

The Lowly Remains: Waste in Twentieth-Century American Fiction

Navid Ebrahimzadeh

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Reading Committee:  
Jessica Burstein, Chair  
Brian Reed  
Sonnet Retman

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Navid Ebrahimzadeh

University of Washington

Abstract

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Navid Ebrahimzadeh

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Jessica Burstein

At what point does a thing become waste, and why? What happens to waste when it is discarded? How can an aesthetics of waste retrieve its modes of production and circulation, revealing submerged histories of the commodities, bodies, and spaces of a nation? These research questions unify my line of inquiry, which enables “The Lowly Remains” to scrutinize literary representations of waste in postwar America, a period paradoxically known both for its unprecedented mass production and streamlined technological concealment of garbage. Examining four distinct yet interrelated categories of waste—corporate, bodily, spatial, and social—this dissertation elucidates the material, economic and psychological systems of waste-aversion which assign and rescind the value of the waste object, emphasizing literary excavation as an effective means of accessing a fuller range of the material world and uncovering historiographical elisions in master narratives of the development of the United States over the last century.

The dissertation examines the symbolic substitutions, cross-pollinations, and ideological relays between different categories of waste—how one economy of value will utilize the rhetoric and associations from another to form a multi-discursive culture of waste aversion. Through this dissertation, I aim to contribute to a growing body of interdisciplinary work on waste in recent years, the broadest goal of which is to grant serious academic attention and value to valuelessness.

Most contemporary studies of literary waste speak of trash as ahistorical abstract category and do not detail the development of various disposable and synthetic materials responsible for its current volumes. To avoid this pitfall, I employ a diverse array of theoretical positions integrated with historical precision and attention to specific materials—each chapter scrutinizes a specific moment in twentieth-century American history, the role of waste in that moment, the formal techniques through which it is aestheticized, and what it discloses about shifting values in the cultural imaginary.

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## 0. Introduction: Containing the Category

### *0.0. Situating Waste Scholarship and Methods*

A paradoxical and porous category, waste presents a series of cultural conundrums: simultaneously ubiquitous and invisible, trivial and significant, valueless yet utterly necessary. While productivity is frequently deemed valuable, the byproducts of productivity, the remnants of once-useful commodities bled of their productive capacities, are not. Whether in the form of material waste or trash, bodily waste or excretions, social waste (sometimes wasted, and often deemed wastes of space) and the places they inhabit, these subjects, objects, and spaces are by definition extraneous and inessential, a waste of time to ponder when considered at all. Yet waste starts to turn up everywhere the moment we look for it, the everyday castoffs of the various economies and systems that structure modern human existence. There is, in fact, a long-standing history of literature fixating on waste as the thematic, formal, or social centerpiece, the subject matter, the aesthetic principle, or in some other capacity, the very ethos of the work. What purpose or purposes could an artwork centered on waste, an aesthetics of trashiness, possibly serve? How does art respond to and work towards the production of paradigm shifts in the history of trashmaking? How might these castoffs signal back, tellingly, to the economies which birthed them, and where else might they signal?

This dissertation seeks to examine literary depictions of waste in mid-to-late-twentieth-century (1943-1997) American prose as related to the development of modern waste management, consumer culture, embodiment, urban ecology, and social hierarchy. This introductory section summarizes the existing body of pertinent scholarship on waste before proceeding to the arguments, terms, methodologies, and contributions the dissertation provides to

the discourse.

First popularized in literary modernism and cultural studies in Charles Baudelaire's mid-nineteenth century poetry volume *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857), and later excavated in Walter Benjamin's 1930s writings on Baudelaire, the interrelated topics of waste and trash, waste's most omnipresent manifestation, have since grown exponentially, becoming a discourse unto themselves. From 2014 to 2016, a series of critical works across the disciplines of literary and cultural studies, philosophy, environmental studies, urban planning, and sociology focalized waste as an increasingly pressing and dynamically flexible rubric for excavating the discarded elements of modern literature and culture (Viney 2014, Bozcagli 2015, Morrison 2015, Rania and Jazairy 2015, Alworth 2016, Dini 2016). In this way, the study of waste often serves as recovery work: trash gets swept aside, trashy literature recuperates it, and literary, social, and urban garbologists extend or complement the process of recuperation.

