologically obtrusive in its industrialism and is exemplary of the novel as a whole. Indeed, Clarke extends the technique in describing Deep Space Monitor 79 and the manner through which the information it examines is relayed back to Earth recording machines that “would amplify and record the signal, and add it to the thousands of miles of magnetic tape now stored in the vaults of the World Space Centers at Washington, Moscow, and Canberra” (102). So, the fifty years that the satellites have been in orbit, “trillions and quadrillions of pulses of information had been pouring down from space, to be stored against the day when they might contribute to the advance of knowledge” (102). The dramatic narrative is ultimately subjected to digressions into what appears to be Clarke's principal
literary concern, precise descriptions of plausible technologies rather than a digression as a more sophisticated mode of aesthetic.

Consequently, Clarke is apt to divorce this technology from any Romantic or phenomenological connotations; the judgment of the human subject is secondary to the analytic advantages of technology. For Clarke, technology is the extension of the human nervous system into the material world. Humans are not linked to these entities as techne, as Flusser or other Heideggerians contend, and nature is not, for Clarke, there for us any more than we are there for it. The dramatic significance of the electronic shriek is tamed by the significance of the satellites functioning as analytic mechanisms in a larger, more pervasive scientific project. Indeed, the electronic signal is given superior significance, not according to Floyd and the affected scientists on the Moon, but as the result that “Deep Space Monitor 79 had noted something strange—a faint yet unmistakable disturbance rippling across the Solar System, and quite unlike any natural phenomenon it had ever observed in the past” (103). It is technology as an extension of the collective process of scientific inquiry that determines the dominant judgment concerning the significance of the signal; indeed, Deep Space Monitor 79 records “the direction, the time, the intensity” of the signal, and “in a few hours [the satellites] would pass the information to Earth” (103). Ultimately, Clarke confirms the nature of the signal:

it was as clear and unmistakable as a vapour trail across a cloudless sky, or a single line of footprints over a field of virgin snow. Some im-

material pattern of energy, throwing off a spray of radiation like the wake of a racing speedboat, had leaped from the face of the Moon, and was heading out toward the stars. (104)

Here we find Clarke at his most metaphorical, yet his terseness is essential to the project that his end of the collaboration upholds. But now, the reader is certain: the electronic interference is a signal sent from the monolith deep into the solar system. Of primary importance for Clarke is scientific plausibility and accurate technological description; all that is dramatic, vague, or disorderly is swiftly evaded or lightly dismissed. However, Clarke’s explanatory persistence does not necessarily diminish the novel’s artistic credibility. There certainly is a metaphor here: the slow dawn suggests that some unknown will be slowly made visible and humankind will be enlightened. Metaphor, in hard science fiction, is certainly operative; however, explanatory digressions remain at the forefront of this literature. Indeed, Clarke’s sobriety is appropriate to the epistemology his fiction upholds towards that which eludes, if only temporarily, rationalization: the unknown is distant, cold, isolated and the subject of sharp curiosity. Clarke’s apparent artlessness is more aesthetically alert than we may first acknowledge.

Kubrick’s version of this episode, on the other hand, is characterized by the absence of explicit explanation of what is occurring; there is neither dialogue nor narration to clarify any of the visual information. The cinematic and visual mastery of the film’s corresponding episode, coupled with György Ligeti’s sublime a cappella choral piece for sixteen voices, Lux aeterna
(1966), guides the diegesis with measured deliberation into a visual and aural encounter with noumenality. Indeed, if there is a sonic expression of the endlessly rising and, simultaneously, endlessly falling pitch, it is Ligeti’s *Lux aeterna*. Kubrick’s aesthetic project certainly differs from Clarke’s informative digressions. The episode opens with an excavation site. There are tread marks leading to the ramps which, the viewer presumes, allow researchers to descend into and ascend from the site. There are five floodlights directed at the monolith, though in vain (Kubrick is thorough enough to ensure a 360° visual rendering of this environment to assure the viewer that the monolith does not reflect, but only absorbs light). The lights merely illuminate the site while the monolith remains an unaffected symmetrical abyss: an unexplained visual phenomenon and empirical absurdity provoking both angst and wonder. The excavation site is situated in a barren, half-lit moonscape, the horizon dappled with stars and punctuated with the Earth. Indeed, this radically foreign landscape seems to function as an existentially abyssal stage onto which the scientists cautiously plod: the episode evokes both a sense of revelation and death. Ultimately, while the scientists line-up for their portrait in front of the monolith, the photoshoot is interrupted by an electronic interference. Again, anxiety and wonder crescendo as explicability recedes in its narratological importance.

One cannot ignore the significance of Ligeti’s choral piece in this episode. Richard Steinitz in *György Ligeti: Music of the Imagination* (2003) suggests that Kubrick’s “use of classical music in particular, became absolutely an essential part of the narrative intellectual drive of [2001]” (161). There is a potent polysemic in the meaning of the music in this episode. The *Lux aeterna* (Eternal Light) connotes revelation and mystical consolation. Following is the text, translated from the Latin: “may everlasting light shine upon them, O Lord, with thy saints in eternity, for thou art merciful. Grant them eternal rest, O Lord, and may everlasting light shine upon them.” Simultaneously, however, the fact that the *Lux aeterna* is a movement from the Roman Catholic Requiem Mass is diegetically significant. Richard Toop in *György Ligeti* (1999) suggests that Ligeti’s *Lux aeterna* is far more than a spin-off from the Requiem: it could stake strong claims to be regarded as the most exquisitely “perfect” a cappella work of the post-war era. Its “virtuosity” lies not in the external display, but in the absolutely perfect intonation—hideously difficult to achieve and maintain—that is required to project its extraordinary harmonic luminosity. (116)

The scene, accompanied by this extraordinary and sublime choral piece, is permeated with the immanence of death. Extreme in its technical requirements and mystifying in affect, Ligeti’s *Lux aeterna* unsettles the possible meanings of the situation. It is not an episode indicative of mercy but of the indifference of the unknown. The “them” upon whom the light shines are the dead. Though death is cosmic in Kubrick’s *2001*, it is also relentless in its theological hesitancy.
The following episode does not provide the viewer with any explanation. Rather, we are presented with the mystifying image of the monolith partially eclipsing the sun, the sun partially eclipsing the Earth, and Kubrick eclipsing narrative extrapolation. The symmetrical alignment of the monolith and celestial bodies conjures connotations of astrology as opposed to Clarke’s astronomy. Kubrick’s take on this episode is characterized by anxiety, tension, and wonder. The treatment of mystical tropes in this scene—the ritual music, the existentially threatening landscape, the encounter with the unknown, the alignment of celestial bodies—is not necessarily one of sober rationality and scientific enquiry. Rather, it is an encounter with the unknowable: the episode is terrifying and exhilarating; it is mysterious, even mythic.

Therefore, 2001 exists materially as two takes on the same narrative episodes. Clarke’s version is obsessively explanatory, where aesthetic liberties seem to be secondary to scientific accuracy, and the human characters, though brilliant with curiosity, are disinterested. Kubrick’s version, on the other hand, is largely without explanation; the connotative cloudiness of the episode seems to prevail, and the human characters plod through a landscape and soundscape of terrible significance. However, something interesting happens with the in-between text—the oscillating strange loop, the third version, of 2001—once one has experienced the former media versions of this work. In reading Clarke’s version a second time, or upon viewing Kubrick’s version again, one finds that indeed the scene is a scientifically plausible excavation site, yet it is also an existentially threatening stage. The glimmering of the moonscape and corona on the horizon is nothing more than a scientific phenomenon, though simultaneously a metaphor for isolation and detachment and a rising sense of exposure to that which is uncompromising. One feels as if Floyd’s disinterested “reverie” is simultaneously an expression of anxiety, angst, and exhilaration. The reasurred plodding of the scientists into the excavation site is also infantile hesitation manifest in their movements. And finally, the electronic shriek is indeed a signal sent by the monolith to another location in the solar system, and also an intense burst of asemic noise infiltrating logical, sense, and order. Yet, the materiality of the novel and film remains unchanged, the imaginary intervention of the third version halts and glimmers as still life. The collaborative process here and the tripartite extrapolation from the actuality of the media ecology prove unlike the recycling process of adaptation not simply because it gives rise to multiple unforeseen forms. Instead, the illusory looping, cycling, and recycling of texts through and into one another is made manifest as an imaginary procedure, an illusion of directionality. This procedure is imaginatively oriented and yet it situates itself nowhere and its duration is imperfect. As an immaterial, ephemeral entity, the third text manifests itself only to disperse itself beyond the possibilities of induction and interrogation. And so by occupying a kind of abstract space and time of imagination, this third extrapolation ultimately discloses the source material as extrapolations from a tangled relation.
The third version of 2001, uneasy and infectious, is constantly in the paradoxical process of level-crossing—from novel to movie, movie to novel, from Arthur C. Kubrick’s version, to Stanley Clarke’s version, from the confidence in scientific methodology to the anxiety and exhilaration inherent to the inability of conceptualizing or rationalizing certain experience. As one rereads the novel, one finds himself unexpectedly infusing the images and sounds of the film into the written text; and as one re-watches Kubrick’s film, one inevitably hears Clarke’s explanation. Paradoxically, the novel and the film somehow become a whirling singular work. Yet, the novel always unexpectedly loops back upon itself and we are reminded that it is itself a unique work—the same paradoxical process applies to the film. And so manifests an extra-diegetic Straussian Also sprach Zarathustra. And with this sonic homage to Nietzsche’s metaphor of transformation and transcendence, a third text, a mutation and transformation amongst the knotted inter-textual web of concrete relations, from collaborative urtexts, the birth of an invisible Übertext. Like the embryonic Starchild of Clarke and Kubrick, an imaginary text flitting about in the dataspHERE of experience, disguised as loops and cycles, where no text is left unchanged and, yet, nothing changes: the shimmering oscillations of still life.

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The Unrecyclable
Works Cited


I am standing in the garage of a hoarder. The ceiling is low and raftery, the lighting unlucky, the books heaped on weak wooden tables and in cave-damp cardboard. As if they have reached that intermediate age between requiring deodorant and discovering it, the books have lifted into the air as a musk. My nine-year-old self is a buoy in it, floating from view behind a shelf-less mass of drugstore novels. The hoarder, a family friend, pronounces his lending policy: “You can borrow as many books as you want for as long as you want.” “Could I have one?” “You can borrow one for the rest of your life, but I expect it back after that.” I settle into a long lease of *The Last Starfighter*—its cover torn off, its spine a tacky band of glue, its pages smelling a month or two from mushrooming irretrievably. Alex, a kid in a trailer park, masters an arcade game only to discover it’s a recruitment tool for a galactic defense force. It falls to leaves after the second read. A few years later, among the beach wrack of a yard sale, sunbaked, I find *The Last Starfighter* on VHS. And (the first symptom of a future of graduate English work) I hate it. They’ve turned that charmed, mouldered book into this unrottable cassette.

I had it all backwards, of course: when Alan Dean Foster wrote *The Last Starfighter* in 1984, he was novelizing Nick Castle’s film,
released earlier that year. Yet my experience of the two texts is reducible neither to the order of production nor the order of encounter; it is shaped by a particular narrative of production and encounter, the paratext comprised of the novel’s and film’s comparative renown, reputation, and referentiality. Bluntly, my consideration of the novel as precedent was determined by my initial unfamiliarity with the film and by the novel’s lost cover, where (I later learned) the attribution to Jonathan Betuel’s screenplay was printed. That crucial plot point missing, I encountered the novel as authoritative and the film as derivative, and these impressions persist even now, so that in recalling the novel, I cannot re-experience it only as a novelization of the film: no, the vector of adaptation will always seem to run in the other direction as well. Much as in M. C. Escher’s perpetual motion aqueduct, Waterfall, a ‘rational’ descent of influence from film to novel is matched by an illusory ascent from novel to film.

In Waterfall, a flaw of two-point perspective, a visual rhyming of distance with height, propels the water impossibly up the aqueduct; in my encounters with The Last Starfighter, a limited perspective, an incomplete narrative of production, fashions my irrational allegiance to Foster’s novel. But in Andrew Wenaus’s “Patterns that Oscillate Forever,” his readings of 2001: A Space Odyssey are shaped by a perspective disguising itself as total—an elaborate narrative of the collaborative and concurrent composition of Arthur C. Clarke’s novel and Stanley Kubrick’s film, the two texts sharing that title. The first two-fifths of Wenaus’s essay promises a compound theoretical framework, a (frankly exciting) constellation of media ecology, natural ecology, virtual ecology, rhythm science, and strange loops, out of which he projects 2001’s “imaginary third text” (60)—a text of “posterity” rather than “priority” in that it “may only exist after experiencing the novel and the film” (61), but a text “paradoxical” in that it nonetheless seems to ‘loop back’ and “inform” those texts (62). The fit of these models with each other and with his “third text” is rather more associative than schematic, but Wenaus foregoes the provisional hermeneutics of the stargazer and instead consigns these discrete
models to tight semantic equivalence. They are, he implies, not merely related but identical to the processes of his “third text.” The resulting framework is less constellation than singularity, proliferating synonymous phrases by collapsing terminological distinctions—between ‘text’ and ‘environment’; between ‘still life’ and ‘oscillation’; between ‘mirror’ and ‘loop’; and finally between ‘paradox’ and ambivalent ‘priority’—that is, ambivalent authority. What these theoretical collapses obscure is the foundational narrative of 2001’s production, the paratext that indeed comes prior to an experience of the texts and that may afterward recuperate a reader’s experiences back into itself as “posterity.” This paratext is not imaginary but quite material, even as it encompasses the more atmospheric and affective (socio-historical contexts of encounter, genre, mode, and cultural, group, and personal associations) along with the more immediately legible (advertisements, interviews, textual packaging, and venues of encounter), including what we usually consider the metatextual (reviews, word-of-mouth evaluations, authorial reputations) and intertextual (citations, references, re-releases, and remakes). At the risk of sounding like the P.I. in a whodunit, I must insist that this paratext—this is the actual “third text” of 2001.

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\text{text} \neq \text{environment}
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In interpreting Vilém Flusser and Louis Bec’s playful phenomenological ruminations on “natural ecologies” (59), Wenaus converts their notion that “[a]n organism mirrors its environment [and] an environment mirrors its organisms” (Flusser and Bec 31) into a notion “that the reader mirrors its texts and the texts its reader” (59). Structurally, this implies an equivalence of reader with organism and “texts” with environment, yet it is unclear how “texts” are environmental: how does a text envelope and sustain “the reader”? How could a text, even at its most enthralling, match the total phenomenological immersion of an environment? How does the plurality of “texts”—a word that must be plural to allow for readerly nomadism—reconcile with what Flusser and Bec identify as a singular suitability of organism and environment? A reader may pick up and discard texts half-experienced; an organism, however agential, cannot enter and exit environments with impunity. Rather than constituting “two levels” (59), two different orders of hermeneutic agency, it seems more accurate to consider readers and texts as constituting two types of “entities” (Flusser and Bec 31) within the same level—organisms and elements, that is, within what Wenaus names “interpretive environments” (59). Indeed, Wenaus’s initial terminology soon slips in this direction such that “Clarke’s novel [and] Kubrick’s film . . . operate as entities in an environment” (60) rather than as environments themselves.

This revision, to which Wenaus seems at least partially inclined, allows for variations in degree of entanglement between a given reader and any particular text (more of us will have closely viewed Kubrick’s 2001 than closely read
Foster’s *The Last Starfighter*), much as a given organism is uniquely entangled with an environment’s resources. The revision also allows for readers’ differing basic awareness of a text and of its intertextual relations (more of us will have heard of Kubrick’s *2001* per se than heard of it specifically as a co-text to Clarke’s *2001*). And crucially so, for as a reader, my interpretative environment includes not only my history of textual entanglements, but also the reputations that precede un-encountered texts, the paratexts that anticipate and fashion how I will tangle with texts once I do encounter them. As a consequence of this revision, however, we must locate the mirroring relationship Flusser and Bec identify not between readers and texts, among texts, or even among readers, but rather between each such entity and the overall interpretive environment they co-inhabit. If readers and texts “transform and mutate one another,” as Wenaus insists (59), they do so indirectly through the Flusserian environment’s mediation: as the whole adapts to one particular entity, each other entity adapts to that new whole.

Picture an interpretive environment as T. S. Eliot’s “existing order” of art—but delineated by readers’ possibilities of encountering texts rather than limited to an evaluative canon, and in which not only “the introduction of the new . . . work of art” but the merest reading of an extant work may add to and so alter “the whole existing order . . . if ever so slightly . . . so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted” (Eliot 1). Paratext acts as both the substance and the space of this process: it is the accumulated narratives of production and consumption surrounding a text and thus the catalyst (or set of guidelines) for a reader’s future encounters with that text. In the case of *2001*, then, the third text is not “an invisible Übertext” born from the “collaborative urtexts” of Kubrick’s film and Clarke’s novel, as Wenaus argues (69). Neither is the third text “the lived experience of reading, the experience of the in-between of primordial texts in relation to one another” (59). Rather, I would counter, the third text is the narrative of those texts’ collaborative and concurrent conceptions, the “primordial” paratext that prepares one to read the text or texts—especially to read *2001* as “unique” (60) among typical novel-to-film or film-to-novel adaptations.

**still life ≠ oscillation**

In considering John Conway’s *Life*—a solitaire game in which pixel-like “organisms” in a checkerboard grid survive, die, or give birth over successive “generations” based on the over- or under-population of neighbouring cells (Gardner n.p.)—Wenaus defines the term “still life” as “a mutation that ‘cannot change or patterns that oscillate forever’” (60). This oxymoronic ‘static oscillation’ suggests a convenient parallel for what Wenaus sees in Flusser and Bec as an “infinite spiral” of adaptation contained within a “finite” space (60), and so “still life” becomes a term central to his argument, a basic rhetorical building block. In Martin Gardner’s original article on *Life*, however, the full
context of the term reads as follows: “Most starting patterns [of Life’s organisms] either reach stable figures—Conway calls them ‘still lifes’—that cannot change or patterns that oscillate forever” (n.p.). Vitally, the either/or construction of this sentence sets “stable figures . . . that cannot change” in opposition rather than synomyic relation to “patterns

that oscillate forever.” The emphatic insertion of “still lifes” refers only to the former category.

Wenaus’s particular citation of Conway’s “still life,” by superimposing stasis and oscillation, contributes to his conclusion that “the knotted relations” of Clarke’s 2001 and Kubrick’s 2001 “manifest themselves as a kind of conceptual paradox” (61); while Wenaus refers to at least three distinct ‘paradoxes’ in this essay, the first being that of “posterity” and “priority” summarized above, in this case he describes his third text’s paradoxical “increase in richness and complexity” with “no effect on [the] materiality” of its base texts (62). For Wenaus, that is, the capacity for an intertextual reading of 2001 to self-complexify on subsequent re-reading, even as the core film and novel remain unchanged, requires that such an intertext and its oscillations be wholly “imaginary” (62) and “abstract” (60). But a more precise application of Conway’s Life allows for the static (ostensibly the film and the novel) and the oscillating (the third text) to occupy distinct materialities. It is within this “interpretive clearing” (61)—if I may appropriate a phrase from Wenaus—that appears the open-ended revisions and referential oscillations of the material paratext I have been describing.

To understand “still lifes” as distinct from “patterns that oscillate forever” is also to glimpse the possible limitations of Conway’s Life to a consideration of 2001’s collaboration. A return from metaphoricity to the plainest denotation of “still life”—the mimetic art of stilleven perfected by the Dutch masters of

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Fig. 3. From “Mathematical Games: The Fantastical Combinations of John Conway’s New Solitaire Game ‘Life’” by Martin Gardner.

