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## Book Reviews

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# The *Word Hoard*

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## Book Reviews

**STEPHEN HARPER.** By John Ibbitson. Toronto: Signal, 2015. 436 pp. \$35 CAD.

**Nathan TeBokkel\***

Scum, Villainy, and Biography

Scum—whether the green algae on a pond, the white lime polymer of soap in a bath tub, or the myolipid film on a meat stew—is something that rises to the top naturally, not as the result of any sort of motivated plan or labour. Villainy, on the other hand, is machination, calculation toward a goal. While scum selfishly rises, villainy coldly plots.

The divisions between the two run along fairly clear etymological lines. From the Battle of Hastings until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, French was the language of the English courts, and “villainy” comes to us from Latin through French. Commoners primarily spoke dialects derived from Germanic roots, and it is from Middle Low German

we get “scum.” Villains, therefore, are intelligent and deceptive, well-connected, probably dressed better than us. Scum are dull and brutishly passionate, short on resources, rough around the edges.

But both words also connote a sense of the outside or ostracized. Villain’s etymological forebears meant farmhand or peasant, someone outside urban centers of power, whereas scum has nearly always meant foam or froth, that filth which is outside a main body but no less a part of it. Do scum and villainy depend on this liminality? And could this externality not make one empathetic to others on the outside?

Biography and criticism, in connecting gritty details with grand ideals, may offer a metaxis between scum and villainy, but politics, in the sense of the neoliberal institution, may just be the nexus where scum and villainy converge. Its contingencies and inanities afford scum opportunity after opportunity to rise witlessly and hoard wealth and power; its complexity and

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spectacle afford villains the variables and people to manipulate, and the goals to motivate them to do so. Villains, it seems, will tell us their motives, but we'll doubt them and guess that their *real* motives are bad. Scum won't tell us their motives because they aren't aware of them or have none, and so we'll guess that their motives are also bad.

Far be it from us to determine whether John Ibbitson, Stephen Harper's biographer, is either scum or villain. Far be it from us to determine whether Stephen Harper himself is either scum or villain. But for both men, these determinations may be made along the same lines: How do their motives align with their apparent motives? How do these suits fit them, if at all?

Ibbitson's goal is to "understand the man himself" (*x*)—to introduce us to "Harper the Man," not "Harper the Politician"—because, as he rightly concludes, many biographers have already introduced us to Harper the Politician. However, either through art or artlessness, he devotes nearly his entire tome to tracking Harper the Politician, first from a lukewarm high-school Liberal to a disenchanting and conservatively inclined freshman, then from a young Reformer to a powerful Conservative. The information Ibbitson discloses about Harper the Man, though derived from a formidable list of sources, is anecdotal, second-hand, and often presented as asides to this general narrative.

The book culminates in what Ibbitson calls Harper's Six Big Things (the words and capitalization are his). These are:

1. his redistribution of federal-provincial relations and termination of the Quebec sovereignty movement (267);
2. his management of the economy, especially through the 2008 crisis (306);
3. his reorientation of foreign policy to be more inward-looking, blunt, unilateral, and results-oriented (322);
4. his complete overhaul of immigration and refugee policy (348);
5. his tough new law-and-order agenda (382);
6. his many trade agreements (388).

A detractor would argue that Harper barely spoke with the provinces, that Quebec sovereignty was either good or was terminated by the NDP, that Harper was in denial about the market crash of 2008, that his immigration policy viewed refugees as queue-jumpers, that crime rates were the lowest in history when Harper overpopulated the jails with laws that have since been deemed unconstitutional, that trade agreements are trashing Canadian industry. A detractor would also point to Harper's environmental negligence, his throttling of research and science, and his abuse of Canadian democracy through bloated omnibus bills, sly prorogations, and stonewalling the press and the opposition.

But Ibbitson mentions most of this. And his point is not that they're Six Big Uncontroversial Things, merely that they're paradigm-shifting no matter our political stripe. He lists successes and mistakes over and over, and so his book reads a little bit like a giant list. When Ibbitson praises Harper's successes, he lists them for pages; we almost can't make out what it is Harper succeeded at over the heavenly chorus Ibbitson conducts in his honour. When Ibbitson denounces Harper's mistakes, he lists them drily, less with elaboration than with excuse: he downplays the mistakes' seriousness, attributes them to an uncharacteristic outburst of Harper's characteristic temper, and resorts to that old political standby, "The Liberals did some bad stuff, too."