While the dissertation focuses on twentieth-century U.S. prose, these texts cannot be fully understood without some recourse to foundational texts produced in nineteenth-century European literature. Charles Baudelaire and Oscar Wilde, two important apologists for trash and uselessness respectively, establish a contrarian ethos and aesthetics which the next century of waste-oriented literature, by scrutinizing the lowly and abhorrent, generally retains. *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire's decadent scrutiny of urban and erotic experience, opens by announcing to its appalled audience that its principle aim is to "find charms" in the "most repugnant objects" (14). His poem "The Little Old Women" maliciously addresses the newly developed archetype of the urbanite, who "trudge[s] on, stoic ... / through the chaotic city's teeming waste" (Baudelaire, IV, 1-2). In marked defiance to this apathetic figure, Baudelaire suggests that the urban poet must immerse himself completely in this ignored refuse material, directly and with a

morbid tenderness. In poems such as “To a Red Haired Beggar Girl,” he extends this poetic attention and sympathy to the socially discarded, though no poem encapsulates this ethos as thoroughly as “The Ragpicker’s Wine,” wherein the ragpicker moves through the slums of Paris, here termed a “muddy labyrinth” collecting “the dregs, the vomit of this teeming town,” in direct relation to what Baudelaire considered the poet’s task: to engage wholecloth the city’s discards in lieu of myopically or hypocritically denying their existence (4, 16). Walter Benjamin drives this point home in his 1938 essay “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” wherein he writes that the poet’s task is to locate his “heroic subject from this very refuse,” to serve as a counterweight to the masses of ordinary citizens who fail to see it (108). As opposed to the Romantic poet whose engaged aesthetic is nature, the modern poet considers, in the words of Bill Brown, “the detritus of culture” his “fully engaging aesthetic object” (11).

Alongside the figure of the ragpicker, fin-de-siècle aestheticism works to instantiate alternative systems of value that twentieth-century art continues, complicates, and rejects. “All art is quite useless,” declares the infamous preface to Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), and it is precisely this uselessness that is to be cherished, not bemoaned (xxiv). The aestheticists demand an autonomy of art from other intersecting institutions—political, economic, and moral—seeking a prized sphere of production not tethered to what was seen as the vulgar and literal-minded pragmatism of the marketplace or Victorian didacticism. *Uselessness* becomes the standard by which art is judged because *usefulness* serves as that standard for the majority of other discourses and practices. Here we see an early and influential initiator of an alternate and contrarian economy of value, one that confers value onto valuelessness largely due to its negative assignation by the dominant order of the historical moment. In the interwar period of the next century, this inverted aesthetic hierarchy is taken up

by Virginia Woolf, whom Douglas Mao dubs “an inheritor of those rebellions in which the aesthetes and decadents pitted a doctrine of beauty as terminal value against the renowned Victorian tendency to stress art’s powers of moral instruction” (29).

In aggressive contrast to the nonobjective and aesthetically autonomous aims of early abstract art, the avant-gardes of Dada and surrealism—in particular the readymades and the surrealist found objects of Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray in the mid-1910s through the 1930s—highlight the contingency, rather than the autonomy, of the art-object in particular and the institution of art altogether. This is sometimes achieved through the use of trashy or lowly objects, in part because such materials make the supposed disparity between art and non-art most immediately and jarringly apparent. More broadly, however, this is performed through the historical avant-garde’s attempted fusion of art with the quotidian, the material manifestation of everyday life as a countermeasure to aestheticism’s dissociation from “the life praxis of men” (Bürger, 48).