Various starting patterns (a, b, c, d, and e) in Conway’s Life are tracked over two generations, or “moves” (1 and 2). Patterns a, b, and c die out on the second move due to under-population. Pattern d reaches a two-by-two block and persists in that shape over successive generations, forming a “still life.” Pattern e oscillates indefinitely between a horizontal line and a vertical line, forming the simplest instance of an oscillator.
canvas in the 17th century—believes Wenaus’s notion of “a diegetic still life” (60) as a basic contradiction. That which is in the main diegetic, which narrates or ‘tells,’ such as Clarke’s novel and (arguably) Kubrick’s film, cannot also be primarily mimetic, imitative, or ‘showing.’ While for Conway “still life” means, simply, a static organism, the term has drastically different denotative freighting in arts, textual, and media studies. In a discipline-attentive sense, 2001’s paratext is indeed both “a third diegetic space” (59)—an accumulated narrative oscillating between each readerly or textual entity and the whole interpretive environment—and “an inter-diegetic entity” (59)—a material bridge between two texts with their own oscillatory beginnings and end points. But these “shimmering oscillations of still life” (69), compelling though their image be, are taken for granted as accurate descriptors of an inherently oxymoronic paratext when they are instead an artefact of Wenaus’s argumentation.

mirror ≠ loop

By tossing Paul D. Miller’s “rhythm science” into the theoretical mix, Wenaus expands on his brief comparison of ‘static oscillation’ to an “infinite spiral” in a “finite” space, specifically a spiral that “manifests as a mirror reflects itself in another mirror” (60). As Wenaus reports it, “rhythm science” is “a mirror held up to a culture . . . that has released itself from the constraints of the ground to drift through dataspaces, continuously morphing its form in response to diverse streams of information” (Miller 5). Wenaus takes this to signify a “mirror [come] to reflect itself so as to spiral, mutate, and drift away from the constraints of spiral, mutate, and drift away from the constraints of materiality” into “an abstract nowhere,” which in the case of 2001 is “the imagination of a reader” (60). And so, of Wenaus’s theoretical components, Miller’s seems the most apt, especially given Miller’s classification of contemporary cultural production as a movement “from version to version” based on “the logic [of] extension rather than . . . negation,” a mutative “changing same” (Miller 3-4) that might resonate with Wenaus’s “oscillations of still life” (69).

Indeed, on the level of metaphor, Wenaus’s reading of Miller reinforces Flusser and Bec’s notion of mutual mirroring between organism and environment—or, as I have argued, between text and interpretive environment. In equating rhythm science’s “mirror held up to culture” with a mirror held up to a mirror, however, Wenaus assumes the cultural processes of “drift” and “morphing” that Miller depicts are synonyms for ‘reflection.’ In Miller’s figuration, however, “[r]hythm science is a forensic investigation of sound as a vector . . . that goes from the physical to the informational and back again” (5). In other words, while rhythm science reflects culture to itself, making legible its self-production in progress, that cultural production is an autonomous loop between “the informational,” which might in extremis be considered immaterial, and “the physical,” which certainly cannot be. Neither Miller’s rhythm science nor its conception of culture, then, bear out the
radical, spiralling, purely abstract information or hermeneutics so foundational to Wenaus’s “imaginary” third text.

While rhythm science does not describe cultural production in the fashion of Wenaus’s third text, it does describe it in the fashion of Hofstadter’s “Strange Loop”—or as Miller puts it, the process of “[digging] beneath what lies on the surface only to arrive where you started” (4). And it is in turning to the strange loop that Wenaus explicitly collapses all four theoretical models in his framework into the image of the infinitely fertile, immaterial third text:

Indeed, like Miller’s mimesis representing mimesis . . . and Flusser’s mirrors reflecting mirrors, strange loops shimmer in complex symmetries, oscillating and mutating, contributing to mathematics of chaos where the sum of collaboration seems vastly to exceed its constitutive parts. That is, strange loops are indeed the shimmering symmetries of Conway’s ‘still life.’ (62)

Specifically, strange loops constitute the first of Wenaus’s paradoxes, that temporal “aberration” in which his “imaginary” third text can exist only ‘after’ the two core texts but appears to inform them ‘before’ they are encountered: “this third work is at once deviant and loyal, autonomous and dependant . . . and is as much the mutating offspring of the original works as it is an instigating force causing mutations to occur to the memory of the reader of Clarke and the spectator of Kubrick” (61).

Here Wenaus comes to the cusp of identifying his third text as a variation on time travel’s ‘grandfather paradox,’ a thought experiment in which a time traveller murders his virgin grandfather, thus preventing his own birth, time travel, and grand-patricide: Wenaus’s time travelling third text (in what we might call the McFly variation) instead steps in as its own hermeneutic grandparent. Yet what makes a strange loop ‘strange,’ even as Miller describes it, is that the segmented arcs of its cycle are gradual, ordinary, and rational, featuring no such miraculous or material violation as time travel. As with Escher’s Waterfall or, say, a Möbius strip, it is only as a whole that the loop appears uncanny to us; the trick manifests not because of the loop’s radical “aberration” but because of its seamlessness. In his insistence on the experiential inversion of cause and effect—its reversal as if in a mirror image—Wenaus fails to distinguish between an experience of the whole loop in parte (as when a single reader re-encounters the same texts in a modified way) and experiences of the arc in totum (as when multiple readers’ encounters with a text modify the interpretive environment). Both Wenaus’s experience of 2001 and my experience of The Last Starfighter, I believe, demonstrate how a private instance of the former experience, through circulation as material paratext into the interpretive environment (read: through publication in Word Hoard), can become a public instance of the latter experience.
I have so far discussed two of the three distinct paradoxes to which Wenaus refers: infinite mutation within finite space, and ‘posterior’ interpretation’s appearance as ‘prior’ interpretive grounds. It is Wenaus’s third paradox, though, that seems most fundamental to his particular reading of 2001. In his view, the common “critical misunderstanding” that Clarke’s more expositional novel serves only to gloss Kubrick’s affective film “is rooted in the unwillingness of critics to treat the relationship between the works as a paradox. The two works are successful insomuch as they are considered as two autonomous parts of the same work of art” (63). In his conclusion, he elaborates:

As one rereads the novel, one finds himself unexpectedly infusing the images and sounds of the film into the written text; and as one re-watches Kubrick’s film, one inevitably hears Clarke’s explanation. Paradoxically, the novel and the film somehow become a whirling singular work. Yet, the novel always unexpectedly loops back upon itself and we are reminded that it is itself a unique work—the same paradoxical process applies to the film. (69)

The paradox Wenaus delineates here, one ostensibly unique to 2001, is that of a novel and a film that are both separate and conjoined in their meaning, both integral and fragmentary, both textual and intertextual. Yet considered in the broadest sense, this perilous extra-textual dependency—differing from that of 2001’s texts perhaps in degree but certainly not in kind—is the condition of any text within an interpretive environment. Without participating in the most basic forms of conjoinedness, fragmentariness, and intertextuality constitutive of cultures, media traditions, and languages, a text is not only uninterpretable but, in fact, unreadable. The only intelligible material is that which is largely recycled.

What the case of 2001 brings into particular focus, by shifting it into an unusual orientation, is the influence of authority within such recyclical interpretive environments: 2001’s novel and film, “each, simultaneously, operating as source text and as adaptation” (Wenaus 61), flatten the usual vertical hierarchy of source text and derived texts. The story of 2001’s production differs from the story of any other novel-to-film adaptation (or the now-endangered film-to-novel adaptation) only in terms of which text is assigned greater authority—which text, to borrow from graphic novel and sci-fi parlance, is “canon.” While the typical narrative is the film adaptation’s inferiority to the source novel, here we have a paratextual story that splits authority between film and novel. They are, quite simply, co-authored. It is this authorial ambivalence, not an ostensibly unprecedented intertextuality, that makes 2001 different from the typical “beginnings and ends, directionality, cycling and recycling, and linearity of adaptation” (62): neither novel nor film can be seen as a degraded facsimile, clumsily wrought knock-off,
or misguided translation, because the narrative of Clarke and Kubrick’s simultaneous collaboration cross-pollinates each text with the other’s authorial clout. Clarke’s disavowal of any such narrative, his insistence that no “record” can capture the “the complicated truth” of the collaborative process (Wenaus 60), forms as a crucial part of the very “canon” it disavows. To similar effect, I might describe the view from Mount Ngauruhoe’s volcanic peak as “indescribable,” or myself as “speechless.”

But if we should “[accept] that there are actually three works involved in this discussion” (Wenaus 61), we should also attend to the authority of all three: Wenaus’s conviction in a certain narrative of 2001’s production—his conviction, that is, in the paratextual authority of its assignations of mutual textual authority—sanctions his transposition of “Clarke’s explanation” into Kubrick’s film and Kubrick’s “exhilaration” into Clarke’s novel (68). A similar set of convictions might affect a reader encountering any two (or more) perspectives on a common narrative: two victims of the same violent act, two characters in the same novel, two camera angles in the same scene, two translations of the same poem, two adverbs in the same phrase. In each case, the flotsam and jetsam of paratext tell us a story about the relative authority of each text. And as I have implied through my conviction that Foster’s The Last Starfighter is more “canon” than Castle’s, we may be unaware of that story, in whole or in part, or we may refuse its authority. Perhaps, then, the most important contribution of Wenaus’s essay to literary studies—even as he would surely insist on 2001’s radical exceptionality—is its suggestion that any intertextual relationship is far more complicated than a simple conception of adaptation, than mere linearity, recycling, textual effect.

 readable ≠ rereadable

To rather facilely paraphrase Isaac Brock, I have argued that paratext “is the liquid that we’re all dissolved in.” I have proposed an understanding of interpretive environments as the grounds of interaction between readers and texts, comprised of cycled and recycled paratext. And I have suggested that Wenaus’s particular experiences of 2001, Clarke’s novel and Kubrick’s film, act as epilogue to the story of their collaborative and concurrent production—just as Wenaus’s essay acts as a prologue to its readers’ subsequent experiences of 2001. What emerges as unrecyclable in Wenaus’s essay and mine (and here I must speculate, presumptively, that my own reading experiences are definitive of readerly life in general) is the impression authority makes on readers. Traces of textual authority may be what marks the distinction between the rerun and the reboot, those familiar grooves in our grey matter that make it impossible for us to experience a familiar text anew even as we need it to define the freshness of its adaptation.

A reader is a palimpsest of its texts; this may be a rather unfashionable conclusion to draw, an émigré from the old country of reader-response criticism. But it offers an elegant alternative to Wenaus’s Rube Goldberg machine, his
paradox-riddled explanation for the “otherwise simple reason why, once one has [both read] Clarke’s novel and watched Kubrick’s film, one cannot help but visualize Kubrick’s imagery when rereading Clarke’s version and, alternatively, one cannot help but fill in the explanatory absences with Clarke’s clarifications when re-watching Kubrick’s version” (63). Were I to read Foster’s The Last Starfighter again, it is not difficult to anticipate how that third reading would differ; my experience of the film would act as the centre of my experience of the novel, even as my earliest reading of the novel would continue to nest inside my viewing of the film. To Wenaus I say, Forget the levers and treadmills and ghosts in the machine: if you want to crack an egg, here’s the edge of the pan.

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Toni Morrison’s use of the Margaret Garner story as inspiration for Beloved has become necessary foreknowledge for any scholarly reading of the novel, but what few critics seem to acknowledge is the conceptual inconsistency that this origin creates. Beloved’s final driving-out by the townspeople at the end of the novel is frequently read as an indication that the town has moved beyond its historic trauma. But how can this reading exist alongside the widespread retelling of Garner’s real, historical trauma that Beloved’s dissemination caused? This question is not a quibble, but is instead an interrogation of a serious contradiction present in the novel’s relationship to the history it describes. How can it spend so many pages describing a traumatic past only to then say that such a past should be forgotten, that “it was not a story to pass on” (323)? I argue that this question is only problematic so long as we continue to see the driving out of Beloved as a totally beneficial act, rather than a temporary reprieve from an endemic problem. Arguments along this line often posit the character Beloved as an avatar for (or physical manifestation of) the historical trauma suffered by African-Americans from the first kidnappings across the Middle Passage to just after the American Civil War, which is when most of the novel takes place. Beloved’s final banishment, then, brings closure to the traumas suffered, as it allows the characters to escape the haunting of their past traumas and instead look forward towards a better existence. I argue instead that in Beloved, it is not the re-telling of history that inflicts trauma, but instead the creation of a historical narrative that re-inflicts the past instead of testifying on it.

Evidence in favour of this reading can be found in both Beloved’s birth (and later re-birth), which both occur during periods of relative happiness, and also the nature of Beloved’s subsequent parasitic relationship with Sethe. Put simply, the trouble that Beloved causes is quite closely connected to African-American collective trauma—but it is an ongoing trauma, and not a historical one, which causes this trouble to occur. Problems like Sethe’s difficult financial situation, her abandonment by the town, and the mistreatment she receives from several white characters all stem from social issues that will still be present for decades after the book takes place (and arguably still exist...
today). These issues come together in Sethe's role as Beloved's mother: a role that is completely undermined by the echoes of slavery, and that makes it impossible for Sethe to control the present manifestations of her trauma, the impoverished position inherited from history making it impossible to reclaim control of that history's contemporary manifestation. In *Beloved*, the trauma of the past is contiguous with the trauma of the present, and in fact it is the inability to define and conceptualise the past that (as I will show) is what allows it to continue to do harm—a reading that grows stronger once we consider the racial politics of the time in which the novel was written.

I.

Beloved, the character, has been read as a figuative representation of African-American history for almost as long as *Beloved* has been studied. “She is a composite symbol,” writes Terry Otten, “not just Sethe’s dead child . . . but also the representative of the ‘Sixty Million and More’ to whom Morrison alludes in her headnote” (83). Her “presence,” writes Sam Durrant, constitutes “the materialisation of racial memory” (101). But these readings elide several complicating factors present in Beloved’s origin and development. In Beloved’s first corporeal appearance she experiences a second birth as a “fully dressed woman [who] walked out of the water . . . [with] new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles on her hands” (61). As Beloved emerges, Sethe experiences an uncontrollable urge to urinate, and does so in such quantity that she compares the flow to that which was released as her water broke when she gave birth to Denver (61). The birth scene establishes immediately Beloved’s liminal identity. Beloved’s smooth skin distinguishes her from her heritage first by giving her the un-humanlike (and uncanny) quality of having no wrinkles on her hands or joints, second by showing no marks from her violent death (wounds which, had she survived them, would have left a scar), and third by establishing Beloved as her mother’s opposite by way of the large scar on Sethe’s back, which resembles a “chokecherry tree” (18). Beloved’s emergence from the water also recalls the transportation of slaves over the Middle Passage. The river is, however, also the town’s main source of transit and income—“this is a city of water,” Mr Garner tells Baby Suggs as he drives her in to town (168)—which establishes that Beloved has emerged not only from Sethe’s metaphorical womb, but also from both the town’s shared historical trauma and its relatively more prosperous present. Beloved is therefore born of the conflict between the horror elicited from the traumatic past and the townspeople’s need to move past that horror in order to construct a viable post-slavery identity. Beloved’s function as the avatar of history becomes clearer once we take into account Morrison’s inspiration—the aforementioned story of Margaret Garner, the ex-slave who killed her children to keep them safe from an approaching party of slave-catchers. Beloved’s origin is therefore mired in paradox. Her first appearance suggests a
second birth out of Sethe, but much about the circumstances of that birth, along with Beloved’s physical appearance, makes her apart from her mother. Morrison reiterates this conflict in the novel’s coda, describing Beloved as “the girl who waited to be loved” (323, emphasis mine), with the difference between “being loved” (i.e. “beloved”) and “waiting to be loved” amounting only to a space on the page. Beloved’s description in the coda establishes that the origin of her parasitic relationship with Sethe lies in her hunger for affection.

Beloved’s dangerous love derives from the conflict between the degree to which she demands intimacy from those around her and the estrangement between physical and emotional intimacy established by slavery. The most striking appearance of this conflict of intimacy is the murder, where Sethe takes on the role of the self-sacrificial mother while also doing violence to her children, and as a result becomes alienated from her two surviving sons (both of whom run away) and also from Beloved, with whom she later fruitlessly tries to re-connect via excessive care and dotage. The emotional intimacy of Sethe’s intent problematizes the physical violence of her actions. This conflict extends also to the origin of Beloved’s name. After Sethe is released from prison, she goes to plant a headstone on her daughter’s grave. Lacking money, she agrees to sleep with the engraver for “ten minutes for seven letters,” cutting “Dearly Beloved” down to just the second word (5). The manner by which Beloved received her name is, again, a conflict between emotional intimacy and physical intimacy. Sethe wants the gravestone to be an expression of her love for her dead child, but in order to have the gravestone Sethe needs to sleep with the engraver and truncate the intended epitaph. This necessity resulted from the financial limitations imposed on Sethe by racial discrimination, which made it impossible for Sethe to earn more than a living wage. Slavery, and its aftermath, has forced Sethe into a position where, in order to make even a basic expression of emotional intimacy with her daughter, she has to engage in the sham-physical intimacy of prostituting herself to the engraver. Further alienating the sexual exchange from any emotional connection is the language by which Morrison narrates the deal. The agreement is treated as a bartering of services, with the number of minutes that Sethe would agree to spend with the engraver acting as currency. Sethe gets seven letters for ten minutes, but she wonders whether “with another ten could she have gotten ‘Dearly’ too?” (5). The story of the gravestone—and, by extension, Beloved’s name—is therefore the story of a deliberately un-intimate act being used as a means to express affection. It is also the start of Sethe’s self-destructive drive to give Beloved love.

In both killing and naming Beloved, Sethe engaged in actions that left the two physically estranged while making them emotionally closer. In both cases, Sethe is performing—in an extreme form—the social function of a parent. By sleeping with the engraver, she is able to name her child, and by killing her daughter, she was able to protect her other children. Her
parenting has been deformed by the paradoxes and doublethink that sprang up from slavery’s discourse, the lingering effects of which continue to subvert the parent/child relationship even after slavery’s cessation.

Slavery’s systematic undermining of parenthood is a persistent theme throughout the novel—afflicting both Baby Suggs and Sethe’s mother in addition to Sethe herself. The three mothers, however, all respond differently to the attack on their maternity. Sethe’s mother simply disappears, and it is in her that the undermining is most complete. All of the children that Sethe’s mother bore from white men, we discover, had been thrown away (74)—an infanticide quite different from Sethe’s. Though both women killed their children as a result of the slave trade’s interference, Sethe’s murder was carried out from a desire to protect her children while Sethe’s mother had rejected outright those children who were the products of rape. Baby Suggs, meanwhile, did not give her children up, but instead had them taken from her (6). Whereas Sethe responded to the undermining of her motherhood by recoiling into her house, Baby Suggs—following the loss of Halle, her final child—instead took on the extremely public role of a preacher (102-03). Her response to the loss of her family and her parenthood is to seek the role of a community builder and public figure.

What draws the various portrayals of subverted parenthood together—and what connects them back to Beloved’s role as history’s avatar—is the shared paradox of affection being introduced into their relationships by slavery and its supporters. Beloved is in need of affection, but the novel concludes with her being driven out, presumably resulting in a material improvement in Sethe and Denver’s lives. If Beloved is a physical manifestation of the trauma inflicted by slavery, then it is easy to read the final confrontation between the villagers and Beloved as the banishment of the traumatic past to make room for a better future. However, by giving this trauma a human body, Morrison has also ascribed to it human emotional needs, including the need for intimacy. If we are to read Beloved as the avatar of a trauma in need of eviction, then what are we to make of the fact that her actions—as damaging as they are—are still the result of events entirely out of Beloved’s control, that slavery’s undermining of the family structure is hardly her fault, and that the need for affection which drives her is clearly the result of extreme trauma? If Beloved is history’s representative then how do we reconcile these mitigating factors? Part of the answer lies in the difference between cultural history and individual testimony and in the different ways that these modes of communication bestow control of the past onto those who describe it.

II.

In her foreword to the 2004 Vintage edition of *Beloved*, Morrison describes “the shock of liberation” that she felt after leaving her day-job in order to write full time (xvi). Her description of this “shock” is quite similar to Baby
Suggs’s reaction to her own freedom (166). In both cases, the euphoric realization of freedom does not come at the moment that it is gained but instead follows an epiphany during which the newly freed person crosses the gap between the formal achievement of emancipation (Baby Suggs’s freedom papers, for example) and the realization of that freedom both cognitively and in lived experience.