This politicking may point to motives on Ibbitson's part, and we may be tempted to guess they're bad or assume Ibbitson is unaware of them, but they could be charitable. So, maybe it's the person looking at the so-called scum or villain, the person critiquing his motives, who should be critiqued. In any case, politicking is to be expected in a book about politics. However, Ibbitson promised us the story of the life of Harper the Man, not the Politician, even if the Man had a life that happened to be very political.

We can comb through Ibbitson's prose to glimpse Harper the Man. We can find our own list of six little things, based

not on Capital Letters, but on repetition. While Ibbitson's declared structure is a grand, idealistic List, his writing produces a littler, grittier list; his scrupulous sculpting of Harper's life leaves as its dross a scree of bothersome pebbles.<sup>1</sup> These liminal, contingent details of the Man may just displace the Ozymandiac Politician.

Ibbitson repeats—meticulously or unconsciously, or both—these same six items, over and over. The number of repetitions is important, but so is their location and their emphasis. These six little things often begin and end sections and chapters; they often appear as excuses for Harper's mistakes and causes for his actions. Therefore, Harper the Man is made by the following:

1. his father, an accountant for Imperial Oil with an overweening pro-Israel ideology (9);
2. his smarts. Educated at Richview, University of Toronto, and Calgary, Stephen becomes "Straight-A Steve," until "Smart" becomes his almost Homeric epithet (48);
3. his anti-elitism and victim complex: growing up as a suburbanite with asthma and weak ankles, unable to play the sports he loves and so resorting to memorizing their statistics (13), Harper crafts an exquisitely elitist anti-elitism, able no matter what to see himself as the outsider, victim, insurgent (103). He detests the "political class," which

he defines as scientists, researchers, educators, bureaucrats, activists, journalists, and communicators who draw their income not from the market but from the public sector (80). He detests the Left, which he defines as “tax recipients” in opposition to the Right’s taxpayers (80). And he detests the “Laurentian elite,” the wealthy east-Ontario-and-west-Quebeckers who’d controlled Canada since 1867 (13). He sees himself, ironically, as outside urban centers of power, and this view doesn’t do much for his empathy;

4. his hatred of being told what to do: from his time at Northlea Public School, when he is chastised for telling a teacher that Jupiter had one more moon than the teacher said (because Harper had read a science paper and learned this new fact), to his time working for Preston Manning and the Reform Party, to his 6-year Master’s Degree, Harper is completely unable to take orders from anyone;
5. his idealistic nationalism: a Leafs fan, an avid student of the Canadian economy, a transplant from Leaside to the West, Harper loves what he thinks Canada is—hockey, economy, and oil. He seeks to make his idea of the nation into a reality, despite detesting those, like Chief Justice Beverly McLachlin, whom he accuses of being “able to turn their theories into laws” (384);

6. his need to control and order his world: raised in the sheltered suburbs, in the failed first “planned community” in Canada, Leaside (3), Harper punctiliously organizes the world around him—even through recreation, which is simply “switching from analyzing finance department statistics to analyzing hockey statistics” (235).

If we set these six little things beside the Six Big Things, we may move from seeing Harper as a brilliant statesman who united his country, weathered its financial crisis, redefined its international presence, cracked down on crime, and attracted countless businesses, to seeing Harper as a crafty, (self-)ostracized power-monger who received his ideological passion with his pabulum, who saw himself always as an underdog punching up against all odds to turn his dreams into realities and so order his world. Are these fault lines unique to Harper, or are they symptomatic of spectacular societies and neoliberalism more generally? Biographically for Ibbitson, politically for Harper, and critically for us, could these discrepancies be the work of scum, villain, more, or less?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The word “scrupulous” is from *scrupus*, Latin for “rough pebble.”

<sup>2</sup> These questions must be answered more scrupulously by Ibbitson, by us, and by bi-

ographers, politicians, and critics, perhaps, in general. To answer them, we must reflect not only on our subject's motives and circumstances, but on our own, which is something we may sometimes neglect to do as we write a biography, read an article, post online, or speak aloud. If the difference between scum and villainy—or the decision to apply these labels in the first place—really is in the eye of the beholder, then we must be more charitable, more empathetic beholders, meticulously and unconsciously.

***VALERIE SOLANAS: THE DEFIANT LIFE OF THE WOMAN WHO WROTE SCUM (And Shot Andy Warhol)***. By Breanne Fahs. New York, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 2014. 352pp. \$18.36 CAD.