The foregoing proto-modernist and avant-garde explorations of the undesirable, the overlooked, and the displaced speak to the relationship between waste studies and Anglo-American modernisms. In the eyes of the urban majority, trash—a trivial, worn-out element of experience stripped of its commercially appealing, visually dazzling appearance—is quintessentially banal. Trash and other quotidian objects are seemingly inappropriate subjects for mimetic representation, yet modern art repeatedly focalizes and renders them both visible and significant, whether due to their intrinsic or potentially transcendental properties. Duchamp’s radical interventions play an essential role in this abrupt and jarring switch. While a readymade is not a piece of trash or even a form of waste—after all, a bicycle wheel, urinal, or comb, modified though more or less intact, still retains some glimmer of functional use or exchange-

value—the way in which the readymade is repeatedly dislocated from one network of value and reinscribed in other, purportedly mutually exclusive networks, functions in parallel fashion to trash-centered art. For it is the artist's surprising and even shocking choice of debased, lowly, or quotidian subject matter and materials—in Thierry de Duve's formulation developed from Michel Foucault, the enunciative function which states "This [lowly rubbish] is art"—which is responsible for the object's passage into the aesthetic realm (98). By puncturing the plenum of each previously sequestered domain and re-situating their contents, such a passage fundamentally uproots the foundations of both systems thereafter.

As we are beginning to see, the parameters of this field are wide: every system produces waste, and nearly every byproduct has been considered waste at some point in time. No nation, however, has played a more pivotal role in the history of modern waste than the United States. Our history of trashmaking, detailed at length in Chapter One, reveals that streamlined systems of production, consumerist principles of obsolescence and disposability, and the invention of plastic and related synthetic materials originated in the United States, a nation largely animated by the pursuit of novelty and expansion. Beginning in the 1880s with Taylorism and later succeeded by Fordism in the 1910s, the first efforts to systematically organize factory operations under scientifically-managed principles implemented foundational and influential models of efficiency and output at a theretofore unprecedented scale.

Because increased efficiency requires increased consumer incentive in order to generate exponentially-increased revenue, it is no coincidence that modern standards of accelerated consumption proliferated around this time. In order for this to work, commodities that were already possessed were recast as defunct and trashlike, and commodities that were not yet produced decreased in lifespan. From the creation of disposable products to an expanded

conception of disposability itself, the “uniquely American invention” of “deliberate obsolescence” thus emerges as a response in the twentieth-century capitalist enterprise (Slade, 3). In 1923, General Motors implemented “aesthetic obsolescence” into its production cycle: over a three-year period, newer models would be visually distinct yet technologically identical (Strasser, 193). By 1929, obsolescence and disposal had become loaded with nationalist ideology: in *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, prominent home economist Christine Frederick introduced the notion of “progressive obsolescence,” wherein increased rates of obsolescence reflected the noble and uniquely American pursuit of new things and experiences in defiance of an archaic European veneration of the past (246). In the emerging identity of the modern American consumer, places and histories themselves had become obsolete.

The sanitary landfill, the twentieth century’s iconic waste-symbol and major subject of the dissertation, is also uniquely American both in terms of invention and sheer volume. Introduced in Fresno, California, in 1937, American landfills have been record-breaking since: as of 2019, the largest landfill in the world is the Apex Regional Landfill in Las Vegas, Nevada, boasting a massive 50 million tons of waste and surpassing the Fresh Kills Landfill in New York, which held the title until 2001 (Melosi, 23; Karuga; Lindner, 99).

Physically and conceptually, the postwar period also exhibits unique and unprecedented transformations in human relationships with their byproducts. Although the early 1900s are essential to understanding the development of trashmaking, and although the Anglo-American modernists were interested in an aesthetics of trash and the notion of modernity as linguistic, cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic wasteland, it is the latter half of the century in which new technological developments in disposable materials—such as the invention of Styrofoam in the early 1940s and plastic bags in the mid-1960s, alongside their new postwar waste basket, the

sanitary landfill—began to aggressively transform and accelerate production, consumption, and disposal practices, making trash a more frequently recurring concern in literature and beyond (Bozcagli, 298; Alworth, 57; Roach, 2).