The key to the trauma experienced by Beloved’s protagonists therefore lies in the gap between the fact of freedom and the experience of freedom, and examining the moment of Suggs’s epiphany leads to a map by which that gap can be crossed. During her epiphany, Baby Suggs focuses on her ownership of her own limbs and organs, reacting in shock at the discovery of “her own heartbeat” (166). After settling into her new home and establishing herself as a preacher, Baby Suggs gives a sermon in which she defines “freedom” in terms of one’s relationship to one’s body, telling the assembly to “love your hands . . . raise them up and kiss them . . . flesh that needs to be loved” (103-04, my emphasis). Importantly, Baby Suggs’s sermon does not simply recount the uplifting moment of emancipation but also recalls the trauma inflicted by the absence of ownership over her body which she, and other ex-slaves, suffered—“they [slave owners] do not love your hands,” nor do they love African-American faces, throats, or organs (103-04). It is the resulting trauma, and the release from it, to which Baby Suggs gives testimony, and through which she seeks to emancipate the other ex-slaves who have come to hear her speak.

The giving of testimony is, in Beloved, an act of empathy by which the giver can instigate an emotional response in the receiver similar to what the giver felt while experiencing the trauma being testified to. Much in Beloved therefore anticipates the theories described by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in their study on the testimonials of Holocaust survivors. To give testimony, says Laub, “there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an other—in the position of one who hears . . . the witnesses are talking to somebody: to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time” (“Bearing Witness” 70-71, original emphasis). Baby Suggs’s desire to become a preacher—to tell her story to someone—is consistent with this model. To be in possession of both a traumatic memory and the desire to speak it therefore leads logically to the need for an audience, with testimony demanding a listener by its definition. However, to be the receiver of testimony is to be in an emotionally dangerous place. Laub lists several reactions that listeners often have to traumatic testimony—these responses ranging from “a sense of total paralysis” and “numbness” to an extreme emotional response that leaves the testifier “drowned and lost in the listener’s defensive affectivity” (72-73). The common strand between these responses is the empathy of the listener—the trauma felt by the giver of the testimony being transferred over to the receiver. The responses are the subject’s subconscious attempts to mitigate these responses, to “protect himself from the offshoots of the trauma . . . that, through the testimony, comes to be directed toward him” (73).
A further intersection between *Beloved* and Laub’s description of testimony’s psychological effects is the witness’s compulsion to testify, which becomes for them an existential imperative. According to Laub, “the [Holocaust] survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story. They also needed to tell their story in order to survive” (“An Event” 78). However, it is in the effects of giving testimony that *Testimony* and *Beloved* diverge. For Laub’s patients, the trauma of the Holocaust is simply too great for any amount of testifying to be enough. Describing a series of in-depth interviews that she performed as a contribution to the Yale Video Archive, Laub says that many of the subjects ended the sessions “realiz[ing] that they have only begun the long process of witnessing now—forty years after the event” (79). The events are simply so big and so overwhelming that any attempt to lock them down into words fails, leading to a “collapse of witnessing” that leaves the events distorted in the minds of the people who expressed them (80). The traumatic events have exceeded the language’s capacity to communicate, this failure of language leading to the trauma’s perpetuity in the minds of the afflicted. Thus, while testimony can help assuage the trauma suffered, it can only do so when the depth of that trauma does not overwhelm the subject’s ability to speak.

Thus, an important way in which *Beloved* goes beyond the scope of Laub’s argument is through the explication of the variability between witnesses and the degrees of difference between being rendered inarticulate and being impelled to testify—a part of the effect to which Laub gives less treatment, likely because the trauma inflicted by the Holocaust was so great that no subject could contain it. John Duvall points out an instance in which *Beloved* seems to approach, and then recede from, Laub’s construction of testimony—that being Schoolteacher’s nephew’s verbal paralysis, which he experienced after witnessing Sethe’s infanticide, and which renders him “unable to explain” what he saw (Duvall 128). This paralysis follows the pattern set out by Laub, the horror of what the nephew witnessed being too great for him to articulate. The murder does not, however, have the same effect on everyone, as it is revealed elsewhere that an abolitionist group had used it as “political capitol” to advance their campaign (*Beloved* 128-29). Laub notwithstanding, Sethe’s story was put into words, and those words served their task well enough to aid the abolitionist movement. Someone had to have witnessed the event and then intelligibly described it in order for it to have become available to the abolitionist group. Thus, the trauma that Sethe’s murder inflicts is therefore established as not being overpowering to the point that it overwhelms everyone who encounters it but is still traumatic enough that some who had seen it would face the similar problems of articulation as the Holocaust victims did. Another instance of the murders being testified occurs during Sethe’s attempts to gain Beloved’s forgiveness, which drive Sethe to describe exactly what she
had done and why (Beloved 284). Not only is Sethe giving testimony on her trauma, she is also giving that testimony to the same person whose murder she is recounting. Sethe proves unusually able to give testimony on the traumas inflicted upon her, and this ability means that the model for testimony expressed in Testimony cannot be applied to Beloved unmodified.

The divergence can be explained in terms of the difference between what Dominick LaCapra calls “writing trauma” and “writing about trauma.” An author “writing trauma” engages in a “process of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and ‘giving voice’ to the past,” whereas an author “writing about trauma” takes part in “the project of reconstructing the past as objectively as possible” in order to create a historical text (186). Thus, the testimony in Beloved differs from the testimony of those Laub interviewed in that the interviewees were attempting to “write about” the trauma that they had suffered (the context of the “Video Archive” implicitly historicising their interviews), whereas in Beloved Sethe and Baby Suggs’s testimonies are part of a larger attempt to “write” the trauma suffered as a result of slavery—a trauma which had up until that point remained suppressed.

We see a further iteration of this point in Morrison’s essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken,” in which she argued that African-American writers had become “the subjects of [their] own narrative, witnesses to and participants in [their] own experience, and . . . in the experiences of those with whom [they] have come in contact” (375). Morrison argues that American literary tradition had, in order to continue suppressing the vast African-American influence on American history and culture, chosen “romanticism” over “verisimilitude” in its description of inter-racial relations, a decision that Morrison says has often “succeeded in paralyzing both the work and its criticism” and had caused “a virtual infantilization of the writer’s intellect” that rendered harmless any attack on the white male hegemony (378). Following these lines, Angelyn Mitchell argues for Beloved being in part a response to the “retrograde” racial politics of the Regan administration, which “played to the fears of White America” in order to undermine affirmative action (106). Mitchell argues that Morrison was writing “against the possibility of contemporary disenfranchisement”—with Mitchell’s primary example here being the so-called “welfare queen”—by establishing history’s continuity in the present, and “forc[ing] her readers . . . to rethink what they know about their own existence in the context of a history of bondage” (107). The “welfare queen” social construct was an idea that gained currency in the nineteen eighties and nineties and can be considered a more racialized version of the so-called “undeserving poor”—that is, a subset of those who live off government assistance but, for a variety of cultural and ideological reasons, are thought to be doing too little to remedy their financial situation and therefore are “undeserving” of aid. The prototypical “welfare
“welfare queen” usually appears as a grab-bag of racial stereotypes and wishes only to remain on welfare as long as possible, having no interest in finding work. To give testimony on the trauma of the past was therefore an imperative not only in a literary and cultural sense but in a political and historical one as well. The invention of the “welfare queen” was, essentially, the invention of a distorted African-American cultural identity by a group of white men who did so in order to undermine exactly the kind of programs that were needed to undo the damage caused by the prior enslavement of the African-American population. In subverting these programs, and in doing so through cultural appropriation, the creators of the “welfare queen” had disclaimed any cultural responsibility for the economic hardships faced by the benefactors of affirmative action and—by implication—were acting as if slavery had never happened.

The problem faced by African-American writers at the time of Beloved’s publication is exactly a lack of testimony—not because the trauma of the events involved was too great, but because those writers had been subject to a decades-long campaign of disinformation through which their work was rendered harmless to the status quo. As Laub’s Holocaust survivors show, those who have suffered a great trauma will feel the need to testify on it, and will continue to do so even after their language fails them. Morrison argues that the failure of earlier African-American literature to give this testimony is not due to the writers’ failure to encapsulate the trauma in their work (for Beloved indicates that such testimony is possible) but instead because of a deliberate act of suppression on the part of the literary establishment. Thus, Beloved’s mission is to fill this gap by “writing” the trauma with the “verisimilitude” that earlier (white) accounts had eschewed. It is due to this goal that Beloved’s depiction of testimony’s effect and function differs from Laub’s. In both cases, the giving and receiving of testimony is an act of empathy, with the listener experiencing emotions similar to those felt by the giver. Because Beloved seeks to use its testimony to fill in a gap in the literary tradition, and to allow those who have suffered to move beyond it, giving testimony becomes a vital component of the construction of an affirmative African-American cultural identity.

III.

It is in Beloved that history and testimony come together to fulfil the goals that Beloved has set out with. In light of the role of testimony and the historical and intellectual context in which the novel was written, I argue that the final driving-out of Beloved near the end of the book is not, as it might first seem, a rejection of the traumatic past but instead a call for that past to be drawn out into the open, exposed, and thereby taken under the control of the African-American community. Testifying on the trauma of the past robs the dominant power structures of the ability to define the standards against which
African-American cultural production is to be judged, in defiance of the “welfare queen” story that would be otherwise established if control over the racial discourse were to be handed back to the white hegemony.

Beloved’s coda (323-24) would seem at first to contradict this reading. The refrain, “it was not a story to pass on,” appears to be the most obvious counterpoint. However, in order to read the refrain as a command to avoid communicating the trauma of the past, one has to also argue that the three lines in question are the declarations of the author—or at least of some omniscient narrator—and are not reflections of the mindsets of the people who had witnessed the events taking place at 124 Bluestone Road. The inverse seems true. Through the chapter, the paragraphs that describe the events following Beloved’s eviction are clearly descriptions of what those people doing the eviction were thinking at the time. The first paragraph begins by stating, inclusively, that “everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name” (323). This opening establishes, first, that the narration refers to a group of people (“everybody”) and that the narrator is privy to that group’s collective thoughts (“everybody knew”). The “she” and “her” clearly refer to Beloved. The other paragraphs all clearly describe events related to the preceding story—the “motion, unlike a ship’s” in the first paragraph, for example, being another reference to the Middle Passage. The third paragraph’s rhetorical question, “what made her think her fingernails could open locks the rain rained on,” alludes to both Paul D’s figurative “rusty tobacco tin” (first mentioned on 133) which Beloved opened (137-38), and the “closed portion of [Paul D’s] head” that Sethe “opened like a greased lock” (49). Finally, the fourth paragraph of the coda explicitly mentions 124 (324). The last two paragraphs, read in conjunction with the first, amount to an anthropomorphized description of the trauma of slavery and its after-effects within the group of evictors. In describing not only Beloved’s “footprints” but also the “water” that washed them away (324), the novel binds Beloved’s “birth” from the river, the Middle Passage, and the deliberate but hidden suppression of African-American culture into a single image. However, the memory of this trauma is not gone, regardless of whether its effects are dismissed as “just weather” and “certainly no clamour for a kiss” (324). If “Beloved” is to be treated as a portmanteau of “be loved,” and if Beloved is a product of slavery’s undermining of the family structure and the associated denial of familial affection, and if the coda is to be read as the narrated thoughts of the African-American community, then the narrator’s denial that the wind constitutes “a clamour for a kiss” represents the effacement of the existence of the historical suffering of African-Americans and the subsequent denial of their right to lay claim to that suffering through the giving of testimony.

If, though, the coda is an indictment of the ignorance of the past, then what of the refrain, which would seem to declare the opposite?
Their separation from the paragraphs might suggest that they are removed from this cultural memory—that while the paragraphs constitute descriptions of the thoughts and memories of the townspeople, the separated sentences’ privileged placement on the page indicates that they are to be read apart. However, there is at least one instance of the body paragraphs interacting with the refrain, which occurs during the transition between paragraphs three and four (324). Paragraph three concludes with a description of the townspeople forgetting Beloved (“in the end, they forgot her too”) before repeating the refrain “it was not a story to pass on.” The fourth paragraph, unlike all of the others, begins its first sentence with a conjunction—“so they forgot her.” The “so” suggests that the paragraph follows conceptually from something preceding it, the two candidates being the preceding paragraph and the refrain. The first option—that the “so” of the fourth paragraph picks up after the content of the third paragraph—makes little sense given the content of paragraph three. In that paragraph, the decision to forget has already been made; “the memory of the smile under her chin” has already vanished, and one cannot forget something that has already been forgotten. Furthermore, the last sentence of the third paragraph does not conjoin syntactically with the first of the fourth. If we push them together, the phrase becomes “what made her think her fingernails could open locks the rain rained on? So they forgot her,” which makes no grammatical sense. However, if we combine the refrain between the two paragraphs with the first sentence of paragraph four, it becomes the more readable: “it was not a story to pass on. So they forgot her.” Thus, the refrain is not removed from the descriptions but instead constitutes the repetition of an idea that has permeated the town’s local culture as a result of the events of the novel, and which eventually allowed others to tell their story for them—leading to the problems that the “welfare queen” image encapsulates.

To read *Beloved* as a rejection of history is therefore misguided. *Beloved* is indeed in part a cautionary tale on the uses of history, but it is neither cautioning against the embracing of history nor against facing the trauma of the past. Rather, *Beloved* advocates the reclamation of history, the giving of testimony about the past, and the appropriation of the racial discourse on terms free from “retrograde” political rhetoric and the “romantic,” white-dominated literary establishment. Beloved is undoubtedly history’s avatar, and her effect on Sethe at the novel’s end is quite harmful. But it is not Beloved’s presence *per se* which inflicts harm on Sethe, but rather the resulting inversion of the mother/daughter relationship, an inversion that is clearly the result of factors entirely out of either woman’s control. Beloved is dangerous not because she manifests the traumatic past, but because she has been allowed to slip out of Sethe’s influence. While the townspeople evicting Beloved did save Sethe’s life, their subsequent decision that the incident “was not a story to pass on” repre-
sents a tragedy—that tragedy being the failure (in Morrison’s view) of the African-American community to take control of the discourse, a failure that lead to the unsustainable state of af-fairs that constituted the political and cultural environment in which Beloved was written. The supposed paradox of Beloved being an a-historical historical novel is therefore an illusion. It seeks not to reject history but to reclaim it.

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1 For Morrison’s recounting of the novel’s in-spiration, see her foreword to the 2004 Vintage edition (xvii-xviii).

2 For recent examples of this reading, see Moly Abel Travis’s 2010 article, “Beyond Empathy: Narrative Distancing and Ethics in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and J. M. Coetzee’s Disgrace,” in which she describes Beloved as “the return of a repressed racial memory” (233).

3 For fuller descriptions of the history of the “welfare queen” construct, see Myth of the Welfare Queen by David Zucchino and, more recently, The Politics of Disgust by Ange-Marie Hancock.

The Unrecyclable
Works Cited


---. “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening.” Felman and Laub. 57-74.


The notion of trauma as an overwhelming experience of violence that exceeds all forms of representation has become axiomatic. Beginning with Cathy Caruth’s pioneering study of historical trauma in Unclaimed Experience (1996) and Shoshana Felman’s equally seminal work on testimony and witnessing, literary theorists have since conceptualized trauma nearly unanimously as a temporal rupture or “missed encounter” (Caruth 6) whose belated return assumes the form of a symptom, psychic or otherwise. However, as Susannah Radstone notes disapprovingly, in this perversion of the Freudian paradigm, traumatic experience is wholly identified with the so-called unrepresentable as opposed to the unconscious desire or fantasy and, as a result, it erroneously comes to serve as a “general theory of representation” (Radstone 12). Through the effacement of trauma’s pathological dimension—that is, the fantastical associations through which the subject interprets the traumatic event—its historical dimension is equally lost. As a result, trauma becomes a kind of “master signifier” through which the violence of history is articulated as a representation of subjective experience whose legitimate expression must take one of two poetic forms: testimony or allegory. Both of these poetic forms constitute trauma as a mode of historical rupture that leads to the relativistic insertion of alternative points of view, both in a literal and a figurative sense—literally, through its belated representation in the testimonial form, and figuratively, through its reification or personification in the allegorical form. Often these distinct forms are intertwined in the trauma text.

The central problem with the conception of trauma as historical rupture or belated representation is that it relies on a model of history in which the temporality of trauma corresponds to the unfolding of history, a model that Walter Benjamin (among others) has criticized for its association with a strictly ahistorical, “homogenous, empty time” (Benjamin 261). In this model, the traumatic rupture produces a break in time that is ultimately sutured by the belated process of working through, or re-presenting. Historical time is redeemed; the progression of history is restored through the recovery of missing or repressed experience. In this model of trauma, history serves as a point of departure. The excess produced by the violence of
history returns in the form of a traumatic or ghostly repetition whose disruptive potential is ultimately neutralized through narratives of closure and healing, or historical recovery. Social equilibrium is reinstated and the progression of history resumes, unaffected. Underlying material inequalities remain intact.

Not surprisingly, literary representations of trauma are often read in terms of historical recovery, both in the therapeutic sense of working through and in the political sense of historical repossession. Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is a case in point. As a trauma text that articulates the historical violence of slavery through the traumatic experiences of its individual characters, it has been variously referred to as a “trope for recovered history” (Spargo 2002), the “ghostly return” of memory (Bhabha 1994), an invitation for ethical engagement (Brogan 1998), a “truth claim” regarding the nature of historical violence (LaCapra 2001), and, according to our current interlocutor, the attempt to “reclaim” history through the recasting of the past (Colangelo 2013). Despite the fact that each of these interpretations attempts to unearth the hidden meaning of traumatic experience through its historical excavation, what each overlooks is the fact that the very concept of trauma is the effect of a particular mode of production in which the narrative of history becomes not only a representation of the past but also the means of reproducing this representation. The language of recovery and repossession should, from the outset, point us in the direction of history’s constitution as both a form of property and a representation of the social relations that constitute its property form. By recognizing history *tout court* as an effect of the same capitalist mode of production that created the institution of private property, we can see history—or the specialized knowledge of the past—as a mode of enclosure that separates or divorces the subject of historical violence from the violent structures of history.

Dean Franco provides an alternative reading of *Beloved* that explicitly situates it in relation to capitalism; his interpretation transcends the paradigm of historical recovery and reconstitutes trauma as an expression of the loss of property rights, in which property is precisely “where trauma and material possession meet” (Franco 425). Providing examples from the narrative, such as the theft of Sethe’s milk which ultimately overshadows the trauma of her preceding beating, Franco argues that the “relationship between bodily trauma and the body as property, mediated by the language of ‘rights’ and ‘claiming,’ points out the flexibility of concepts like injury and redress that constitute the broader field within which trauma occurs” (426). The broader field, it turns out, is the field of capitalist production in which the history of slavery is also the history of a process of primitive accumulation synonymous with the production of private property. Marx defines this process as “nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production” (Marx 874-5). While the expropriation of common land in sixteenth-century England provides an exemplary model...
for Marx, the logic of enclosure equally underlies forms of extra-economic violence, including “conquest, enslavement, robbery, [and] murder” (874). The traumatic narrative of Beloved, from this perspective, becomes an allegory of primitive accumulation in which traumatic ruptures betray the capitalist logic of historical violence. This privileging of property relations over psychic trauma ultimately leads Franco to pose a fundamental question: “is a psychoanalytically conceived effort of working-through adequate to the task when the experience of loss is mediated through the discourse of property?” (Franco 427). By understanding historical violence and its traumatic effects as the products of capitalist accumulation we might reformulate this question more generally, asking: how does narrative closure in the form of historical recovery, or as the recycling of the past, endorse the very logic of enclosure upon which the capitalist mode of production is founded?