***THE INSPIRATIONAL SCUM MANIFESTO: CALENDAR 2016-2017***. By Kenton deAengeli, Jordan Piantedosi, Meredith Kleiber, Ryan Humphrey, Kristen Felicetti, Andrés Toro, Tracy Feldman, Janet Lackey, Grace Lin. [scumcalendar.com](http://scumcalendar.com)

### Jacob Evoy\*

Breanne Fahs's *Valerie Solanas: The Defiant Life of the Woman Who Wrote SCUM (And Shot Andy Warhol)* provides readers with a long-awaited in-depth biography of Valerie Solanas almost three decades after her death in 1988. Fahs's biography laboriously tracks the life of one of the most notorious radical feminists of the 1960s and 1970s—a task which previously had seemed “a sheer impossibility (Valerie was homeless! She had twenty different names! Her mother burned all her

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belongings! She was *dangerous!*”) (Fahs 5-6). Most famously known for her satirical and political *SCUM Manifesto* (self-published in 1967 and commercially published in 1968), Solanas’ life had been shrouded in mystery. While many shortened biographies have been published, none compare to the depth and balance provided by Fahs; previous biographies published with reprintings of the *SCUM Manifesto* frame the story of Solanas’s life around her interactions with Andy Warhol, but Fahs skilfully (and justly) centres the biography around Solanas herself and her manifesto. As Fahs asserts, “The story of Valerie’s life, more than anything, is a story of her relationship to the manifesto” (5).

Writing the history of women can already be a difficult exercise due to the lack of surviving sources, but Fahs’ task is further complicated by the following facts: Solanas was homeless for a large portion of her life, was in and out of prison and mental health institutions, and her mother destroyed all of her possessions following her death. To uncover the details of Solanas’ life, then, Fahs utilizes a range of historical tools: she slogs through museum, public, and private archives, she tracks down Solanas’ personal correspondence and communication (with figures ranging from famed radical feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson to former actress and model Ultra Violet, who was one of the last people to

speak with Solanas before her death [Fahs 325]), she diligently collects Solanas’ many anonymous and misattributed publications (publishers often misspelled her name as “Solanis” [Fahs 156]), and she conducts dozens of interviews with those who worked with, knew, met, or even saw Solanas (ranging from Solanas’ sister to Margo Feiden, with whom Solanas visited and spoke just prior to shooting Warhol [Fahs 134]). Solanas was, and is, an infamous figure in many circles, and Fahs constructs a nuanced view of her being and her work, addressing the complexities of Solanas’ life and politics and making possible the “impossibility” of Solanas’ experiences as a queer, disabled, and homeless woman. Such nuance is accomplished by Fahs’ seamless traversing of multiple complex discourses, including pop culture, anarchism, feminism, queerness, classism (homelessness), and critical disability studies (mental health). By situating Solanas’ life in relation to these discourses, Fahs demonstrates how Solanas and SCUM challenged them. Fahs’ academic diligence is a welcome change from biographers’ affinity to focus solely on Solanas’ mental disability and violent tendencies—and it is a diligence that produces a well-rounded image of Solanas as a human being living in a world not made for her.

Fahs’ second chapter, “Shooting: SCUM, Shots, and Stupidstars, 1967–



1968,” will captivate those wishing to better understand Solanas’ shooting of Andy Warhol. Fahs directly confronts the idea that Solanas’s shooting of Warhol was an act inspired by *SCUM*; by doing so, Fahs avoids the pitfalls of the sane-ism conventionally used to criminalize the mentally disabled more broadly. Following the shooting, for example, many of Solanas’ contemporaries (and readers of *SCUM Manifesto*) tended to view both the shooting and *SCUM* as products of her mental disability. Even now, “[w]hen the shooting of 1968 is given as Valerie’s fifteen minutes of fame, *SCUM Manifesto* serves as its footnote” (Fahs 59). While by no means justifying the shooting of Warhol, Fahs delicately reframes the event to show that

[Solanas’] relationship with Andy merely formed a center point for many forces moving through Valerie’s life at the time: her growing anger towards men, particularly men with power, prestige, and wealth; her interest in self-promotion and fame, particularly as a writer; her emerging connection with the avant-garde, queer, and drag scene in New York; her wobbly mental health and the intensifying deterioration in her rational thinking; and the classic contradiction between her desire

for acceptance and her outright rejection of all organized groups or movements. (60)

Fahs masterfully analyzes each of these forces, and their interactions, to reconstruct the events leading to Solanas shooting Warhol.