Moreover, postwar paradigm shifts in national infrastructure, including the development of municipal trash collection and the U.S. interstate highway system in the 1950s, along with the resultant explosion of mass-produced suburban housing and supermarkets, evolved concurrently with these new products and amplified prevalent values pertaining to disposability, invisibility, and waste aversion. It is therefore unsurprising that the unprecedented material proliferation of trash in this era correlates with its increased representation in the arts, from the Beatniks' hostile attacks on suburban homogeneity to the postmodern examination of supermarkets as hyperreal matrices severed from their material referents. The evolution of streamlined technocratic systems of mass production and waste disposal, predicated on and constitutive of the impulse to obscure and eliminate unwanted byproducts, makes garbage an increasingly pressing artistic consideration during and after this time.

For scholars of waste, it is a critical commonplace to begin with the work of British cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas. Indeed, nearly every book on the topic—Gay Hawkins' *The Ethics of Waste* (2005), Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted Lives* (2005), David Pike's *Subterranean Cities* (2005), William Viney's *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (2014), Susan Morrison's *The Literature of Waste* (2015), David Alworth's *Site Reading* (2016)—opens with a discussion of Douglas's analysis of polluting behaviors in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), the landmark work in structuralist anthropology that might be considered the origin of waste studies. Each of these texts places emphasis on Douglas's famous definition of dirt as “matter out of place,” and the argument that cultural

concepts of pollution rest upon spatial context and a violation of the ordering principles entailed therein (45). Shoes, for instance, “are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing” (Douglas, 45). If, then, dirt is “dirty” in a bed but not in a garden, what makes dirt problematic is not its material fibers, but its violation of categories and penetration of borders regulated by complex rituals that keep polluting behaviors and objects at bay.

More recent scholarship by Martha Nussbaum and William Viney has challenged Douglas’s ideas, including her radical stance on relative structures of difference or her emphasis on place rather than time. *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, Nussbaum’s 2004 study reconsidering contemporary U.S. obscenity laws, criticizes Douglas for defining impurity almost exclusively in terms of spatial anomalies. Nussbaum notes that there are anomalies that do not elicit fear or disgust, suggesting there is more to the phenomenon than its contextual outlier status. Nussbaum points to dolphins as an example—as sea-dwelling mammals, dolphins violate biological and spatial borders but are not viewed as dirty or contaminating (Nussbaum, 91). In *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (2014), Viney challenges Douglas’s emphasis on matter out of place, opting instead for an emphasis on matter out of *time*, given that notions of inutility and uselessness operate not merely in a spatial but also in a temporal framework. Tied not only to where it is and is not, but *when* it is and is not, waste is “both inert and mobile, in and out of place” (Viney, 112).

Despite these criticisms, most work in the field is coextensive with Douglas, applying the porous boundaries of dirt and cleanliness to other spheres, such as bodily contact, literary taste, and urban space. Taking Douglas as foundational, this dissertation nevertheless adapts the space-

waste relationship as befits the context: in our examination of the waste historiography of *Underworld* (1997) and its literary antecedents, for instance, time and place are not as neatly separated as Viney suggests. Thus, even if the exact parameters of the relationship between waste, time, and space are contested, waste scholars must inevitably grapple with the interrelation—relative, contextual, and contradictory—of these baseline components.

Douglas's assertion that dirt is a contingent rather than necessary substance therefore opened the doors for scholarship to consider multiple forms of undesirable materials in the context of social practice—that waste matter can be “read,” and that such readings reveal that waste is context-dependent, ultimately working to unsettle the borders between cleanliness and trashiness, between private and public, and between the categories that order space itself. Douglas's account, then, provides an intriguing and flexible rubric for examining various discarded elements of modern culture. If cleanliness must eliminate trashiness, the identity of which is predicated on its expulsion from “a systematic ordering and classification of matter,” then trashy literature and art poses a radical potential for disordering basic categories, be they related to commodity production and fetishism, literary aesthetic values, border-averse emotions such as fear and disgust, or the ordering of matter in the form of urban planning, to name a few applications pertinent to our inquiry (Douglas, 45). Trash scholars have used Douglas's basic assertion—that waste is contingent, legible and culturally informative—to ends as diverse as these, key examples of which will now be outlined.