A second paradigmatic text in the field of trauma studies invites us to reconceptualize trauma from the standpoint of the present, as a normative element of modern subjectivity that reflects the ongoing violence of capitalist accumulation in the era of globalization. W. G. Sebald’s highly acclaimed final novel Austerlitz (2001) is the haunting and enchanting tale of Jacques Austerlitz relayed by an unnamed narrator who befriends the architectural scholar and fellow ambler over a number of years through a series of chance encounters abroad. The story begins with the narrator’s account of his visits to Belgium during which he first encounters Austerlitz in Antwerp Centraal Station clad in “heavy walking boots and workman’s trousers” but set apart from other travellers in his pre-occupation with “making notes and sketches” (Sebald 7). Already, Austerlitz portrays a non-synchronous temporality with respect to the mindless bustle of the train station. Curious, our narrator approaches with a query about the historian’s interest in the building, and Austerlitz answers (we are told) “without hesitation” (8). This would be the first in their series of “Antwerp conversations,” which continue to articulate the topographic temporality of what Lefebvre (among others) has termed “the everyday” with the telescopic logic of historical time. The scene illuminates the conflicting temporalities of concrete and abstract time. A woman “whose peroxide-blond hair was piled high into a sort of bird’s nest” and whom Austerlitz refers to as the “goddess of time past,” passes beneath a “mighty clock” (8), the station beacon, which, as Austerlitz explains, represents the standardized time that assumed its throne in the mid-nineteenth century and to whose demands weary travellers continue to oblige. At the same time, our narrator remarks on the eternal time experienced in the intermittent silences of their conversation, which contrasts starkly with the rapidly condensed temporality of Antwerp station’s history as relayed by Austerlitz—its relation to Belgium’s colonial expansion under King Leopold, the Roman inspiration of its image as a “cathedral consecrated to traffic and trade” (10), and its capitalist symbolism, whose apex is “the heraldic motif of the beehive,” a symbol
standing not for the socialist ideals of a serviceable nature, or labour as social good, but for the very “principle of capital accumulation” (12). This initial scene encapsulates the ensuing tensions between (historical) progression and (capital) accumulation that constitute the structure of the remaining narrative.

The German expatriate’s four novels have stimulated an abundance of secondary literature. Often, his books are interpreted, at least implicitly, as a contribution to the growing body of work known as Holocaust literature, despite the author’s claims to the contrary and the fact that the atrocity is only ever represented obliquely in his texts. Analyses of *Austerlitz* in particular (and Sebald’s work more generally) tend to adopt one of two main approaches. The first is informed by developments in the contemporary field of trauma studies and its memory-related derivatives, for which the Holocaust serves as a paradigmatic historical rupture. Using concepts such as postmemory and traumatic repetition, this approach attempts to construct a socio-therapeutic framework that might further elucidate the ethical and political possibilities of collective acts of testimony and witnessing. Marianne Hirsch, for example, interprets *Austerlitz* as a prime example of postmemorial operations, where postmemory is “a structure of intergenerational and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience” that illuminates the ways in which “second generation” subjectivity is informed by the “inherited memories” of historical violence (Hirsch 106-7).

Amending Hirsch’s analysis, Richard Crownshaw demonstrates the ways in which the use of photographs in *Austerlitz* resists the potentially appropriative nature of postmemory (which is nothing other than the possession of the other’s memory) through the “convolution of time” that accompanies the “belated return of the past” (Crownshaw n.p.). For this reason, the photographs that both augment and interrupt the story of *Austerlitz* “can be read as an ethical intervention in the work of postmemory” which is not simply “an ethical relation to the oppressed or persecuted” (Hirsch qtd. in Crownshaw) but a way of exposing the totalizing fantasy of archival completion that structures the historicist conception of history as progress.

The second approach prefers to focus more closely on the formal elements of the text in order to consider the ways in which Sebald’s poetics convey the particular aesthetic experience of modernity. Many of these interpretations focus on his engagement with “natural history,” a phrase Max Pensky (paraphrasing Adorno) elaborates as a construction of concepts which like a chemical elective affinity become volatile in one another’s presence and can, under suitable theoretical conditions, reverse polarity, such that nature, developed to the point of its most extreme significance, appears as the saturation of time—that is, as fully timely, hence historical being—where humanity as a historical phenomenon in turn appears
under the sign of the historical repetition of catastrophe, and therefore as mythically recursive and static, that is, as nature. (Pensky 66)

Pensky argues that, in *Austerlitz*, Sebald presents a “version of the natural history of ruins” (82) that disrupts the “stability of the distinction between memory and forgetting” (83). Hal Foster suggests that Sebald “questions the humanist commonplace about the restorative power of memory” even as his characters are “ghosts of repetition” that inhabit a world “after nature” (Foster 16).

In a similar vein, Mary Cosgrove addresses what she calls the “natural history of capitalism” in Sebald’s work through a re-examination of the theme of melancholia that runs through all four of his novels. Departing explicitly from the traditional perspectives of trauma theory, in which melancholia is commonly linked to “history as repeated catastrophe” (Cosgrove 92), she states:

Melancholia in his work is not just a matter for the belatedly-born, post-memorial leftover of the second generation. On the contrary, it exceeds the downbeat mindset of his various narrative figures, transcending the individual subject to represent a historically informed and challenging discussion on topics as varied, contemporary and interconnected as global capitalism, the planet’s weather systems and also genocide. (92)

Melancholic images transcend the individual subject in order to present a picture of “world history as a spatio-temporal whole” (96), a perspective affirmed by others who suggest that Austerlitz has no interiority.2 A number of other critics have also noted the significance of time in Sebald’s narratives and its relationship to textual poetics. Ben Hutchinson describes Sebald’s prose as a “poetics of slowing down” (Hutchinson qtd. in Simine 26), which Amir Eshel identifies as the “poetic deceleration” that structures Sebald’s “polemic against time” (94). Sebald’s work is remarkable, Eshel claims, precisely “because of the ways in which the narrative organizes and reconceives temporality” (90).

According to the current paradigm of trauma theory, temporal rupture in the forms of belatedness and repetition is a significant aspect of traumatic experience. The temporal aspect of trauma was already present in Freud, who granted the concept a psychic dimension. Deriving from the Greek word meaning “wound,” trauma under the Freudian gaze was both revived and transformed into the symptomatic expression of repressed memory that took shape in the concept of traumatic repetition. In part, this new understanding of trauma was made possible by advances in modern technology; it is well known that Freud’s theories of the psyche were highly influenced by prevalent technological advances of the time, such as photography and railway travel, which would inform his theories of condensation and displacement (to be re-interpreted by Lacan in terms of the poetic functions of “metaphor” and
“metonymy” respectively). Nearly a century later, under the influence of deconstruction, the concept underwent a further transmutation. Building on Freud’s theory of traumatic repetition, Cathy Caruth, a pioneer in the field of what would eventually become trauma studies, defined trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 11). Trauma, in other words, is the effect of a temporal disruption that derives from the ultimate failure of representation, “a break in the mind’s experience of time” (61). Ulrich Baer attributes this temporal rupture to the lack of a “coherent mental, textual, or historical context” (Baer 10). The initial temporal rupture is followed by a belated representation. It is for this reason photography and not railway travel has remained the contemporary exemplar of the temporality of traumatic experience, despite the devastating effects of high-speed collisions.

The narrative of Austerlitz is fraught with references to time. Beyond Austerlitz’s initial allusions to the standardization of time in nineteenth-century railway travel, specific points are often set in relation to the technologies of observation. One reference stands out in particular: as narrator and protagonist gaze through telescopes atop the Royal Observatory in Greenwich Park, Austerlitz initiates an extended meditation on the nature of time, which begins:

Time . . . was by far the most artificial of all our inventions, and in being bound to the planet turning on its own axis was no less arbitrary than would, say, a calculation based on the growth of trees, or the duration required for a piece of limestone to disintegrate, quite apart from the fact that the solar day which we take as our guideline does not provide any precise measurement, so that in order to reckon time we have to devise an imaginary, average sun which has an invariable speed of movement and does not incline towards the equator in its orbit. (Sebald 100)

In this passage, Austerlitz reveals even the cyclical time of nature as contrived, as an immaterial invention anchored in the most abstract elements of mathematics and astronomy. The new capacity to create precise measurements of the passage of time was in many senses an effect of the telescopic vision of time that had been “spreading out over everything” since the invention of the telescope in the early 1600s. Austerlitz points out the potential fallaciousness of this view of time, asking: “[c]ould we not claim . . . that time itself has been nonconcurrent over the centuries and millennia?” (100). Remarkingly on the continued unevenness of historical time in the age of global capital, he queries further:

Is not human life in many parts of the earth governed to this day less by time than by the weather, and thus by an unquantifiable dimension which disregards linear
regularity, does not progress constantly forward but moves in eddies, is marked by episodes of congestion and irruption, recurs in ever-changing form, and evolves in no one knows what direction? (100-01)

During this second unexpected encounter in 1996, in which the first signs of trauma begin to surface, questions of sight and blindness are inlaid within the historical progression of time. Shortly following the narrator’s brief encounter with chorioretinopathy—in which a “bubble suffused by clear liquid formed on the macula” causing a “gray area” that partially obscured the field of vision, leaving only the periphery in focus, a condition he initially mistook for “merely hysterical weakness”—he rediscovers Austerlitz at “the edge of an agitated crowd” of gold miners at the Great Eastern Hotel on Liverpool Street (Sebald 35-38). Despite a twenty-year hiatus, the conversation resumes as if no time had passed; Austerlitz continues where he left off, the narrator tells us, “without wasting any words on the coincidence of our meeting again after all this time” (41). For the next 85 pages or so, visual motifs articulate lengthy taxonomic descriptions of the contents of various architectural landmarks: the Great Eastern Hotel with its “cool labyrinth for the storage of Rhine wines” and elaborate “fish section, where perch, pike, plaice, sole, and eels lay heaped on black slate slabs” (43); Stower Grange private school for boys with its “curious collection of oddities, most of them over sixty or suffering from some affliction” (59); and Andromeda Lodge, whose transformation “into a kind of natural history museum had begun in 1869, when Gerald’s parrot-collecting ancestor made the acquaintance of Charles Darwin” (83). Meanwhile, questions of the visual arise in the story of Evan the cobbler who had a “reputation for seeing ghosts” (53), old photographs which resemble “shadows of reality” that emerge “as memories do in the middle of the night” (77), and a tale concerning the main resident of Iver Grove estate, “who suffered from insomnia and withdrew into the observatory he had built at the top of the house to devote himself to various astronomical studies” (104).

At this point, we encounter a shift in the narrative, both conceptual and temporal. If the first half elaborates the protagonist’s accumulation of architectural knowledge, the second is marked by the return of traumatic memory. Like the “philanthropic entrepreneurs,” whose “vision of model towns for workers . . . had inadvertently changed into the practice of accommodating them in barracks,” Austerlitz’s “best-laid plans . . . turn into the exact opposite when they are put into practice” (Sebald 28). Taxonomic descriptions are replaced with photographic observations. Rational observation is displaced by “nocturnal apparition” (165). His initially pedantic tone attains a more harried and anxious quality. Linking the onset of his decline to the accidental death of a close schoolmate named Gerald, whose passion for flying led him not only to study astronomy but to perish in an unfortunate but not altogether surprising plane crash, Austerlitz begins to
convey more personal details of his past in his telling of the search for his lost origins. Before this point, he explains, it had “never occurred to [him] to wonder about [his] true origins” (125), despite the fact that as a young student he had discovered his birth name was not Dafydd Elias but Jacques Austerlitz. The recovery of lost memory becomes an obsession replacing the perpetual accumulation of architectural knowledge, which, he explains, “served as a substitute for compensatory memory” (140).

At first glance, this turn to traumatic memory seems to endorse the disruptive temporality of trauma that marks ours as a culture of catastrophe. However, despite the fact that Austerlitz has all the markings of a traditional trauma text, including photographic interruptions, railway symbolism and ghostly returns, it departs from contemporary theories of trauma that conceptualize it primarily in terms of temporal rupture. Rather, traumatic memory in Austerlitz serves as a poetic device that signals a shift in the field of modern subjectivity from the melancholic subject of the modern era to the traumatic subject of so-called postmodern times. Like Morrison, Sebald situates the subjective experience of trauma within a broader field of historical violence. Whereas for Morrison this field is the history of slavery, for Sebald it is the history of the Second World War. Capitalism is the broader field of struggle underlying both of these historical traumas, a fact Sebald makes explicit. He presents an image of historical progress that is out of sync with the material forces of capitalism which yield historical atrocity; he exposes a tension between the uneven temporality of capitalist accumulation and the abstract progression of history, a tension represented by the contrast between the technologies of observation responsible for the compression of space and extension of time, and technologies of transportation responsible for the extension of space and the compression of time. These opposing branches of technological advancement represent the opposing axes of capitalist accumulation—which we might call the telescopic and the topographic—whose disarticulation represents the alienating experience encapsulated by the temporal ruptures and visual aporias that characterize the contemporary landscape of trauma. Austerlitz’s eventual breakdown in 1992 is preceded by the loss of his capacity for language, a common symptom of traumatic repression. Austerlitz explains: “But now I found writing such hard going that it often took me a whole day to compose a single sentence” (Sebald 122), which in the end only comes to resemble a city whose confusing urban sprawl disorients returning travellers (124). In a Lacanian sense, the withdrawal from language signals a retreat from the discourse of mastery. However, the retreat from language is accompanied by a new impulse, the recovery of the mother.

Marianne Hirsch interprets Austerlitz’s search for his mother’s image through the lens of traumatic memory, arguing that the fantasy of the mother’s recovery operates as a screen memory that highlights the roles of photography and family in postmemorial work. Both, she argues, “[strive] to reactivate and reembody more distant social/national and archival/cultural
memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and family forms of mediation and aesthetic expression” (Hirsch 111). These two mediums converge in the figure of the lost mother. This image serves a “space of projection” that draws on a storehouse of what Aby Warburg has called “pre-established forms,” which resonate in the popular imagination. For Hirsch, the figure of the lost mother is one such pre-established form through which “gender becomes a powerful idiom of remembrance in the face of detachment and forgetting” (Hirsch 124). In this model, the image of the lost mother becomes a screen for the remembrance of historical trauma, and familial images act as protective covers that “reinforce the living connection between past and present” (Hirsch 125). These claims rest on a number of assumptions implicit in Hirsch’s argument. First, the desire to maintain a “sense of living connection” is taken for granted and thus not critically interrogated; second, Hirsch assumes that the recovery of traumatic memory is what is covered over by the search for the lost mother, which fails to address the broader structures driving the recovery of memory in general.

The notion of the screen memory itself remains within the field of the imaginary, with one image ostensibly substituting for another, more accurate, image. If we remind ourselves, however, that Marx identified genocidal violence with the processes of primitive accumulation, then we must immediately acknowledge the fact that our current obsession with the recovery of memory has something to with the capitalist mode of production. Austerlitz recounts his history instructor’s assertion that “[o]ur concern with history . . . is a concern with preformed images already imprinted on our brains, images at which we keep staring while the truth lies elsewhere, away from it all, as yet undiscovered” (Sebald 72). Read alongside this claim, the image of the mother and the trope of recovered memory equally operate as “preformed images” that correspond to the historical time of capital. From this perspective, the image of the mother must be interpreted as a mode of reification that conceals, not a truer or more authentic memory, but the forces of alienation that correspond to the historical time of primitive accumulation. This becomes particularly explicit when we consider the role of time in Austerlitz’s search for his mother’s image. Austerlitz commissions a slow-motion copy of a film fragment in which he hopes to discover his mother (246), while, at the same time, he experiences the “current of time slowing down in the gravitational field of oblivion” (257) during his nocturnal wanderings. This new experience of time, and not the recovery of lost memory, is what Austerlitz discovers in the search for his mother’s image. The recovery of memory itself does little to change the violent material forces that contributed to Austerlitz’s sense of alienation, which is placed under the sign of traumatic memory. Indeed, he states:

It was obviously of little use that I had discovered the sources of my distress and, looking back over all the past years, could now see myself with the utmost clarity as that child suddenly cast out of his familiar
surroundings: reason was powerless against the sense of rejection and annihilation which I had always suppressed, and which was now breaking through the walls of its confinement. (228)

A feeling of alienation underlies Austerlitz’s distress and threatens, but does not quite succeed, in rupturing his erudite exterior.

In her analysis of *The Rings of Saturn*, Mary Cosgrove elaborates Sebald’s skillful rendering of the “particular temporal quality of capitalism,” the ways in which “‘capitalist time’ operates in terms of trends and cycles which ebb and flow, contract and expand” (Cosgrove 103). For this reason, she argues, Sebald’s descriptions of the ruins of nineteenth-century capitalism, “while melancholy in tone, should be read as an informed, if poetically rendered critique of the capitalist world system, not just as it was in the past, but as it continues in the present” (103). Time, in this context, is represented as “a natural history of capitalism which has its roots in the early sixteenth century and which continues to expand in the present” (103). Such claims are resonant with contemporary theories of primitive accumulation, which emphasize the continuous nature of what Karl Marx defined as the particular mode of extra-economic violence that separates the worker from the means of production through genocidal and annihilating actions. Despite the fact that primitive accumulation is, for Marx, a historical event that identifies the “original” accumulation necessary to establish the capitalist mode of production, Marxist theorists at least since Rosa Luxemburg have referred to its qualities of permanence and repetition. Marx himself alludes to the perpetual nature of primitive accumulation when he states that the capitalist relation “not only maintains this [initial] separation [of the worker and the means of production], but reproduces it on a constantly extending scale” (Marx 874). The initial separation of the worker from the means of production is maintained through the invention of standardized time through which the time of production that characterizes abstract historical time is divorced from the time of survival, which is dictated by the natural rhythms and cycles of everyday existence.

The Antwerp conversations, we might say, narrate and make visible a specific historical period we might call the epoch of trauma. Indeed, it is not insignificant that our narrator first encounters Austerlitz in Antwerp Central Station in 1967, the very same year Michel Fried issued his critique of Minimalism, Roland Barthes proclaimed the “death of the author,” and Guy Debord published his manifesto, “Society of the Spectacle.” It is equally significant that these conversations end in 1996, the same year Cathy Caruth published *Unclaimed Experience*. This period, from 1967 to 1996, corresponds precisely to the time that elapsed between the emergence of two types of subject. The first, emerging in 1967, is the Minimalist subject of art, who Rosalind Krauss argues anticipates the disembodied, fragmented, postmodern subject. The second, emerging in 1996, is the traumatized subject, who, according to Radstone, attempts to reclaim the autonomy of the subject that was dissolved by poststructuralism by
reasserting what Ruth Leys calls the “sovereign, if passive” subject (Radstone 14).

Recall their initial conversation in 1967, which takes us on a swift journey through the sweeping history of Antwerp station, situating it within the crumbling façades of nineteenth-century architecture, with Austerlitz moving deftly between broad historical contexts, general architectural trends and particular biographical details (Sebald 7-12). The narrator comments on the astuteness of Austerlitz’s communications, marveling at his ability to form “perfectly balanced sentences out of whatever occurred to him, so to speak, and the way in which, in his mind, the passing on of his knowledge seemed to become a gradual approach to a kind of historical metaphysic, bringing remembered events back to life” (13). In this informal architectural lecture, Austerlitz not only speaks of the relationship between capitalist accumulation and the standardization of time, but of the “marks of pain which . . . trace countless fine lines through history” (14). Crownshaw argues: “In 1967, [Austerlitz’s] sense of history replicates the very monumentalism (or forgetfulness) of the buildings he studies” (Crownshaw). Already, the Antwerp conversations draw an implicit connection between the fantasy of historical progress and the emergent subject of trauma. The Austerlitz of 1967 is a mouthpiece for historical progress and accumulated knowledge. From the perspective of trauma theory, his architectural knowledge is a screen that covers over or represses the memory of a historical trauma that he will eventually discover as the source of his discontent. However, from the perspective of capitalist accumulation, Austerlitz’s historical knowledge represents the utopian image of a complete historical archive that drives the narrative of historical progress made possible with the invention of standardized time. From this perspective, Austerlitz’s eventual breakdown and the ensuing search for his own origins allegorize the experience of alienation particular to the temporality of capitalist accumulation.