Cutting through the sensationalism surrounding Warhol’s shooting, Fahs devotes the rest of the book to the remainder of Solanas’s life, which other biographers have tended to avoid. The third chapter, “Provocation: The Contentious Birth of Radical Feminism, 1968–1973,” has much to offer historians, feminists, and contemporary activists: incorporating interviews with notable feminists and activists, such as Ti-Grace Atkinson and Florynce Kennedy, Fahs examines the emergence of the rift between liberal and radical feminists in the 1960s and 1970s. The central theme of this chapter is anger: a question that has followed feminists for decades is how one might mobilize and utilize anger in a productive way, with liberal feminists arguing that anger and violence have no place in feminism and radical feminists disagreeing. The debate over the utility and place of anger continues to this day but is now most often discussed within the framework of “respectability politics,” a shift encapsulated well by Roxane Gay in *Bad Feminist* (2014). Fahs examines how Solanas’



shooting of Warhol spurred a debate within the National Organization for Women (NOW): those in the camp of Ti-Grace Atkinson went head-to-head with those in the camp of celebrity feminist Betty Friedan in the debate over what place (if any) anger and violence had in their feminist movement. This debate eventually led to Atkinson and others splitting from NOW to form the October 17<sup>th</sup> Movement, “a group of radical women aligned around the idea of upending institutionalized sexism” (Fahs 186). By examining these debates through the framework of the shooting, *SCUM Manifesto*, and Solanas’ life during and after her incarceration, Fahs provides insight into the history of feminism in the United States and the split between liberal and radical feminists.

The 2016 release of *The Inspirational Scum Manifesto Calendar* highlights the continued relevance of *SCUM* as an ideological framework for social justice, even as the calendar itself remains attentive to the histories of *SCUM Manifesto*, of artistic disruption, and of the emotional debates surrounding the life and work of Solanas. The calendar is a work of collaboration by artists Kenton deAngeli, Jordan Piantedosi, Meredith Kleiber, Ryan Humphrey, Kristen Felicetti, Andrés Toro, Tracy Feldman, Janet Lackey, and Grace Lin—and, one could say, by Solanas, as the artists each draw passages from the *Manifesto* to accompany their artwork. While Fahs’

biography pieces together the full continuum of Solanas’ life around the *Manifesto*, this calendar demonstrates that *SCUM* is also an artistic revolution meant to inspire, and make *SCUM* of, us all.

If “*SCUM*” is a politics of the mind (a reorientation of our thinking) as well as an embodied practice, then it is best summarized by this passage from the *Manifesto*, selected by Piantedosi for the month of February: “Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there exists to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females” (n.p.)—that is, there exists to *SCUM*, followers of *SCUM*—“only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex” (n.p.). The calendar is direct and confrontational in its artistic interpretations of these *SCUMmy* politics and practices. Consider the tip of a forefinger covered in shit, which is captioned with this quotation from the *Manifesto*: “The males has a Negative Midas Touch – Everything he touches turns to shit” (Lackey, “November”). Or consider the summery collection of dolphin, cake, beach, unicorn, and gumball machine emojis surrounding this quotation: “Women, in other words, don’t have penis envy; Men have pussy envy” (Felicetti, “June”). This calendar transforms a quotidian household item into an in-your-face political statement: it is certain to draw eyes, to provoke

laughter and questions, and to instigate SCUMmy conversations.

One of the most fascinating months of the calendar also exhibits one of the most simplistic designs. Printed in white capital letters, over an astronaut's-eye view of Earth's horizon and the Northern Lights, is this passage from the *SCUM Manifesto*:

But SCUM is impatient; SCUM is not consoled by the thought that future generations will thrive; SCUM wants to grab some thrilling living for itself. If a large majority of women were SCUM, they could acquire complete control of this country within a few weeks simply by withdrawing from the labor force, declaring themselves off the money system, ceasing buying; just looting and refusing to obey all laws they don't care to obey. The police force, national guard, army, navy and marines combined couldn't squelch a rebellion of over half the population. (deAngeli, "January")