The first major framework addressed is economic. Thus far, we have begun to establish some of the particularities of modern regulatory practices and attitudes towards the production of goods and the excesses they create—specifically, the transition to a consumer culture predicated on efficient production and inefficient consumption, a paradigm shift that constitutes the

historical backdrop of the dissertation's first chapter on corporate waste. Here, the dissertation is most heavily indebted to American historian Susan Strasser and French structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose contributions to the field are enumerated below.

Strasser's *Waste and Want: A Social History of Trash* (1999) details the many minute transitions of the means of production in the nineteenth- and twentieth- century U.S. and the corresponding social attitudes towards possessions and refuse—and, most crucially, how objects slide from one category to the other at increased rates over time. Through examining a wide range of primary documents including domestic advice books, household and factory inventory lists, sanitation policies, reform efforts, and trade journals, Strasser produces a thorough taxonomy of common goods and their increasingly public, rather than domestic, production. Here, *Waste and Want* echoes the well-documented transition from agrarian to industrial capitalism, wherein the production of basic necessities shifts primarily from the home to the factory, from within the household to without.<sup>1</sup> Prior to this transition, customers “practiced habits of reuse that had prevailed in agricultural communities” (Strasser, 12), including boiling food scraps into soup or feeding them to livestock, taking worn-out items and clothes to their makers or mending them one's self, reusing grease to cook or to craft candles or soap, repurposing worn objects as toys, or burning them to heat rooms and cook (Strasser, 30).

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), a sociological text detailing the ascendancy of the nuclear family and the strengthening of the doctrine of separate spheres, Nancy Chodorow notes that the expansion of extra-domestic production makes it such that “production outside the home became identified with work as such; the home was no longer viewed as a workplace. Home and workplace, once the same, are now separate” (4). Similarly, Tamara Hareven's “American Families in Transition: Historical Perspectives on Change” (1982) looks at the “gradual separation of the home from the workplace” that results in “sentiment [beginning] to replace instrumental relationship” in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries (47). By the time of Fordism, this separation is rigid: “When we are at work we ought to be at work. When we are at play we ought to be at play. There is no use trying to mix the two,” writes Ford (92). While these scholars explicate a paradigm shift essential to this dissertation, what is highlighted here is not shifting social relations (subject-subject) so much as the producer's increased alienation from the commodity produced elsewhere (subject-object).

Strasser's text utilizes Lévi-Strauss's concept of *bricolage* to illustrate this fundamental paradigm shift in the modern history of trash. In *The Savage Mind* (1962), Lévi-Strauss defines the *bricoleur* as "someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman" (16-17). The *bricoleur* does not limit his materials to the conventionally received set—the "materials and tools conceived of and procured for the purposes of the project"—opting instead for "whatever is at hand" from a wide and "heterogeneous repertoire" (Lévi-Strauss, 17). This odd-job man thus exhibits a synergy, rather than a divide, "between the toolbox and the junkbox," or, in its gendered nineteenth-century equivalent, the sewing kit and the scrapbox (Strasser, 11). The rise of factory production, by contrast, widens this divide. Whereas nearly "everyone was a *bricoleur* in the preindustrial household of the American colonies and, later, on the frontier" (Strasser, 22), as the site of production shifts outside domestic space, the general populace's "kinesthetic knowledge of materials" wanes (Strasser, 11). More and more, fewer people can mend worn-out objects and feel a decreased sense of responsibility and proximity towards those objects as what was once a necessity becomes a superfluous hobby. This, in tandem with an increasing emphasis on convenience and speed, marks the gradual move towards a fledgling interwar consumer culture—emphases which, as will be demonstrated, expand significantly in the postwar era.