The metaphor of fortification that closes their initial conversation exemplifies the tension between historical progress and capitalist accumulation. Tracing the history of Antwerp’s fortifications from Floriani to Breendonk—the fortress which was later transformed, the narrator tells us, into a “reception and penal camp” only to become a “national memorial and museum of Belgian resistance” following the Second World War (Sebald 19)—Austerlitz explains:

as architectural plans for fortifications became increasingly complex, the time it took to build them increased as well, and with it the probability that as soon as they were finished, if not before, they would have been overtaken by further developments, both in artillery and in strategic planning, which took account of the growing realization that everything was decided in movement, not in a state of rest (16).

From a certain angle, the fortification seems to metaphorically represent the operations of psychic defense. Freud articulated the psyche in terms of defense mechanisms, and he
conceived the repression of traumatic memory as one such mechanism that protects the psyche from overwhelming shock. But, of course, the repressed memory returns in the guise of a symptom, which forms the basis for traumatic repetition. The logic of fortification is itself overwhelmed by the return of the repressed. Assuming an anamorphic glance, however, the fortification is perhaps more aptly a metaphor for the irresolvable tension between historical progress and capital accumulation, a reading supported by Austerlitz’s claim that “somehow we know by instinct that outsize buildings cast the shadow of their own destruction before them, and are designed from the first with an eye to their later existence as ruins” (19). In the dialectic of history, capitalism, as Marx allegedly prophesied, contains the seeds of its own destruction. The duality of the metaphor, which marks the transition to a new master narrative, situates the production of traumatic subjectivity within the context of capitalist production. In this sense, the metaphor of fortification articulates the “blind violence” (Sebald 21) of primitive accumulation incarnate in our “mightiest projects” (14).

Beginning with the fact of global capitalism, Austerlitz provides a vehicle for re-conceptualizing trauma as the reification of alienation under the sign of historical time. Such a reading reconfigures the trauma text as an allegory of primitive accumulation through which the most extreme forms of alienation take shape in dialectic between the telescopic and the topographic, the linear and the cyclic, the metaphorical and the metonymic, the allegory and the narrative. In retreating from the common conception of trauma as primarily a rupture in time that reveals the hegemony of “homogenous, empty time” and drives the quest for the search for lost origins and the recovery of memory, the view provided by Austerlitz captures the ways in which trauma is a normative element of capitalist subjectivity that cannot be consigned to the past but which must be continuously reproduced in the present moment on an ever-expanding scale. In this sense, traumatic memory is not only a reflection of historical trauma (primitive accumulation as historical event) but also, more importantly, a permanent aspect of the forces of capitalist production (primitive accumulation as permanent process). In “Historical Temporalities of Capital,” Massimiliano Tomba argues: “To understand the permanence of primitive accumulation we need a kind of ‘historiography of the present’ that would allow us to understand the current combination of temporalities in the attempt to synchronize them through the intervention of extra-economic violence” (56). Austerlitz responds to just such a call.

2 See Mark Ilsemann’s “Going Astray” and Michael Niehaus’s “No Foothold.”

3 Lacan makes this equation explicitly in “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud.”

4 See, for example, Werner Bonefeld’s “The Permanence of Primitive Accumulation” (2001); Massimiliano Tomba’s “Historical Temporalities of Capitalism” (2009); Sandro Mezzadra’s “The Topicality of Prehistory” (2011).
Works Cited


The Unrecyclable
Synthesized Environments of Utmost Clarity
by Mikhail Pozdniakov

When I was a teenager I used to sit in an empty field listening for hours to the sounds of distant cars, railroads, helicopters, and other motorized objects. These sounds, which are very rough and noisy when they are near, attracted me from the distance because they had merged and diffused into a continuum when they reached my ears. By this experience it came to my mind that it is more satisfying for me to listen to continuous changes within one sound than to the combinations of discreet sonic events usually found in music. Remembering that a few years ago, I began to search for possibilities to create continuous sonic situations with controlled dramatic development that cannot be expressed in traditional terms of melody, harmony, and sound color. The five pieces collected on this compact disc are my first results.

Wieland Samolak, Steady State Music

Axiom: How buildings and cities sound—this is unrecyclable.

Thesis: To learn to listen to these environments, one has to learn to listen to music first, for its non-musical qualities.

A large part of the production of film in our contemporary moment is involved in the synthesis of environments, like: the construction of sets to be enframed by the camera, and the superimposition and layering of sounds into what becomes either immediately perceivable as a soundtrack or conversation, or nearly non-present, as environmental noise, like the passing of cars and the hum of ventilators. What should be noticed is that the unique soundstage of each film substantializes its atmosphere. A completely silent section in film is rare and, today, is used as a means of emphasis. But it is not the case, looking back, that during the silent film era a soundtrack à la John Cage’s 4’33” or piano playing in the background filled the void. The soundstage is virtual, and the viewer tends to fill in most of the required sounds by gazing at the movements on screen. A shot showing shuffling feet, or an opening door, or laughter is suggestive enough that all the...
ostensive narrative gaps of the purely visual medium are quickly ignored, so that silence is one of the means, implicit as it may be, immuring one into the moment.

In fact, in sound engineering and production, it is known that a soundstage, even at a concert hall, is a virtual soundstage. The task was how and where to place objects in a stereo field in order to give them their proper space, their correct sonic texture. This was a concern already for the Greeks and their amphitheatre, which was built specifically so that speech delivered on stage could touch gently and precisely the ears of all those attending. The delivery and clarity of sound announces clairvoyant quality, a structural relationship of prediction, in that how and where one should properly receive the sonic event is set into the building’s form. In the orchestra or band, the placement of players provides a secondary aestheticization of musical arrangement, alloying harmonic strata to locations on stage. As the musicians play, they seem to stage the drama of purely geometric interactions of sound. The modern construction of concert halls for the purpose of projecting of acoustic music to the audience can be seen in the selection of materials. The combination of concrete, steel, and wood is not only inexpensive—displaying a dignified, restrained appearance at that—but is also fortunate because the resonant qualities of these materials coincidentally correspond to the range of hearing of the human ear. The varied proportion and positioning of this material arraigns and anoints the atmosphere of such places. Incidentally, this is why good sound is so difficult to achieve in outdoor concerts or in clubs—only a technically adept and highly skilled engineer can accommodate a given and usually awful set of conditions to shape for clarity the sonic cushion in which one can easily listen or dance. Some contemporary performance art installations in electroacoustic music accommodate an awareness of the structural elements above into their work. A now-classical example is the Acousmonium of François Bayle of the Institut national de l’audiovisuel - Groupe de recherches musicales (INA-GRM), which modifies the traditional concert stage by setting loudspeakers into the place of players. “Chamber music” is, in this way, taken literally to mean music shaped by a given chamber, made for-and-with that chamber as its instrument. Thus, the type and timbre of sound have been intimated along with the environs. The concert hall to this day stratifies the relationship between the source of sound and its listeners into distinct terraces: stage and audience. Any organized, structured attempt to immerse one in the moment of sound by the dispersion of its sources around one synthesizes an environment of listening. Such an environment becomes inseparable from its physical construction.

Church liturgy, both East and West, is a largely sonic set of rituals. How the hymn or the intonation of the bible reaches the assembled asserts the materials of construction: simple stone carries sound enormously; the reverberations are thick, long; and the composition of plainchant and sacred music took this attribute...
into account. Old buildings like castles and cathedrals nearly constantly murmur; the smallest sound is amplified and reverberated into unintelligibility, floating among the rafters. By contrast, the cities of today are made of buildings that hum, the unceasing resonance of air conditioning and electronics assuring one of being in a properly maintained private space. A din of music, construction, and traffic animates the outside so that, in effect, the silence of our buildings is that resonant and steady drone set against the outdoor swarm of noise. Perhaps this is why many stay inside, apart from understood reasons (like work, play, sex). Where the din in rural locations is uplifted, resonating into the open air, consequently making a much more open space sonically-speaking, in urban areas the constant refraction and reverberation by flat-fronted buildings sitting together, facing each other, results in a much more condensed echo-space. The weight and mass of the acoustic environs forces the silence of the rural to retreat inside and appear as the drone or the pulsation. This is the shift of the pastoral into the interior zone of industrialization. The primordial moment becomes not nature, but production. The human is uprooted and ungrounded, and the soil holds no purchase. “The plank has no solidity of substance. To step on it is like stepping on a swarm of flies. Shall I not slip through?” —so writes Arthur Stanley Eddington, a physicist (Benjamin 142).

To return to film, one thing it stages with frequency, and in fact this could be considered a condition of staging, is the presentation of the sounds local to places distantly removed, whether contemporary to our moment but unlikely to be visited, or from a time long-past. No doubt these are staged utopias; no doubt the sounds are never quite true-to-life. One thing that impresses itself through such distance, through staging, is the historical dimension—i.e., the fleeting quality of sonic events. Every sound is a lament towards its approaching demise. Our current imaginary is, as of yet, unable to register the passing. Acoustic, aural space is “boundless, directionless, horizonless, in the dark of the mind, in the world of emotion” (McLuhan, *Medium* 48)—as if there is no end to sound, the constant billowing cushion... The hushed mutism of an expectant crowd or audience taken in by performance or film is a quotation of pastoral scenery; enacted in that moment is the peaceful, extensive, rolling landscape. Likewise, an exact silence impresses itself on the spectators of dreams and paintings, giving the latter their alluring air, as a pause marked by speechless viewing. And yet pure silence is unintelligible to us—every attempt at shaping an environment for sound is an attempt to render pure silence in conceptual terms. An isolation tank firstly synchronizes one not to the void but to the biorhythms of pulse and blood flow, breathing, the whispers of moving flesh and hair. Perhaps what film is able to do for us is to precisely isolate the virtual features of sound linked to event and set them into rupture; those contours of difference suggest and birth distance, a “staged silence.” Perhaps the point is not the creation of sound environments but our ever-distant presence to them, a distance constantly made to bear through rapt attention, a
distance which is named silence. Film, then, sets us into the silent zone of the biorhythm, that first and most intimate unintelligible noise facing the brunt of history. Because the synthesized environment, the virtual soundstage and its crafting, is the most abstract, and each sound we pick out is radiantly alien, lost amongst its cousins and kin. The effect of such manipulations and emplotted tensions arranging space for sound is the contortion of the real environment, the natural-artificial environment of the city. That torsion forces a break, and the soundscape of the city is no longer tended to place and name. The soundscape is uplifted, made to appear stark and abstract—a music of finitude. Its re-synthesis through the work of staging, in something like film, explicates this relationship, and suggests its capture in recording—the price being that any true sonic particularity is no longer tenable.

Clarity, the capacity to pick out a certain sound, or a certain field of sounds, is in the synthesized environment the first notation of sonic manipulation. If we can imagine an invisible hand directing the sound of a given (nominally real) place, we have somewhat approached the level of alienated abstraction needed to listen to non-music. The paranoid gesture setting a master-manipulator over a given set or series of events is what animates listening to any composed piece of music, not only in the idea that every element was precisely placed and arranged, but also that it was meant to be heard, admired, judged. Once we are thrown out of the subjection to a piece of music, for instance if we hate it, then we have recuperated the elementary experience of listening to non-music, anything that does not bear the mark of composition. Because the ignorance, or a generalized indifference, is already a deeply mature situation to experience. To be able to pass biorhythm or noise into silence is the mark of maturity and the coming-of-age, both philosophically and phenomenologically. This is what marks a citizen of a given polis, what sets a person into their time and era. To hear again what is unheard, willingly, with pleasure, is to shift from being a citizen of the time into self-consciousness.

One of the very popular musics of the contemporary age is the genre of ‘field recordings.’ Their production is widespread, but few listen to them actively as a genre of choice. Even when they are produced for use, in film, yoga classes, or as soothing background noise in other more popular music, these sounds outstrip the capacity of the consumer to listen to them, or indeed even to register them as present or as music. In categorizations of shops and discographies these works are commonly labelled “non-music” and then put alongside other records. This is in no sense to call the production and listening of these pieces subversive, as if they are some species of a masterfully obscure beauty. The generative moment of enthusiasm in listening to this genre is not its finally becoming an accepted music but its becoming at all, which is in the listening that marks it as such. There is a slight absurdity in placing field recordings, the sound of passing cars, the chirping of birds, the buzz of conversation,
as a genre of music alongside the tradition of Western Art music, for instance. But it must be emphasized that the recording techniques serving as the basis for the genre match the premise of the vertical and horizontal shaping of traditional compositions.

Sounds hold a fascination for their recorder. Recording specifically is about calibrating the equipment to match the intensity and duration of a given sound. Paradoxically, if you try to record a tiny sound by using a highly sensitive device the effect usually follows in a twofold manner: gross distortion of its characteristics to our ear by the necessary increase of volume to make it clearly present, or its complete obliteration against a field of other sounds. With most recordings, a tiny sound will become the modification of others, and will vanish into the sonic ether as a quality of the overall texture. And so, the size of sounds determines their clarity. The smallest sounds become qualities of others, perhaps harmonic or enharmonic, perhaps only effecting a slight change to the overall field. The largest take up the entire field of listening and, unless one knows to withdraw, cannot be heard either (if one pauses to listen, most places are outrageously loud). Preparative listening—attempting to hear every detail and nuance, to register every tick and boom—is the exact correlate of the paranoiac supposition of a guiding master. Opposed to the composer-master, at the end of the other polarity, a figure is suggested as being ready to receive all, to supplicate to the event and its passing. Listening marks a twofold distanciation: the rupture of any sonic event from its home and its replacement and return by synthesis. Inhabiting city space or any other sonic zone marks this dyad of construction and reception.

A brief word on instruments and instrumentality, those like radio telescopes, spectrometers, or oscilloscopes. These, of course, function as extensions of the senses. But, they are no longer rudimentary, in that they are not built for integration into our sensorium, like the hearing aid and the telescope. The latter two devices are examples of a sense-extension still immanently intelligible. The dream embodied by the former devices is something like the total integration of circuitry into the nervous system, although not in the intimate, metaphoric way Marshall McLuhan imagined. McLuhan suggested by his work with media that every new technology enters human history by the banishment of its abstraction into the immanence of sense. That is, we cannot understand technology if we think of it as “tool,” something that stands in addition to the body. In the epigraph introducing The Gutenberg Galaxy, McLuhan writes,

There might have been some advantage in substituting for the word ‘galaxy’ the word ‘environment’. Any technology tends to create a new human environment. Script and papyrus created the social environment we think of in connection with the empires of the ancient world. Technological environments are not merely passive containers of people but are active processes that reshape people and other technologies alike. In our

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time the sudden shift from the mechanical technology of the wheel to the technology of electric circuitry represents one of the major shifts of all historical time. (1)

A snapshot by a camera enframes some passage of time and light and strangely stops its passing—thus rendering the electro-chemical phenomenology of the segmented, technologically mediated subject. (A microphone, therefore, can be thought of as taking a picture of a sound.) McLuhan imagines an embodied and historically immanent relationship, taken as the analogy of the relation of the body to the mind, the concept to its bearing, the message to its medium, “a ratio between the mind and things made by the shaping imagination,” the latter being the effect of the synaesthesia or interplay of functions carried out by users and media (268). He thus compels us to come to the realization that handling an old or ancient technological implement is the re-living of the tensions of its original creation. One is then perfectly subject to history, able to receive and re-experience, describe, potentially all of its nuances. There is no question of loss, or of unrecyclability, of a pure relationship to waste.

What truth is there in these devices, which show impossible, inhuman data? As it was once written, “Squids? Crawly things with arms? . . . Superconducting quantum interference detectors. Used them in the war to find submarines, suss out enemy cyber systems . . . Even the primitive models could measure a magnetic field a billionth the strength of geomagnetic force; it’s like pulling a whisper out of a cheering stadium” (Gibson 23). So our sensorium corresponds to a kind of horizon. The only way to move out of this limit is through the metaphysical experience of abstraction, the reduction of things to data. This is precisely an operation steeped in the dimension of history, memory, and time, more generally. Reconstruction, telescropy, genealogy—these are about linear systems of amplification, which set one’s position as an abstract marker on a very long continuum. They are accepted because they are familiar, not because they are any more human, more traditional, or any less abstract. All the data coming from outside our narrow spectrum, given to us by instruments, is non-subjective and incomprehensible to phenomenology. It is inhuman. It requires us to step out of ourselves to comprehend it. The latter requirement was once called ecstasy by the mystics.

The correlate of ecstasy (ekstasis in the Greek) is entasis, or “standing-within-oneself.” Perspectivity as such is a very cruel experience—the world pressing in on the self and the self pressing back. Such an image has informed much analysis, but it is strictly wrong. Perspectivity itself, the consciousness of one as a point of reception in space, is the most mystifying relation to the world in general, and, for our purposes here, the same applies for the reception of sound. When sonic characteristics themselves become musical, that is when the noise (“non-music”) of the environment is listened to as if it were music, the elementary experience is not that of subjectivity or agency, it is of be-
ing lifted and carried, pulled upwards, away from the sense of belonging. Listening enacts this abstraction. It is to be in a space of endless calls and peals with no one there to hear them, no proper listener, one wandering tangentially through a convulsing and thick field of sound. To stand within oneself in listening is to cut the bond of reception and phenomenology. All around appears the inevitable debris of the present moment, incomprehensible as to its historical meaning.

The unrecyclable is a relationship to history, to wandering in the detritus. McLuhan had it that such wandering, through study, can reconstruct the experience of, for instance, primitive man, or any man, because the medium, whether writing or etching, relates much more than the content of any given communiqué ever could (Gutenberg 5-9, 19-21, 61-3). We can know people, places, et cetera—but the price for such knowledge is that we cannot know ruin. In reconstructing the ephemera of the moment in its meaningfulness, relating true knowledge of the artefact to its context, we lose the moment of its passing, in fact excising from our knowledge massive portions of history of decline and disappearance. It is, within the historicism that purports to take each thing as itself, as if we are witness to a series of tableaux, each object and item authentically its own, that procession standing for all the eras and epochs leading up to our moment, but the gaps between hold nothing of interest. The major consequence is that, in effect, we assume as our ontological truth the impossibility of understanding our present moment and hold it that only after we become unrecyclable debris, yet again, for others, they will be our judges and historians. There is then a certain absurdity of writing a history of the present moment. Against that, McLuhan attempted to write the history of the era of the “global village,” through the objects of our media, in order to stage a purely immanent relationship to knowledge located in or actualized by objects. Yet, unacknowledged, the trash of all previous epochs still remains—trash is the reminder of that which was lost.

The unrecyclable is the sound event, but in a larger sense it is the sound-context. The metropolis, as heterogeneous as it is in regards to itself, has never generated its sound as pure cacophony, multiplicity, as its singular and unchanging font. What will be missed even with field recordings and the film, that synthesized and audible geography, is the immersive moment of the sound-context. What continually occurs is the copying of no particular object—a repetition that continuously destructs. What makes this moment unrecyclable is not that it fades away never to be heard again, this unique and unitary happenstance, but that it is copied over and over without specificity, in the construction of new buildings, new stages (for sound or other purposes), in the practise of enframing, recording, and releasing music. To learn to listen to non-music is to learn to listen to the distant continuum of passing. The recording of an ever-passing background noise, its discovery as a type of listenable material, its registry, however tangentially, into the

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domain of music as such articulates an awareness that much has been left out. Many sounds and noises proper to the era recorded have been lost in that act. When one feels oneself counted amongst the rabble, “amongst all the sweepings and . . . all the dead cats of civilization,” (Conrad 46) the recording becomes the strand that links this undifferentiated mass to the inherent possibility of being heard and thought, the capacity to see loss, waste, trash, as the embodiment of lost experience. It is a loss we can register as a feature of the recording—or, more generally, of any historical object. Field recordings, in their difference to the tradition of artistic composition, stage the trash of music and hold it up for our perusal.