The weight of the passage collapses normative understandings of space and time. Just as the first views from orbit radically refigured how we thought of our planet, so too does this image demand such a reorientation, exhibiting the power and significance of the anti-capitalist, anti-military, and anti-sexist politics of Solanas and *SCUM*,

themselves so well highlighted in Fahs' biography. *SCUM's* impatience challenges the notion that we must wait for a better future. Rather than accepting clichés like "think of the children" and "children are the future," *SCUM* and Solanas are unwilling to sacrifice their present desires for a promise that unborn future generations will thrive. It was decades prior to Lee Edelman's critical intervention in queer theorizations of temporality with *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004) that Solanas presented this alternative to what Edelman would term "reproductive futurism." However, Solanas' vision of the future, unlike Edelman's, does not rely on the death drive or a conception of futurity based solely on negativity. Through her perpetual call for disruption of business-as-usual, Solanas instead provides a somewhat utopian queer envisioning of the future.

While Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto* disposes of normative views of envisioning the future (and, by proxy, the present), it also challenges our understandings of space. Solanas' call for women to abandon the labour force and money system demands that women re-create spaces devoid of patriarchal and capitalistic framings of women's roles. While challenging the imperative to sacrifice now so future generations can thrive, the *Manifesto* asks for a reorientation of how we view and interact with the world. deAngeli's pairing of this anti-futurist quotation with a view of

the Earth's Aurora Borealis-lit horizon situates *SCUM*, and its glorious global-scale destruction, both within and out of this world—and the pairing of text and image with the month of January is sure to inspire some SCUMmy New Year's resolutions. What better way to honour Solanas' vision, what better way to become and embrace *SCUM*, than by tearing down all the things men have touched and turned to shit, by making men even more envious of the power of the pussy, and by giving the middle finger to normative conceptions of space, time, and the future?

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***ECOSICKNESS IN CONTEMPORARY U.S. FICTION: ENVIRONMENT AND AFFECT***. By Heather Houser. New York, N.Y.: Columbia UP, 2014. 309pp. \$65 CAD/\$30 USD.

### Riley McDonald\*

The final words of Heather Houser's 2014 academic monograph *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* are "today's diseased now" (228). This phrase (borrowed from American literary titan David Foster Wallace, the subject of one of this book's chapters) characterizes our time by way of its contamination and, through its emphasis on immediate temporality ("today," "now"), highlights the urgency of confronting the many environmental catastrophes that appear to increase daily in scale and visibility. In spite of the seeming urgency of these words (voiced by a disaffected Republican lawyer in Wallace's early short story "Girl with Curious Hair"), Houser appears less interested in tracing the sources of ecological problems than in recognizing the ways bodies and ecologies intermingle with one another—and in recognizing how this intersection of subjectivity and place is narrated. Through examining recent at-

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tempts by American authors to narrate the “medicalization of space” (17), Houser’s volume maps the variety of connections through which ill bodies and environments discursively inform one another. Thinking through environmental disaster is undoubtedly urgent, Houser contends, but rather than issue a generalized call to environmental action (whatever that means), she explores the affective connections between bodies and environments in order to reveal the complex and shifting relations that people form with the wider world.

*Ecosickness* is a deft and thoughtful contribution to the fields of American literary studies, ecocriticism, medical humanities, and affect theory. Divided into an introduction of concepts, four case study chapters looking at novels and nonfiction memoirs, and a brief conclusion, Houser’s study skilfully juggles these fields’ interweaving discourses to develop exciting readings of canonical authors and reinvigorate well-trodden theoretical grounds. Houser makes a clear break from environmental and ecocritical writers of the past (whose massive archive she diligently researches and engages with in her introduction) through her rejection of “etiological” (2) narratives of cause-and-effect that clearly express how environmental damage negatively impacts bodies. Houser’s interest is not focused on rigorously plotting effects, but rather on a more ephemeral subject: how bodily affects undergo contin-

ual changes within environments of illness. Houser opts to avoid canonical texts like Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1985) precisely for this reason: the “airborne toxic event” (qtd. in Houser 6) of that novel is too clearly linked to protagonist Jack Gladney’s fear of bodily pollution and death. Instead, Houser selects books without obvious bodily-environmental linkages; the rural AIDS memoirs of Jan Zita Grover’s *North Enough* (1997) and David Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives* (1991) that make up Chapter 1, for instance, are not *about* AIDS outbreaks in these non-urban areas, but rather about how these writers’ experiences with HIV/AIDS colour their readings of landscapes that have been subject to deforestation and massive housing developments—how, in Houser’s words, “figuring sick bodies in literature necessarily changes figurations of space” (59). Familiarity with disease and injury provides a powerful lens through which to consider the “natural” world, Houser contends, and the lexicons used to discuss these ecological and embodied discourses become increasingly fraught and entangled.