The shift to modern consumerism entailed, then, not merely a change in where commodities originate, but in who possessed and continuously practiced the tactile skills to produce, evaluate, and repair them—not merely a shift in the social organization of producers or their attitudes towards equipment and nourishment, but the range of technical abilities upon which those attitudes rest. From the standpoint of the unskilled or underskilled user, the object's period of usefulness becomes increasingly truncated, its range of life at that node of its

circulation shortened. As obsolescence occurs much earlier in an object's life cycle in contemporary history than ever before, discarded objects become more materially present and conceptually pressing. Trashy literature often opts precisely for these *bricoles*—the odds and ends jettisoned from dominant economies of value—in part as an effort to bring them into an alternative system of circulation with wider and less rigidly utilitarian and pragmatic parameters than those held by the factory or average consumer.

Systematic practices thus arise in turn to meet and form the demands of a consumer culture whose relationships to objects becomes increasingly transient and atomized. Much as the expulsion of dirt defines purity, capitalist models of mass production are predicated on the expulsion or mitigation of inefficiency, of useless matter and wasted energy. In this vein, cultural critics Anson Rabinbach, Mark Seltzer, and Elspeth Brown examine the paradigm shift that arises in the development of Western industrial capitalism deemed the productivist model of efficiency. Rabinbach's *The Human Motor* (1990), a detailed study of the relationship between nineteenth-century European scientific discourses and the development of the fully-fledged bureaucracy of industrial capitalism, defines "modern productivism" as "the belief that human society and nature are linked by the primacy and identity of all productive activity, whether of laborers, machines, or of natural forces" (3). Emerging scientific discourses analyzing the release and containment of energy, such as thermodynamics, formed the basis for a factory model that unites modern subjects in the establishment of values pertaining to speed, efficiency, and the reduction or elimination of waste. Rabinbach examines the rise of conceptions of fatigue and neurasthenia in nineteenth-century science, which take on central importance in Western culture in the 1870s and beyond. This manifests as a "widespread fear that the energy of mind and body was dissipating under the strain of modernity," with increasing attention afforded to "the need to

conserve and restrict the waste and misuse of the body's unique capital—its labor power” (Rabinbach, 6).

As we will see repeatedly, waste is aligned with, and often defined through, aversion and fear: the fear of wasted energy, objects, subjects, and spaces alike, and the violation of production-oriented principles and borders that this entails. Seltzer's *Bodies and Machines* (1992) and Brown's *The Corporate Eye* (2005) extend Rabinbach's analysis (Brown's explicitly stated purpose is to apply Rabinbach's European framework to visual culture in corporate America), noting that this shift entails a rethinking of the human body as a mechanism whose inevitable waste products must be controlled in the name of orderly production. Seltzer notes that “bodies and persons are things that can be made,” and that the “conversion of bodies into living diagrams” allows for a transcendence of their limitations through both scientific and ideological management (3, 160). In turn, Brown considers the manner in which photography was put to use in American corporate culture precisely through the diagramming that Seltzer observes—that the advent of photography made it such that bodily movement “could be frozen, broken down, and reassembled into a more efficient combination of individual movements,” which in turn could be used to instantiate the ideal “subjective relationships to the workplace and to finished goods” in the name of a highly programmatic direction of energy into maximum efficiency with zero waste (4). In their discussions of productivism, Rabinbach, Seltzer, and Brown take up German sociologist Max Weber's concept of rationalization, defined in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) as the secular reorganization of “economic life, of technique, of scientific research, of military, of law and administration” around the principle of efficiency rather than religious belief (26). As with productivism, the facet of rationalization specifically concerned with labor, rationalization substitutes efficiency for “magic as a means to salvation”

(Weber, 117).