Experience, once lost, cannot be recovered. The analysis of the objects of history works according to the premise of reconstruction, that a strict belonging can be established by the discovery of one or the other object because of its proper relationship to its time, so that what was once forgotten by us due to the passage of time can be experienced again. Yet the trash of an era, the unrecyclable, is that which cannot be forgotten because it cannot be assimilated or known—it appears like an apparition. The garbage of streets, their evocative cacophony, is their primal character. It is that which is un-phenomenological, unmediated; in other words, the relationship to trash carries a mystical character, and any history or criticism must be able to see the present moment not through ingrained and enacted ideals, but through trash and rubbish, as its essence worked out in worthless articles. Anything genre-defining or major, a work of great renown redefining the knowledge of the moment, is synthetic and future-bound. Its moment is untimely because it speaks of its futurity; any major artefact speaks in compressed and ciphered expression of a later, greater, and generalized acceptability.

In focusing on the minor and the ignorable, the unrecyclable transposes one from active subject into the object of history and arrays and enumerates the paths and directions leading up to and from the moment. An ever-greater portion of experience as of the modern moment has become visible (or audible), and even if such experience remains minor in importance itself, as in the relative obscurity of field recordings, these items, objects, become paradigmatic of our time. In the history of art and work, the ecstatic step-out into the minor has involved one’s dedication to the field. This affection, in terms of tradition, folds into constituting historical categories and the various disciplines. The unrecyclable as such indexes everywhere we have been, all that we have heard, the given codex of the possible as it was accomplished. To pass into it, in music for instance, details the experience of the composer and the creative listener. A critical distance and capacity emerges. Composition takes on the absurdity of intuitive leaps and the nonsense of new structural arrangements. When such absurdities become axioms and instil new musicality—the cosmology of music changes.

University of Western Ontario
For any interested in listening:


The compilation *Audible Geography*, Room40, 2008.


The netlabel Public Record, hosted on ultrared.org.
Works Cited


As a formally trained, professionally active musician passionate about inquiries in the fields of music and sound, I read Mikhail Pozdniakov’s “Synthesized Environments of Utmost Clarity” with much interest. Indeed, some of my reflections on the text will no doubt continue to evolve alongside my thoughts on the listening experience. This response mainly addresses Pozdniakov’s treatment of the concept of soundscapes and will attempt to place it in relation to broader conceptions of music and sound aesthetics. I was immediately intrigued by the statement that one must “learn to listen to music first, for its non-musical qualities” (109). I wondered whether music possesses or conceals such qualities. Composers and performers have always found inspiration in ambient noise and, in some cases, have even welcomed it as an integral component of their work. Furthermore, the processes of abstraction, manipulation, contortion, and re-synthesis described by Pozdniakov are as useful to the listening of music as to the contemplation of soundscapes or “non-music.”

Belgian composer Henri Pousseur, on the listening experience of early twentieth-century serial music, described similar processes: “Since the phenomena are no longer tied to one another by a term-to-term determinism, it is up to the listener to place himself deliberately in the midst of an inexhaustible network of relationships and to choose for himself, so to speak, his own modes of approach, his reference points and his scale” (Eco 11). Music is part of this network, the sound environment; “non-music” (ironically), despite our efforts, cannot be subtracted from it. Each listening experience is unrecyclable, subjected to environmental and circumstantial constraints as well as the individual constraints, predispositions, and fleeting moods of the listener.

Let us first examine the extent to which the properties of music resemble those we are listening to when our hearing lends itself to a soundscape or sonic environment. Admittedly, many of the sounds that constitute human sensorial experience—Pozdniakov mentions the “hum” of modern buildings, the “murmur” of ancient castles, the “din” of traffic or construction (111)—were probably not envisioned by Brahms (or any other composer of the Romantic period) as potential elements of the material of his works. (I use “material” in the Adornian sense: the specific conditions of the creation and reception of a work). The listener, however,
is free to extend the listening experience beyond the proposed limits of the notes that were laid on paper by Brahms. The composer—the “master-manipulator” whose “paranoid gesture . . . over a given set or series of events is what animates listening to any composed piece of music, not only in the idea that every element was precisely placed and arranged, but that it was meant to be listened to, admired, judged” (112)—may indeed guide the listener’s experience through their creative intentions but does not and cannot dictate it.

Composers have long understood that even under perfect performance conditions, spectators’ interpretive differences and limitations see to it that no listening experience will let them access every musical element as it appears in the score (with which, ideally, the orchestra is playing in complete accordance). Composers understand that the listener’s interpretation of any work will differ greatly from their own, which itself varies compulsively at every step of the creative process and thereafter. They also understand that environmental constraints will influence how the performance is perceived. Wise composers are accepting of the fact that listeners can perceive ambient noise during the performance. Some even welcome these unavoidable, unpredictable sonic environments as an integral part of their work.

The venue and circumstances surrounding a performance, regardless of the composer’s intentions, contribute significantly to the material of the work itself and help render each listening experience unique and “unrecyclable.” This has not prevented composers, producers, organizers, and architects to try providing optimal conditions for the communication of composed works from performer to spectator. Pozdniakov rightly mentions differences in the acoustics and materials of different venues. Concert halls and Greek amphitheatres were constructed to optimize conditions of performance and reception and allow works to be, as much as possible, “properly receive[d]” and communicated (110). The existence of these venues, designed to limit the interference of sonic environments, indicates a brutal awareness of ambient noise. A conscious effort has been made to eliminate what was seen as sound pollution or distraction, to isolate the performance from its surrounding soundscapes, to separate music from “non-music.” But there also have been countless events where noise was seen as a positive complement or even an integral component of music and the listening experience. The sound of crowds clapping and cheering may, for example, enhance music in the context of celebratory events. The performance and event shape one another, become inextricable and meaningful in their ephemera, become unrecyclable.

But all social rites aside, let’s return to Pozdniakov’s idea of soundscapes, which concerns itself more with “how buildings and cities sound” (109). Modern and contemporary composers of more serious music have conferred a particular role to ambient sound in their works, welcoming the sonic environment as an integral, unpredictable, “unrecyclable” component of a piece’s material. There are countless examples of
this, one being New Brunswick composer Richard Gibson’s *Invocation à Abenaki*, a piece for wind symphony and beach. In free music, Steve Lacy has made recordings of himself improvising saxophone solos over the noises of road construction. Modern and contemporary musical aesthetics do, in fact, address soundscape and other unintentional, ephemeral sonic phenomena, accommodating them as musical variables and bestowing them with many of the same properties that can be observed, documented, and analysed in music in general.

Aesthetic conceptions in free music blur distinctions between music and ambient sound, acknowledging the properties common to both and allowing similar receptive treatment for the two. “Free music is not a style or context. It is a perpetually evolving artistic frontier that is built on the addition and alteration of various properties and therefore it is not defined by one aesthetic point-of-view” (Morris 49). Heavily reliant on improvisation and unpredictable sound events, intentionally subversive and in constant rebellion against traditional conceptions of musical properties, free music is often appreciated mainly for its “non-musical” treatment of sonic/musical elements such as layers, pulse, textures, events, silence, interaction, and energy. In particular, the European improvised music scene generally avoids traditional musical idioms and purposefully treats music as a sequence of sounds. Its performers strive to create works reminiscent of sound environments and find constant inspiration in the sonic properties of ambient noise. Perhaps, then, free music can offer some insight for those who wish to follow the path suggested by Pozdniakov: “To learn to listen to . . . environments one has to learn to listen to music first for its non-musical qualities” (109). Either way, to be able to behold a sound environment in an active, conscious way indeed allows one “to hear again what is unheard, willingly, with pleasure, [which] is to shift from being a citizen of the time into self-consciousness” (112).

As Umberto Eco mentions, modern psychology and phenomenology use the term ‘perceptive ambiguities,’ which indicates the availability of new cognitive positions that fall short of conventional epistemological stances and that allow the observer to conceive the world in a fresh dynamics of potentiality before the fixative process of habit and familiarity comes into play. (16)

Ironically, the sounds we learn to pick out from apparent silence or sonic continuum are mostly described using labels perfectly consistent with the language used in contemporary aesthetics to discuss the properties of music. A sound, like a note, is perceived and identified for its shape, pulse, timbre, dynamic, form, duration, acoustic span. It seems, in this case, that our tendency is rather to hear “non-music” for its musical qualities. No doubt this habit has favoured countless musicians to find inspiration in ambient noise. The mentioned properties are always present in sound. As free jazz pioneer Cecil Taylor says: “I don’t really concern myself too much about
form. And the reason I don’t is because I know it’s there. I’m always surprised to see how it’s there” (Morris 77).

Yet, although processes used to interpret sound environments and composed or improvised works of music are similar, modern and contemporary aesthetic discourse mostly does not consider soundscapes as “works.” “[O]ur Western aesthetic tradition,” Eco writes, “forces us to take ‘work’ in the sense of a personal production which may very well vary in the ways it can be received but which always maintains a coherent identity of its own” (20). Joe Morris, in his account on the properties of free music, also constantly emphasizes the intentional dimension of works and performances. These aesthetic conceptions do accept sound environments as an element of works’ material as long as this inclusion was the intentional choice of an artist or artist community but generally do not classify soundscapes as art. A conscious listener may experience soundscapes and music similarly, but unless we wish to propose new sets of formal conditions for art, sound environments must instead be viewed as phenomena. To contemplate them is to witness, writes Pozdniakov, “the immersive moment of the sound-context,” “the distant continuum of passing” (115). The fact that no intentional creative process is involved may alone legitimate Pozdniakov’s use of the word “non-music,” even though some of the qualities to which he seems to extend this label are otherwise perfectly consistent with what contemporary aesthetics do consider to be properties of music.

But the listening experience concerns the listener alone. From her perspective, it may be of little importance that the object of her contemplation was or wasn’t brought forth by an intentional act of creation. The listener is free. Free to experience sound or music in her own way. Free to listen or ignore. Free to interpret sound as circumstances and experience prompt her to do so. Her personal admiration of a Brahms symphony, situated in a particular performance-event, may favour an active inclusion of sounds from ventilation, coughing, and cough drop wrapping paper. Eco writes: “Every work of art . . . is effectively open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings, each of which causes the work to acquire new vitality in terms of one particular taste, or perspective, or personal performance” (21). The listener is also free to initiate dialogue with music and sound. Free to distinguish art from phenomenon or to consider music as an element of a broader sound environment. The listener is even free to take a stand against leading contemporary aesthetic discourse and claim that any sound that can be contemplated is art.

Coda: “Der Fall Robinson”

The proposed excerpt is one of my recent original compositions, which demonstrates how free music indeed encourages “non-musical” treatment of sonic/musical elements (such as timbre, shapes, and phrasing), while at the same time permit-
ting inclusion of “non-musical” sound phenomena as integral components of a musical work.¹

“Der Fall Robinson” is meant to guide an unsuspecting audience’s attention away from its own chatter and social interaction, shifting it gradually towards the orchestra. It welcomes this chatter as an unpredictable component of its musical material and is an ideal piece to include at the beginning of the second set (as the audience invariably becomes quite chatty during intermissions).

The initial improvised “noodling” should be cued in while the audience is still engaged in conversation. It may at first seem like the orchestra members are warming up. At 40 seconds into the excerpt, composed elements are gradually added to the performance. The wind players begin mimicking sounds that they pick up from the ambient chatter, interacting with the audience and adjusting timbre and phrasing accordingly. They then gradually join the rest of the orchestra as they execute repetitive composed parts. By then, thanks to the fixative process generated by repetitive composed musical material, the spectators’ attention has for the most part shifted to the orchestra and away from the chatter. At 2:20, the orchestra can safely perform a softer less “free” piece, meant for a quiet audience like the one that they just then guided into attentiveness.

¹ Note: this excerpt is from a studio version of the piece and does not contain the audio chatter that it may welcome during a live performance.
Works Cited


In our neo-liberal economy, the unrecyclable is that which can be exchanged but not used. Despite its very literally toxic status, the unrecyclable does not stand outside of the market, since the principle of the market is circulation, re-cycling, and this occurs even with respect to that which cannot or ought not to be recycled, just as systems, thanks to the laws of entropy, include precisely that which leads to their negation. The exchange value of the unrecyclable lies in the very real sums that we accept to pay to distance it from our sight and immediate contact, thus mitigating but not alleviating the effects of its slow violence. Above all, the market puts value on transactions that allow us to ignore the unrecyclable. We willingly pay to extend its period of latency, our delusions of its distance, our hope that recycling will somehow come to include the unrecyclable as well.

Confronting the unrecyclable demands a change in our thinking. It demands a rethinking of economics—both economics as usual and green economics. Coping with the unrecyclable demands thinking ecological economics without relying on recycling, philosophical or otherwise, which is the knee-jerk save-all of green economists. But it is not just the economy; it is ecology and even anthropology that are challenged by the unrecyclable. In the weird green light of the unrecyclable, there is no possible return to Mother Nature, no hope that things will go well in a world returned to Gaia. In relation to the unrecyclable, the cycle of pollution and restitution that according to Michel Serres underlies the very formation of the self and of property, even of society, needs to be reimagined. Including the unrecyclable in reality, adapting ourselves to dealing with a reality in which there is the infinitely toxic, the utterly unrecoverable, becomes terrifying. Being biocentric in a world where the unrecyclable is real becomes either suicidal or delusively idealist.
How, then, do we think the unrecyclable, rethink ourselves in terms of the unrecyclable, confront the unrecyclable, respond to the deepening of society’s problem with unrecyclables? In the following, I suggest that we must embrace a weird species of philosophical realism, a dark ecology, a melancholic and object-oriented way of thinking that must from the first seem somewhat improper, inassimilable, even incoherent. This dark ecology demands that we see the unrecyclable as something deep and particular, something inaccessible yet real, or rather accessible only insofar as it presents itself through horror, through a horrified imaginary that resonates because it plumbs a reality that is itself and in principle inaccessible to any self-possessed experience. These objects of horror are incompatible with nature, and so are inassimilable to any cosmology or order, they cannot be placed, they only displace, rendering homes unhomely and dwellings uninhabitable. Thinking our world in such a manner renders it strange and terrifying, an aftermath, an incomprehensible posthuman place in which our practices survive on the limit of the senseless, hemmed in or surrounded by alien others beyond our access. Dark ecology forces us to accept the unrecyclable as part of lived reality but also forces us to recognize that it is a part apart, a living death, an actually existing negation. Confronted with the unrecyclable, there are no solutions, only resolutions, speculations, hopes, and attentiveness.

I.

Most contemporary philosophy, influenced by scientific positivism, thinks of the unrecyclable in terms of risk. Living with risk is living with unknowing, with knowing about known unknowns (Beck, 104). Speaking of unrecyclables in terms of statistics seems to avoid forcing us to make ontological claims. So speaking allows the unrecyclable’s half-lives to have only a half-reality.

While such suspended judgment is laudable from the point of view of the scientific method, ethical action and ethical responsiveness require more of us. We must do more than suppose that there are probably unknowns. We must say more than that it is likely we will not win the Lotto, since we have a choice: either to keep buying tickets hoping for the day in which work will not be necessary, or to get to work, always hoping that winning remains possible. Inclining towards the latter option implies believing that there is such a thing as a reality beyond the statistics and believing also that this reality is to some degree accessible to us. But that said, it is also clear that insofar as the unrecyclable is the extremely toxic, something like the equivalent of the face of the Medusa, we cannot suppose that we have this access but must rather posit that thing as real but withdrawn. In that withdrawn reality we can always posit alternative valences, other possibilities in the coming to sensual presence of that withdrawn real ob-
ject that might—so we hope—alter our original judgment regarding the object’s withdrawn toxic essence. In other words, taken strictly, the laws of hermeneutics deny access to the essence of the unrecyclable, but the ecological imperative demands that we act, and act as if the unrecyclable were real, ultimate, and unavoidable.

Non-toxic hyperobjects like Styrofoam cups can help us think the phenomenology of the unrecyclable. Even if these objects do not annihilate us immediately, speculation refers us to our own annihilation when we encounter them. As Timothy Morton writes, these objects are “more real than reality itself” (The Ecological Thought, Kindle location 1697), because they contain futurity, a persistence in being that dwarfs our human lifetimes, indeed, a persistence in being that will most likely continue beyond the lifetime of any member of the human species, and so will outlast any projections and imaginations that human beings might make about them and their reality or lack thereof. Because of the known asymmetry between what we hold that we can know about unrecyclable objects and what we hold that we can experience about them, our claims about their reality must always be speculative, and our grappling with their real essences and qualities as they persist beyond experience must be imaginative.

Yet if we say that our knowledge of the unrecyclable is but a speculation, and that our knowledge of it is only via imaginative play, are we not thus saying that these unrecyclable objects are merely in our head? Not at all, for it is precisely the claim of realism about the essences of these objects which forces us into this contorted position, uncomfortable as it might be to those accustomed to the clarity and distinctness of Enlightenment rationality. More to the point, any non-realist account of the unrecyclable, namely any account that supposes concepts might be adequate to thinking the recyclable, immediately inserts the unrecyclable within mental reality, and so transforms it into something that can, like all concepts, like all re-presentations, be recycled. That said, a standard scientific or dogmatic realism that posits knowledge elsewhere than in the imagination and via the mediation of metaphors and figures that try to figure an unfigurable because defiguring thing can no better succeed in thinking the unrecyclable than an idealism in which all that is real is merely a correlate of the human mind, since it falls naively into what Kant calls transcendental realism, unwittingly confusing ideas with things, and so supposing that it has stepped out of itself and into reality without even recognizing that it has done so.¹ The ordinary realist forgets to include the autonomy of the object into his or her speculation; he or she always projects the object as a known known, not an autonomous reality but a predicate of the knower.

What is currently described by object-oriented thought as correlationism, but which might more generally be associated with the common doctrine that societies construct their mental realities, reduces objects to pure phenomena, nothing other than concepts without

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grounds. Traditional realism, to the contrary, supposes that it has grasped that which underlies—the ground—something more real than the phenomenon, but in doing so at once removes all specificity or interest from the phenomenal object, substituting for it a more basic substrate that is the known, a substrate that can be infinitely recomposed because it is eternal or ultimate, and hence a substrate that cannot, in principle, be unrecyclable. In the language of object-oriented ontology, these two approaches overmine or undermine the object.²

Object-oriented thought does not pin down the object, reducing it in either direction. It orients itself towards the object, in this case the unrecyclable, without finally searching for guarantees that its insights ultimately correspond with empirically verifiable knowledge claims. Object-oriented thinking thinks the object in terms of its withdrawal, what we might otherwise describe as the manifestation of its own autonomous reality, its appearance to us as a known unknown. It allows us to explore the object in its withdrawal through imagination and metaphor, hence respecting the withdrawn nature of the object while at the same time remembering its non-nugatory presence. Object-oriented ontology thus allows us to think the unrecyclable, albeit at a cost, namely our comfortable assumption that reality must align with human knowledge and that all reality is the reality apparent to human beings.

Not unlike animistic thinking, object-oriented ontology respects the idea that bears, stones, and even unrecyclables are animate. Like Others, which at least since Levinas we imagine as confronting us with faces intimating the infinite, objects themselves have ungraspable depths and present us with these depths via a kind of magical animation that allows them, despite their withdrawal, to engage in reality, to take part in a world, to enter into connections and communions with other beings. Object-oriented thinking thus departs from the dominant Western sense of reality, that is to say a reality in which objects do not speak or think, and have no personality or capacity to act. Object-oriented thought extends personhood to all objects, makes them actors, gives free play to the imagination in determining how objects might act or interact, might do or forebear, might haunt or taunt vicariously.