The affective and somatic affinities in sickness form the first prong of Houser’s analysis. The second is her focus on affect, specifically the affective intensity that exists between bodies and their surroundings. Houser’s project in *Ecosickness* is subtle and complex: she notes that we often feel crushed into paraly-

sis by the macro-structural forces that contribute to climate change, loss of biodiversity, toxic spillage, etc. But rather than retreat from these feelings toward ones with a more “positive” charge, Houser suggests that understanding these negative feelings are vital to developing a perspective that links the body to a wider environment and registers their coterminous relationship. The four main chapters—discord in Grover’s and Wojnarowicz’s HIV/AIDS narratives, wonder (and its obverse, paranoia) in Richard Powers’ works, disgust as a trope of David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996), and anxiety’s prevalence in the novels of Marge Piercy and Leslie Marmon Silko—return continually to negative registers of affect, what Sianne Ngai would call “ugly feelings.” Only Chapter 2, looking at Richard Powers’ use of wonder to describe the natural world of sandhill cranes in *The Echo Maker* (2006), suggests that such negativity can be an impediment to environmental consciousness. As Houser notes, “wonder is an affect commonly associated with the American environmental movement of the twentieth century, and eco-writers from Rachel Carson to Mitchell Thomashow all invoke wonder as crucial to environmental care” (83). In Powers’ fiction, however, wonder can become overdetermined, sliding into a kind of paranoia in which everything is perilously linked together in a way that “blocks attachment” (108). Even within *Ecosickness*’ reading of wonder exists the possibility of relationships—among

people—collapsing into hostile connections. Yet these negative experiences do not foreclose an experience of the natural world: they can still be embarkation points for environmental engagement. Houser clearly remarks that these affects are not impediments to action; rather, their dispositions can “energiz[e] people to act on environmental, biomedical, and social injustices” (17).

Indeed, Houser frequently links negative and seemingly paralyzing affective responses to powerful calls of politics. Chapter 3, for example, looks at Wallace’s famously gargantuan novel *Infinite Jest* and how an affect of disgust animates the novel’s huge cast of characters. In Houser’s reading of the novel’s hazy, unfocused plot, its multi-page tangents, and its infamous footnote structure, she sees Wallace as critiquing a disposition of “anhedonic solipsism” (160), of too much distance between things. For Houser, Wallace’s antidote to such a passive existence is the feeling of disgust—whether through the presentation of grotesque bodies affected by indiscriminate waste dumping or the long passages detailing the physical pangs during a drug user’s withdrawal. “[D]isgust slaps us in the face and forces us to confront what we would rather ignore” (120), writes Houser, thereby breaking the reader out of the passivity of postmodernity. Engaging with what is dirty and disgusting, instead of recoiling from it, becomes a decidedly political action.

Houser's conscious decision to situate her study in post-1970s examples may strike some as curious: after all, environmentalist critiques of America have been almost concomitant with its inception, from Thoreau's and Emerson's pastoralist writings to Theodore Roosevelt's development of the National Parks Service, to Rachel Carson's pathbreaking 1962 study *Silent Spring*, which exposed the universal presence and effects of industrial pollutants. Houser's defense of her subjects points to an increasing focus, in the aftermath of the Second World War, on the concept of "life itself" (5) as a code to be tinkered with and manipulated by biotechnological regimes. In particular, her fourth chapter explores how books like Piercy's *The Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and Silko's *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) expose the eugenic impulse behind the notion of improving upon life, and thus how it becomes a weapon inflicted upon women, non-white subjects, and the impoverished. "Life itself" possesses an ideological overtone here, and the affect of anxiety utilized by writers like Piercy and Silko resists utopian narratives of universal betterment—particularly because they set their novels amid dystopian futures wherein nature and oppressed bodies are fodder for the experiments of an aloof and corrupt elite.

*Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* is an ambitious, gorgeously written, and thought-provoking book. Houser's resolute disinterest

in developing causal connections between environmental and bodily illnesses may irk some readers, but her dedication to tracing the ambient connections between sick bodies and ill environments—as a means of cultivating ecological thinking through narrative—is immediately persuasive. If, as sociologist Mary Douglas suggested in her famous text *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), dirt and pollution offend against notions of order (2), then Houser's project aligns different qualities of contaminants to think about new ways of ordering the world.

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