Hunter-gatherers and other animists are able to consistently think the mentality of other creatures, reserving access to these mental spaces to magicians and other sorts of dream insight, thus actually staying closer to phenomenological realism than traditional Western realism, since it is only in this case that the reality of vision is given its due within thought as within experience. As Tim Ingold has argued, this kind of realism about non-human minds contributes to a way of world-making that is intrinsically ecological, in the sense that every mind is bound up in a set of relations that can never be subtracted or analytically separated from the experience of being in an environment, but only encountered within ongoing and ever pre- or sub-conceptual exchanges with that environment and its alien others, what he calls a “poetics of dwelling” (57). This poetics is not pure imagination but is rooted in
reality, though it is—nevertheless—rooted in
a reality that is withdrawn from any concep-
tual access. Indeed, in the light of the concept
and reason it appears to be mere superstition.
Nevertheless, as weird as this brand of realism
may be, its anthropological analogues suggest
that it does emerge out of a faithful obedience
to experience and its limits, a devotion to the
Husserlian imperative to pay attention “to the
things themselves.”

Thus far, what I have said about object-
oriented thought relates not merely to unrecy-
clable objects but to all objects, since object-
oriented ontology holds it to be true that both
bears and basketballs are autonomous and
withdrawn from human sensual perception.
That said, the difference between these objects
and unrecyclable objects is not located with re-
spect to their status as objects but really only
depends upon what kinds of object they are,
and—of course—the kinds of interactions ob-
jects can have with human subjects. Because of
the necessarily withdrawn essence of all real ob-
jects, it is necessarily possible that there may be
something unrecyclable or toxic when related
to humans and other beings in objects that do
not seem to possess this quality and vice versa.
That said, one can mark a difference between
unrecyclable objects and other objects with re-
spect to the causal relations that we are willing
to attribute to them.

One of the strangest features of object-
oriented thought involves the paradox of rela-
tionships between objects. Since all objects are
withdrawn from one another, no two objects
touch or enter into contact. Nevertheless, ob-
jects do enter into relations. When two ordi-
nary objects encounter, this encounter is aes-
thetic, sensual, even if its ultimate explanation
must remain magical, inexplicable. In the case
of normal objects, the sensual images of the
object possessed by subjects seem intrinsically
accurate or adequate. In other words, encoun-
ters with normal objects enrich one’s sense of
living in a world or cosmos, an ordered and or-
derable totality. The encounter with the unre-
cyclable allows no such ordering, no such sense
of adequacy. The metaphors generated in the
comprehension of unrecyclable objects remain
inassimilable, inadequate, and deranging. They
squirm in the mind; they douse everything in a
weird green light.

Speaking of the unrecyclable in object-
oriented terms is always to speak in what Gra-
ham Harman has called “black hole metaphors”
(Weird Realism 260). These metaphors imagine
the broken down place in the phenomenal net-
work that corresponds to a noumenal object that
cannot even be accessed phenomenally except in
terms of absence. These metaphors compare two
or more known things in a way that is mutually
but only partially illuminating, since “one of the
terms is completely and deliberately unknown”
(239). The unrecyclable is a Martian hoot-owl
dragon child threatening the very fabric of our
existence, one might say. Black hole metaphors,
common in the work of Lovecraft and other hor-
ror fiction, imaginatively elaborate not the famil-
lar in terms of the familiar, the smiling flowers
and the sobbing rain, but rather the existentially

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unhomely and the endlessly estranged. They render present to us unknown essences in their absolute distance, “inscribing” them in our consciousness in an indelible fashion—as realities.

It is not merely horror fiction but also recent poetry that has endeavoured to think—and that is to say to render thinkable in sense, affect, and intensity—the unrecyclable. Necropastoral, a genre recently discovered or rebooted by Joyelle McSweeney, takes up as one of its central preoccupations the imaginative knowing about the withdrawn reality of these deathly objects, evoking them as what Reza Negarestani has called “()holes,” presenting them to us as King Prion and other monstrosities. Christian Hawkey’s Ventrakl gives us a good sense of this delirious grooping within the dark, this profound imagining of life with withdrawn death everywhere:

TOTENBERG
No one home. Summer inheres.
A monad shells out sonatas
And Ewoks along some never-ending Walden.

The dense, inner weight of ferns is one way
You might light the interior of an ant’s blue tunnel;
Otherwise, night’s leaflessness trembles beside you,

Cruel as a starless branch. Therefore, the stranger
Trembles in the darkness. No wind. Light’s black furnace.
The silver voice in the mouth of a housefly. (95)

Out of where in the mountain of death comes this silver voice? How do these images fit together but in paradox? What is evoked here other than some nameless terror, some weird presence of some Other, violent but also familiar, distant but also proximate? The poem is suffused with a weird green light. It is a poetic space lit as by a Dan Flavin sculpture. It upsets us and prompts thinking, offers no certitudes and a number of paths outwards, traces prompting translations to other realities and other crimes. As Joyelle McSweeney writes: “The image emerges when the surface oversaturates. Goo, stain, gelatin, blue, green, kissing/pity, the stunted uncles of stain-force. Between the ‘binary ears,’ the mush gelatin of brain matter, the registering spectre also known as ‘trauma light.’ Wave a hand through me, I am barely here. ‘Bright pearls cluster—as if glued—around/The newly opened eyelids of an infant.’ Art plants eggs in its own eyes” (n. p.). So sings the silver voice in the mouth of the housefly, that withdrawn aspect of a reality nevertheless real, burgeoning, without us, ever menacing in the voice, as a void. There is no neat and smiling homely image correlating with “light’s black furnace”; there is only the oversaturation, the surface that is too much surface, thus indicating its own banality before the real and as yet unrevealed or unrevealable depths.

Out of such tortuous turns of phrase there is a possibility but no felt likelihood that something will emerge that is well known, familiar, homely. But there is at the same time “saturation,” fullness, resonance, sounding, hollowness, and terror. Something is really there, a source—
in the case of Hawkey’s poem a real source—namely a poem by Trakl that has, thanks to the inaccessibility of German for Hawkey, been translated, resonated, imagined, but left distant, a testimony in a certain way to the distance that Trakl himself is exploring, the distance of death. Thus the encounter with a real and unfamiliar being yields throbbing antennae and unending unfamiliarity, a sense, possibly only a simulcrum, of the known unknown. The unrecyclable appears, then, when thought through the imagination, not as the deer appears to open to the animist hunter, giving itself to him, revealing its anima, but as a neganimation, a living deadness that takes all we can give of attention and imagination and yet never provides us with a sense of adequate control or sovereignty. To these presences, the monads, the Ewoks, the endless Walden, we cannot ask and they will not tell, yet they loom up at us, confronting us, but also avoiding us, present on the edges between ourselves and some outside, an outside that threatens, that includes a past that does not fold nicely into any comprehensible future. There is no answer here: there is inquietude, like the potential poisons in my body fat waiting to bring about my death, but not yet there and yet forever there, building up, building up in each apple, with each piece of food or quaff of water, a particle of this, a particle of that.

II.

Why submit ourselves to this terrifying delirium, all the more horrifying now that it is not the postmodern play of infinite textuality but dead-serious grappling with a toxic reality? Why not merely go on doing philosophy or neoliberalism as usual? In the next two sections I want to explore two scenarios, two ways of thinking and living emerging out of allowing ourselves to think the unrecyclable first in overmining then in undermining terms.

Correlationism, i.e. the belief that all that is real is only so in relation to the knowing subject or the network in which that knowledge is happening, is the dominant form of overmining subscribed to today. According to this viewpoint, there really is no such thing as unrecyclability, because all that is is to a certain extent always already a representation, utterly without essence, withdrawn or otherwise. An implicit subscription to this belief in the infinite recyclability of representations is why neoliberalism and politics as usual is quite compatible with overmining, since the basic neoliberal take on ecology—recycling—is nothing but this denial of essence rendered into practice, or rather illumined as a mode of repressing the unrecyclable via an addiction to the ideology of total recyclability. Far from hating and fearing waste, neoliberalism thrives on waste, indeed demands the endless creation and proliferation of waste. According to Edward Humes, waste is America’s leading export. The Chinese buy American waste paper and metal by the ton, turning waste exporters into billionaires. Buying new and more, expanding the economy, depends upon throwing out the old, seeing it as used up, wasted, disposable. But there is nothing inherently keeping Americans from willing that all of this might be recycled.
Neoliberalism loves recycling and even upcycling—since it is the fantasy that all can be recycled or upcycled that keeps it going. Americans love making waste to the tune of 102 tons per year (Humes, Kindle location 102), but they also love buying recycled when they can, and doing so calms them, lets them think that their way of living is sustainable, or at least can be made more so. Maybe this is because Americans themselves are the product of a kind of enormous recycling program. Emma Lazarus’ famous articulation of the American dream as it is proclaimed at Ellis Island is all about gathering and reviving the human wastes of the world:

“Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!”
cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired,
your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”
(n. p.)

Europe’s trash became America’s treasure when they came to the “new world” in the hopes of starting over again, plastic bottles beginning their existence again as Patagonia-brand fleece jackets. Making trash may be the consumption that fuels the economy, but recycling is the hope of keeping that economy going . . . forever. It is recycling that permits one to think endless growth, consistency in change, and the metaphysics of presence within the all-that-is-solid-melts-into-air world of late capitalism.

We feel good about recycling, but perhaps we should not. Do not get me wrong: it is great to recycle, great to upcycle, but buying into reusing prompts the forgetting of the unrecyclable, because it perpetuates the impression that there is no such thing as essence, hence leading us deeper into our forgetting of the unrecyclable and its inconvenient consequences. The more we run our green economy, the more recycling we do, the more we risk creating unrecyclables. It is not the same thing to simply not recycle something that might be recycled and to produce objects that can by no means be recuperated. Nuclear waste from reactors, for instance, can be reused. But as John D’Agata points out, the problem is that this recycling only creates something manifestly more dangerous, more radioactive, more imperatively prompting the revision of our mode of living (86-87). In China, photographer Edward Burtynsky documents how a recycling operation in rural China actually involves the accumulation of unrecyclables. In his photos we see piles of toxic waste that remain after the computer parts are “recycled,” masses of material that despite their very ordinary-looking presence are actually causing cancers to proliferate and worse. Buying recycled only implies that a part has been recuperated, forgetting also a part that is in practice buried or shipped out of sight, circulated as a kind of accursed share.
The ideology machine of capital is invested in forgetting this excess. All is reduce/reuse/recycle, and when that fails even the wasted no man’s land of Chernobyl is reintegrated into reality as a tourist destination, a theme park that allows us to imagine that even the most catastrophically contaminated can be reintegrated, re-inserted, re-zoned. Even Fukushima has been looped in, live streamed, seen in real time, reintegrated. Because it is still there: still over there, or not even over there. Over here, inside us as outside of us, present, but as a breakdown—even if or as the knowledge-correlate-network strives to fix what is broken, to reintegrate this part that is no part, this eerie outside in. But keeping it in the loop allows us to deny essence and suppress the unrecyclable by upholding the correlation between mind and world as the only reality, the only criterion of existence.

Seen from the viewpoint of the market, toxic waste is slowly augmenting in value. It is calculated that centralizing all of America’s toxic waste in Yucca Mountain would have cost the government almost a hundred billion dollars. That would have been public funds, though most of the beneficiaries would have been private corporations and individuals. The drivers hauling waste to Yucca Mountain love to have jobs, just as mine workers ruining their lungs with coal dust were happy to have the precious opportunity to thus spend their lives, miserable and employed. And that is but the tip of the iceberg: the more waste that we produce, the more money and time and energy will need to go into dealing with it, because this is not just shortsighted economic egoism—we all must be willing to pay to optimize the circulation of unrecyclables, for failing to do so is a matter of living longer or more briefly. Yet at some point the value of the unrecyclable becomes maximal; the horror of its reality as an essential and real Other causes a shift of perception, something like the flip from relativism to religious fanaticism experienced in modernity. It is at this point that the toxiconomy is born, causing the eclipse of the optimism of the green economy but bringing no more realism into our mode of engagement with the unrecyclable.

III.

Undermining involves the idealization of the real, treating of the real as ideal and accessible to the mind beyond any phenomenon. The toxiconomy is born when, rather than grasping it as a mere appearance, the unrecyclable becomes known as an absolute essence, something akin to a monotheistic god. Once there is no more energy for denying the unrecyclable, no more ability to senselessly circulate it, neoliberalism must totalize it, turning it into that which if not controlled must kill. Rather than buying...
televisions, we will invest in saving ourselves from the toxic waste produced in making them. Rather than looking at politics as a means to progress, politics will soon be devoted to keeping toxins under control, and keeping those touched by the toxins out of power. The first world will battle the third world, the rich will battle the poor, and all will struggle against all in an era in which the containment of the toxin will rule over all exchanges. This is the ultimate articulation of biopower, the final stage in the politics of life.

The black dawn of the toxiconomy has already begun its ascent, revealing its rule over us like a tyrannical sovereign, cruel and bizarre as Jabba the Hutt, that master of a planet populated by enormous fanged worms hidden in the sands, visionary manifestations of the toxic waste repositories that populate the American deserts just a few hours from Hollywood. But this sovereign is one only in the eyes of each ideologist, for claiming to know the unrecyclable in this manner is always a transcendental realist illusion. Thus the very claim to understand the commands of the hyperobjects as univocal assertions will always be a source of conflict. There is no direct access to the unrecyclable; there is only access to its withdrawal and black hole metaphors offering us aesthetic appreciation of its revelation. All claims to the contrary are but undermining, ideological violence-mongering. There is a brilliant, dark, and delirious chapter in Annie Dillard’s \textit{The Pilgrim at Tinker Creek} devoted to perceptual mysticism, the art of trying to see objects, a chapter that we could take as emblematic of the best that we might be able to do in struggling to grasp the content of the unrecyclable while trapped within the philosophical paradigm of the underminer.

Dillard, seeking nature or god as much as experience with objects, tells us that she “used to be able to see flying insects in the air” (17). We might right away suspect that this blindness is a function of decreasing eyesight, though we are just as likely to suspect that she is talking about a kind of moral loss of attentiveness, and she herself reinforces this, suggesting that she simply “lost interest” or “dropped the habit” of seeing the insects. She can, after all, see birds (as she notes). And some people (but not her) “can look at the grass at their feet and discover all the crawling creatures” (17). The specialist “can find the most incredibly well-hidden things” (19). In all of this lurks the fantasy that there is something knowable or visible to be seen, not just oozing or murk, but something namable and companionable, something grounding and directing as opposed to unstable and unholy. Dillard is fatally attracted to this dream of total vision, this Emersonian reverie of transparent eye-ball being; she quotes Stewart Edward White’s recommendation that “as soon as you can forget the naturally obvious and construct an artificial obvious, then you too will see deer” (20) and achieve vision that will give theological or dogmatic authority to the hallucinations of speculative reason.

In Dillard’s account this inability plays a role in a spiritual journey towards conversion. But in the toxiconomy each conversion must
oppose all others, and each faction must arm itself in the name of its death object in the defense of life. The horrible crossing of death dreams, however, only amounts to more and immediate death, no longer the mediated slow violence of the toxin but the simple horror of heads severed like chopped cabbages and lives swallowed up like swigs of water.

There is no ground but ungrounding, nothing to see but holes. Yet in these gaps the unsuspecting see more than black holes, for the toxiconomy is an affair of the gods, an encounter with factions and their beliefs in their knowledge of the known unknown, each raising up their vision of ecological rightness as a justification for ‘divine’ violence. The toxiconomy is at once the rule of the sublime unrecyclable object and an absence of rule, a total chaos initiated by the belief that to deal with the unrecyclable we must have a rule, must have total illumination in light’s black furnace.

IV.

We cannot live with the green economy, and we will live much less once the turn towards the toxiconomy is complete. We cannot be overjoyed to think the unrecyclable, for in granting it reality we also shatter all of our Edenic hopes and fantasies, our hopes of reunion with a Gaia that we might love, a nature we might wish to inhabit. Amidst the monadic sonatas of the unrecyclable we cannot learn new ways of dwelling; instead, we find only discomfort and anxiety. We hate the trust that we must place in the mantic imaginations of poets, artists, and magicians. We hate giving up our ordinary representations and the cosmetic masking that they initiate; we hate sojourning amidst black holes and weird metaphorical access to terrifying withdrawn beings. But we find ourselves in this unworld, this acosmos held in place by petroleum-derived cosmetics. Like the blue tunnel of the ant, inhuman and incomprehensible intrusions “confound our limited, fixated, self-oriented frameworks” (Morton, Ecological Thought 271). We are condemned to melancholic existence, a humiliated living-on as a half-life. Unrecyclable objects are in our midst, so we will acknowledge ourselves as ever more alien, ever more infused with otherness, ever more unknown, ever more displaced because placed amidst a real that repulses our will to experience and fills our imaginations with torturing affects and intensities. But there is an ecological imperative to be obeyed, and at least in the acknowledgement of the unrecyclable we do what we ought or prepare ourselves for the taking of responsibility, the impossible hospitality for this unwelcomed stranger. Amidst the clamor of the flies’ sonatas a golden harmony dissipates noxiously. Better to love this than the siren songs of the overminers and underminers. Something . . . a ghostly trace, a stranger stranger.

Gaps.

Regular straining.
Great rips in the febrile goods. .
Gapes. (Duncan 469)
I have discussed this point elsewhere, notably in a piece in *Ozone* (1: Spring 2013). The best account of this point in the Kant literature is to be found in Allison.

Probably the most concise account of overmining and undermining is to be found in Harman’s *The Quadruple Object* (7-20).

On the notion of the cosmetic, see the work of Cédric Lagandré.
Works Cited


I. Economy of the unrecyclable:

General Economy: Restricted economy, embodied in classical economics, strives to understand economic phenomena strictly through the lens of capital. Unlike those sciences concerned with rational principles, rooted in the Greek *logos* (biology, epistemology, etc.), restricted economy as a field of inquiry is nebulous as the concern with capital alone. This economy is understood only in regard to the circulation of capital, suspending understanding about the surrounding world and the physical substrate of capital itself which includes the social reality of labour and the material requirements and excess of production. This restriction denies that economic phenomena are fundamentally material modifications of the world that exceed economic models on the basis of both labour and excess. While the former has been established as the lived reality of economics in Marxist analysis, the latter is only recognized as such when proposed as the material existence of economic relations that fall outside of the calculations of capital. Restricted economics are premised solely on the concentration of capital (aside from what can be used to further generate capital, which reaches natural limits); in contrast, general economy is concerned with the effect of this concentration in the result of luxury and/or waste. The first is well-documented in human history as the positive end of economics (the erection of monuments or carnivalesque celebrations of the masses) while the second is the necessary, negative end of the operation of economics. All economics accept some existence of waste in the production of capital; only the “explosive character” attributed to general economy by George Bataille enables this waste to be seen as necessarily an end to economics as luxury (41). Both are ultimately the end of economics, although only one is experienced as a positive ends by the economic agent.

Green Economy: Waste is not only the result of economic production, in the common sense of waste, but also in the end where the expenditure of capital can have no capitalist end (whether perceived as positive or negative by economic subjects). In line with the neoliberal expansion towards biopower, the green economy attempts to draw capital from those very sites that were presumed to waste capital.
Mikhail Bakhtin sees the productive utilization of luxury in Middle Age carnivals as entire populations “present the victory of this future, of the golden age, over the past” by connecting disparate elements (the peasants) to the whole (256); in the twentieth century, this became a principle of economics with social Fordism and the internalization of luxury as a productive principle (Antonio Gramsci 286-90). Waste, as well, follows this path: the waste resulting from the process of production itself can simply be reconditioned for the production process once again. The glass bottle, whose decompositional life approaches one million years, can be reconstituted into a further product where it re-enters the cycle of capital. Both forms of excess, which in a general economy is an end outside of the exchange of capital, are recycled in a green economy towards productive ends within the regime of capital. The demands of excess that Bataille details, from human sacrifice to Soviet industrialization, are no longer excess but capital itself under this new understanding of the green economy. The virtue of such an economy is the ability to curb the negative reception of excess caused by waste, especially in a consumer age where commonly consumed items have a global permanence far beyond their consumer. The potentially endless life of the plastic bottle is given a renaissance as cling film. Waste becomes a permanent element of the economy, where even nuclear waste is resurrected in a breeder reactor as spent fuel concentrates a new generation of radioactive leftover.

Toxiconomy: Green economy functions insofar as the operation of capital can be presented as producing only capital, where even essential waste can be recycled into productive possibilities. Of course, the relative success of recycling (of both the material and social existence of excess) overstates the ultimate reality of the green economy. While waste has been minimized and routed towards production, there is a degradation of material quality (or social cohesion) in each stage of the recycling process which requires the augmentation of new production. What recycling guarantees is the perpetuation of the production cycle by nullifying excess towards production—what its reality establishes is a concentration of ultimately unrecyclable waste, just as the general economy concentrated useable energy into the production of excess. Unrecyclables, however, are not the accursed share whose excess of the calculations of capitalism means it is destined for pure expenditure without return; they are that which cannot be productive in themselves but can still be the site of capital. The expected outcome of economic production as both product and waste is fundamentally altered in the toxiconomy; the toxic production produces product and unrecyclables, which both occupy a position in the economy as a saleable commodity or a hazardous commodity requiring persistent and costly attention. While breeder reactors can continuously produce nuclear fuel instead of releasing especially volatile and potentially weaponizable actinides, they ultimately produce far greater amounts of long-lived fission products such as Cesium. The premise of the green economy is undercut by the material reality of its products, which is not ending at the beginning of a
new process but in a toxiconomy is produced on the level of unrecoverable waste. Where the green economy sought pure optimization, the toxiconomy recognizes the inevitability and ultimate hostility of waste to productive enterprises. The extreme longevity and toxicity of Cesium, for instance, is the primary reason for the continuing environmental effects at the Chernobyl site. Cesium has not been naturally present on earth for millions of year and as such poses a unique hazard to ecosystems and human populations. It remains continually toxic for time spans longer than human facticity can equipmentally understand and so requires permanent attention. While both general economy and the green economy are characterized by an amount of risk that is to be mitigated or avoided (either in the excess itself or the functional use of the excess towards productive ends), the toxiconomy accepts risk as a manageable and capital-generating enterprise (Brad Tabas 133). While the circulation of capital continues, it does so only upon the reliance on a certain base unrecyclable materialism that requires a continuous regulatory presence (governmental or otherwise) in order to maintain the conditions of production. To keep the productive environment from the unrecyclables themselves, as in Three Mile Island, the toxiconomy becomes the guarantee of the economy. In a toxiconomy, risk is always already assumed while that assumption is itself in a perpetual state of violating that risk, unless the exchange of capital remains sufficient to guarantee its management.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Time Span (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human (expected)</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Civilization (current)</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genus Homo (current)</td>
<td>2,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Hominidae (current)</td>
<td>20,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3-Photosynthesis (expected)</td>
<td>600,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceans (expected)</td>
<td>1,000,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caesium-137 (expected)</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aluminum Can (expected)</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diaper (expected)</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass Bottle (expected)</td>
<td>1,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caesium-135 (expected)</td>
<td>2,300,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 These numbers are half-lives, which require a large number of iterations for the sample to become inert.
The timeframe under which unrecyclables will become inert and secure competes with the historical span of humanity’s biological (and not merely cultural) existence, so the toxic elements can no longer be understood within risk but as an unavoidable burden once they are produced. The toxiconomy is thus able to secure the permanent place of economic circulation in order to mitigate the unrecyclable’s sublime lifespan.

II. Phenomenology of the unrecyclable:

The materiality of the unrecyclable phenomena is not ambiguous. Unrecyclable objects, like other material objects, exist according to the classical determinations of space, time and causality. Understood according to the appearance of the phenomena in its materiality, the Styrofoam cup is as indistinct from a simple stone as the radioactive Cesium is to the air which it contaminates. A material conception of the unrecyclable is unproblematic, as a material object which defies certain productive activities.

Divorced from the strict identity of unrecyclability to its recyclable origin, the appearance of the unrecyclable phenomena as such poses several problems to a comprehensive phenomenology. Understood economically, the unrecyclable arrests production at a necessary end and thus falls out of the productive sphere as absolute waste. The divergence of unrecyclability from the accursed share is that the waste does not exit the realm of capital and return to nature (either immediately or upon its anticipated decomposition) but becomes an essential element of capital’s consideration. Cesium, for instance, has a half-life longer than the decomposition of any other produced material and remains toxic for several dozen half-lives, requiring constant attention to ensure that its material reality (easily transmitted radioactive matter) is maintained as absolute waste rather than left to the world itself. The requirement of management in order to suspend its material reality is the nature of the unrecyclable—that which retreats from the utility of production as waste but remains within the calculations of capital.

It is this retreat from production, still requiring consideration, which situates the effervescent nature of the unrecyclable. Tabas suggests Timothy Morton’s “hyperobjects” and Grant Harman’s “black hole metaphors” as two methods of struggling with the unrecyclable’s unique relationality as an object (2,4). The material constitution of unrecyclable objects is not of concern but the way in which object-relations with unrecyclable objects carry unique conditions. To properly engage with Cesium in a direct, empirical sense would undermine the conditions of that engagement by making the investigative subject and the surrounding environment inhospitable to the engagement itself. Unrecyclables require a certain already-established relation in order to manifest as unrecyclable, and this relationality defies the sense proper to how subjects relate to objects (perception, utility, equipmentality, world constitution).

Withdrawing from the relations that characterize objects without suspending the material status of objects presents a temporal consideration, alongside the fundamentally spatial relationality. While these objects are manifest to
subjects as material and in a particular time, the manifestation of an object as unrecyclable appears as futural alongside its presence. This notion bears striking similarity to Quentin Meillassoukx’s “arche-fossil,” which in its presence when scientifically understood manifests “the emergence of the conditions for the taking place of the transcendental [subject]” as the “ancestral realm,” albeit projected into the future wherein there will no longer be humans present (25). The unrecyclable asks the question “how is thought able to think what there can be when there is no thought [in the future]?”; however, this unthinkability is co-extensive with the unrecyclable’s requirement of labour for the subject to engage with it at all (121). Unrecyclables thus present a temporal paradox akin to Meillassoukx’s but with a crucial addendum. While the arche-fossil exists outside of a possible subject to give it significance, the unrecyclable, in contrast, requires a material and semiotic subject to respectively maintain its status as unrecyclable as well as give it significance. In short, the unrecyclable requires the subject to think of the unrecyclable’s future where the subject could not possibly exist (see Table 1) but would be required for the being of the unrecyclable. Where Cesium waste will outlive the possible human habitation of Earth, it would still necessitate a subject to exist both materially and meaningfully. The spatial withdrawal of the unrecyclable is mirrored in its temporality, as its presence is grounded upon a future that is outside of possible experience.

Unrecyclability appears in its withdrawal from the presence that nonetheless marks it as a material object. It is obvious that unrecyclable objects appear as material objects (in the form of piles of garbage, tainted water or undetectable energy), but this is not the fundamental limit to their appearance. Indeed, their appearance as unrecyclable is characterized by their “known unknown” wherein their objectivity is maintained only insofar as they are operatively known (i.e. purposefully maintained as waste, and not toxically dispensed) (Tabas 131). The unrecyclable future, the future which itself has no future, does not present the possibility of possibilities, as Heidegger maintains with death, but rather the closure of possibility: the spatial and temporal demands of the unrecyclable reduce the risk of excess to an essential property of maintenance. Withdrawal, as a negation of potential, in the unrecyclable reduces the whole and its possibility to the ()hole, the hole in the whole, and its “mutual contamination of solid and void in holey space”(Reza Negarestani 56). If unrecyclability opens ()holes then it is hardly a simple negation (as its material presence would suggest) but instead negativity: the unrecyclable is that which absorbs possibility with its nullity, as the result of an operation of possibility.

III. Logic of the unrecyclable:

A stillness absolute as death
Along the slacking wheels shall lie,
And, flagging at a single breath,
The fires that moulder out and die.
The roar shall vanish at its height,
And over the tremendous town
The silence of eternal night
Shall gather close and settle down.
All its grim grandeur, tower and hall,
Shall be abandoned utterly,
And into rust and dust shall fall,
From century to century;
Nor ever living thing shall grow,
Nor trunk of tree, nor blade of grass;
No drop shall fall, no wind shall blow,
Nor sound of any foot shall pass:
Alone of its accursed state,
One thing the hand of Time shall spare,
For the grim Idiot at the gate
Is deathless and eternal there.

Archibald Lampman,
“The City of the End of Things”
(Lampman 69-88)

The poet declares this city is named only in his dreams: it is no actual city (7-8). Furthermore, even in its dreamlike duration, the city’s persistence “from century to century” has reduced it to rust and dust, like the human “dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Gen 3:19). At the end of things, judgment, or the march of time, wears all humanity down to the level of creation. The only figure left standing is the grim Idiot who, apart from his compatriots, is “beyond the reach of memories” (Lampman 60) in a state where “[i]n his pale body dwells no more/Or mind or soul,—an idiot[!]” (63-64) that reminisces of the subject who cannot actually be present alongside the unrecyclable in any form. The city of the end of things is no city that can be recognized currently; its only inhabitant, the Idiot, who is deathless (outside of possible relations) and eternal (outside of temporal flux), is in an accursed state outside of human time, the city of the end of things.

Lampman’s concern with the mass development of the Canadian electric age in the 1880s offers a functionally pre-industrial view of the unrecyclable. However, Lampman does not simply encounter the unrecyclable but hypostasizes the subject for whom the unrecyclable would appear simply as object: the horrific visage of the Idiot. It is this unique premise that characterizes the fundamental action of the unrecyclable, which is the positive diminishment of the subject in relation to an object that overwhelms the subject’s constitution. The classical paradigm for such a situation is the Kantian sublime, “that in comparison with which everything else is small” by overwhelming the subject’s spatial (mathematical sublime) or temporal (dynamic sublime) reference (Critique of Judgment 135). What defines the sublime is this overwhelming is experienced by the subject as a “negative pleasure” wherein the imagination’s limitless production of concepts to capture the magnitude or dynamism of an experience provides mental pleasure. Such a unique pleasure, a purposeful pain, can of course be rendered purposeless, in the respective situations of the actual infinite (that without limits) and terror (that which reduces the moment to eternity), as would perhaps be characteristic of the unrecyclable. Both the sublime and the unrecyclable occur within the transcendental limits of space and time, which are overwhelmed by the subject’s lack of access to totality, being rendered within a particular world. However, the
unrecyclable does not simply overwhelm the subject (which would be a conceptless collapse of the act of thinking in light of an object) but is a productive concept like the sublime. The unrecyclable would best be understood not as a correlate of the sublime’s negative pleasure, but instead as a negative destitution.

The pleasure of the sublime is the ennobling and enlightening of the subject through the action of their enlightenment, which proves to heighten the subject in their being-in-the-world. Unrecyclability’s destitution of the subject does not render the subject conceptless, but with a concept of their own failure in light of a materially unproblematic object. The ennobling of the object occurs at the destitution of the subject, who approaches the object not with a transcendental caution about its truth but leaves it with “manifold of cognition,” which fails to fully cognize the appearance of the unrecyclable as unrecyclability, or the perceived object as a transcendental object (Critique of Pure Reason 233). It is the failure of what Immanuel Kant calls “transcendental realism” to ontologically ascribe outer appearance to the things themselves directly, rather than as a mode of appearance, and thus cannot be certain about their appearance wholly but only sensibility (426). Unrecyclability overturns this by appearing in a form that specifically outlines the failure of subjective perception to wholly grasp the appearance of phenomena. Against the classical Kantian delimitation that “[t]he real things of past [and future] time are given in the transcendental object of experience, but for me they are objects and real in past time only insofar as I represent [them] to myself” (513), the unrecyclable is the object experience that defies the representation to the self by including the transcendental object’s requirements of a non-factual subject to realize (a pile of waste at the end of things).

For Kant such an experience is simply erroneous, for the subject would be caught in a contradiction between intuition and understanding. However, this is confusion over the role of the transcendental object, which for Kant is limited to and by perception in order to follow the principle of sufficient reason. This is what Alain Badiou finds remarkable about Kant, as the “transcendental object . . . is nothing other than the pure capacity for unity” and appears as the perceptual correlate to Badiou’s ontological “count-as-One” in Being and Event (223). This is not an epistemological critique of Kant, but a logical one, to work towards “the truth, which is to be found precisely in the overturning of Kant’s prudence: the concept of object designates the point where phenomenon and noumenon are indistinguishable, the point of reciprocity between the logical [being-there: world and object] and onto-logical [being-qua-being: the void, ø]” (241). Kant’s transcendental object, the empty category of objecthood, is clarified as a transcendental of a multiple which provides the index for the identity-function, the basis of objects. Here objects are defined in relation to the multiple they are indexed within rather than the capacity of the empty category of an ideal object.

Whereas the sublime instantiated the subjects failure as a productive experience to
elevate the subject’s capacity, the unrecyclable provides for the elevation of the object beyond the grasp of the subject. This withdrawal from the subject is not the simple Kantian lack of access to the noumena, but a specific withdrawal that questions the capacity of the transcendental object itself. Rather, the unrecyclable demands to be indexed against the world of its appearing, rather than the classical categories of experience that seek to provide a unity to the experiential world. For William Wordsworth, the alignment of the sublime with unity is clear during the poet’s ascension of Mount Snowdon in *The Prelude*:

There I beheld the emblem of a mind
That feeds upon infinity, that broods
Over the dark abyss, intent to hear
Its voices issue forth to silent light
In one continuous stream; a mind sustained
By recognitions of transcendent power,
In sense conducting to mortal form,
In soul of more than mortal privilege.

(Wordsworth XIV 70-77)

The poet’s mind is sustained by a power more spiritual than material, an ascension of the subject over their previous state. This transcendental position of the subject offers a perspective on the unity of the object as such—itself also transcendental. What the unrecyclable demands in its objectivity is not a transcendent position of the subject over objects but of objects over subjects, where the transcendental index is determined by the mode of appearing rather than the status as a (material) object through transcendental deduction. Thus, the sublime experience is reversed in the unrecyclable object: the transcendental is not a position attained by the subject but established by the object. The subject is not atop of objects but below them and in their midst—indeed, no longer atop a mountain looking down to understand but looking all around and thinking in an increasingly weird, green light.

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Works Cited


The Unrecyclable
Letting Go of the Unrecyclable:
Some closing remarks while we’re yet talking

Every beginning
is only a sequel, after all,
and the book of events
is always open halfway through.

Witława Szymborska,
“Love at First Sight”

Like so many other things, much remains unsaid on the subject of the unrecyclable. Calling for papers on the topic we asked about the “guardians of garbage.” These will, for now, remain nameless and will continue to go under the sign and sigil of the biohazardous, as Joshua Schuster argues in this issue. We asked too about ecstatic plagiarists, so enrapt with wonder, joy, or utility on looking at a piece of work that they smuggle it under their own name, unrecycling in a profoundly selfless act. Brad Tabas briefly touches on this plagiarist’s ecstasy, discussing “that which can be exchanged but not used”—though he spins the unrecyclable as a purely toxic creation. Are there no words of kindness to those authors whose works have proved so singular as to be endlessly repeated? We can’t help but quote them endlessly after all: “river-run, past Eve and Adam’s, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environments” (Joyce 3). (Ok, maybe some word strings truly are toxic). Other strings we assimilate wholeheartedly. These aren’t toxic; they’re tonics. Remember these short, sharp clauses? “All of old. Nothing else ever. Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (Beckett 89). Don’t tell Sisyphus he’s recycling that rock he calls the world’s biggest piece of trash. He’ll wonder where the trucks went—are they over that hill? “Hey, Joe, I got this boulder I need taken care of . . . ”

Reflections risk leading us into faint self-admonitions. Perhaps some topics we floated for consideration simply ran too esoteric: genres fallen out of favour lack the champions necessary to describe them for new audiences. Nonsensical tropes, like noisy children, are so quickly whisked to the wings. Out of sight, they’re out of mind. So too with
methodologies we so quickly described as in “unremitting decline,” a judgement that now seems to me precipitous. Michel Foucault would quickly remind us that methodologies, like discourses, morph, change, and shift shapes. Suspicions take on other guises, ideologies, other names. What are we left with when we talk about the unrecyclable?

Here’s a question. It’s something I’ve been thinking about for a long time. Is a discussion unrecyclable? Some, we’d have to say, are not. Take Eugène Ionesco’s bold play The Bald Soprano. Here Ionesco subjects his audience to a gruelling discussion that could happen time and again, endless in its effortless banalities. Moreover! The play repeats itself! Or it threatens to anyway, which is close enough—and this is to say nothing of the play’s history-making run at La Huchette in Paris, where it celebrated its fiftieth year of uninterrupted showings in 2007. Horrified by the recursive concept of unrecycled repetition, didn’t Ionesco originally want to end the play with an actor who would jump from stage with a machine gun, saving the audience from unrecycled drama? I think so. But as ever, first as tragedy, then as farce: when Quentin Tarantino pays homage to this trick in Inglourious Basterds (2009) it seems less than spectacular, hollowed out and beside the point. Once in a while the unrecyclable is just boring. Where was I?

Maybe we are missing something right in front of our noses: the unrecyclable, unutterable strangeness of our words themselves, provocatively in their parade of nothingless scratches before our very eyes. Translator Gregory Rabassa puts it in the following way: “if you ponder a word, any word, long enough it will become something strange and meaningless and usually ludicrous. I suppose this is some kind of verbicide” (9). Paul de Man, for his part, is lapidary. “When you spell a word you say a certain number of meaningless letters” (89). True. This unrecyclable strangeness is something we habitually wish away. But it haunts us—in the ghost’s other role as phantasm of the present, in addition to being “history’s avatar[s]” for Jeremy Colangelo, justifying by side glance Mikhail Pozdniakov’s statement that “[t]he unrecyclable is a relationship to history”—whether we acknowledge it or no, in the very building blocks of our sentences and our words, our worst fears come true: words ever gnawed empty by an unrecyclable nothing. Words filled again by naïve good meaning. Back to Beckett, then: “All gnawing to be naught. Never to be naught” (115). Or here’s how Andrew Wenaus puts a similar sentiment: “no text is left unchanged and, yet, nothing changes.” Right on. Let’s dance.

In the end of it, speaking of the unrecyclable, I must concede however unwillingly to leave the matter as open as it was when the issue began. I mean no disregard of our contributors, whose salutary essays illuminate much for me. But to do elsewise and close the discussion would miss the point of a thing unrecyclable. I am left with Breyten Breytenbach, walking in “no man’s land,” which for him, an Afrikaner, South African, and African poet means a land halfway between the dream of an Africa he left
behind and the face of an Africa that greets him as a visiting exile. It is, in other words, a place both home and foreign, a place whose unrecyclable topography lies under the lines of political geography even as these words playing at meaning continue to be formed from letters gnawed by nothingness when our backs are turned.

The point is to start anywhere. To continue then in the direction opened by that start. Whatever the way may be, wherever it may lead. Can you believe I don’t know where I’m going? But this I do know now: I cannot reach anywhere except by beginning here at this instant. It is important to begin. (215)

We have begun to speak of the unrecyclable, begun only, and already it’s time to go. So soon! No matter. Next time we see each other, there’ll be popcorn. I can’t wait.

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Works Cited


Contributors & Acknowledgements

I. List of Contributors

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Andy Verboom is a PhD student at Western University. His current research links histories of ethnographic archivization in North America and the Pacific with contemporary discourses of closure and enclosure (e.g., reservations, treaty settlements, political apologies) deployed by settler states in these regions; his aim is to foreground indigenous conceptions of time and repertoire that evade, resist, and subvert archival closure. Andy’s broader interests include contemporary poetry, indigenous literature, archival affects and poetics, colonial and postcolonial science fiction, and the cultural politics of time. His works of poetry, and on poetry, are gathered at [www.andyverboom.com](http://www.andyverboom.com).

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Any errors or omissions in *Word Hoard* are due to the work of the four general editors. You can reach the editors at wordhoard.editors@gmail.com.

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