Both the distaste for waste and the quasi-metaphysical belief in production as the prime mover of nature and industry alike are epitomized in Henry Ford's *My Life and Work* (1922). The specter of waste looms over the industrialist's autobiography; indeed, it is anathema to Ford, appearing on nearly every page as a deplorable and unnecessary condition of the status quo. The opening passage excoriates the contemporary factory model for encouraging workers to "waste so much time and energy" and therefore lose the "full return from service" as a result (Ford, 2). In criticizing agrarian labor methods, Ford identifies "waste motion—waste effort" as the culprit for high overhead and low profits (15). Elsewhere he identifies ignorance as the culprit for waste in its many iterations: "Waste is due largely to not understanding what one does, or being careless in the doing of it" (Ford, 19). Waste aversion culminates in detailed rationalization as a scientific and technocratic antidote when Ford calculates that reducing ten steps a day per each of his employees would result in saving "fifty miles of wasted motion and misspent energy" (77). Wastes of space are also targeted, as he details the measurements required to give each worker the exact amount of room to operate his machinery: though the workstations "may seem piled right on top of one another," they are in fact "scientifically arranged" according to this principle, so as not to squander an inch (Ford, 113). Since the industrialist exhibits "a horror of waste" both "in material" and "in men," the onus rests on him as manager and arbiter to strategize and implement the appropriate regulatory methods that combat this horror (Ford, 16). The essentialist rhetoric of intrinsic horrors and aversions that every industrialist exhibits here closely resembles Thorstein Veblen's discussion of humanity's inborn appreciation of efficiency in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), wherein he states that man "is possessed of a taste for effective work, and a distaste for futile effort. He has a sense of the merit of serviceability or efficiency and of

the demerit of futility, waste, or incapacity” (15).

Time, energy, materials, motion, space, and men: all can be wasted under careless management, yet all can be salvaged through calculated, scientific arrangement. While Ford’s immediate inquiry concerns the manufacture of automobiles, the parallels to theological salvation narratives are clear, as Weber and Rabinbach have noted. Ford himself expands the reach of productivism to moral and metaphysical domains, for instance, when he vehemently states that “nothing is more abhorrent than a life of ease” and that “there is no place in civilization for the idler,” directly echoing the Judeo-Christian intolerance of sloth as well as its value-laden rhetoric, or when he expands the range of his postulations to “the largest application,” insisting they “have nothing peculiarly to do with motor cars or tractors but form something in the nature of a universal code” (13, 3). Under productivism, the principles of mechanical production are not specific to industrial capitalism but extend to all worldly registers, guiding and animating matter itself.

Certainly, attempts to minimize the wasted energy of labor efforts are not unique to modernity, though the scale to which they were rigorously theorized and implemented in these decades was unprecedented. While Fordism is the most well-known of these systems, it relied on foundational precepts inherited from Taylorism, so named for American engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor. At the turn of the century and through the 1910s, Taylor instantiated the system of scientific management expanded and transformed by Ford. In our history of corporate mechanisms undergirding waste production and the transition from steward to consumer culture, the passage from Taylorism to Fordism is worth attending to here. Martha Banta’s history of this transition in *Taylored Lives* (1993) corroborates Ford’s own comments on the expansion of productivism beyond the realm of the factory. Whereas Taylor “had concentrated upon the man

as laborer,” he paid “no attention to the house environment to which the scientifically managed worker returned at night” (Banta, 215). By contrast, Fordism “insisted upon the tight fit between laborer, citizen, and homeowner,” a tripartite structure aided by the establishment of the Ford Sociological Department, which provided varied benefits and assistance in procuring single-family housing (Banta, 215). Whereas Taylorism provided laborers with the minimum income necessary for subsistence and focused on the standardization of the labor process, Fordism instantiated a more pervasive model of production, consumption, and habitation by providing higher wages allowing for and normalizing commodity consumption and homeownership (Brown, 5).

Productivism and waste aversion therefore reach well beyond the context of the factory, operating, as this dissertation will demonstrate, on domestic, moral, bodily, spatial, and social registers. Drawing upon Strasser’s history, Gay Hawkins’ *The Ethics of Waste* (2005) shows how these principles extend into domestic space by means of a rhetoric espousing convenience. The production and marketing of more streamlined and packaged domestic products in the 1920s, the aims of which were to prevent unnecessary labor, brought “economic rhetoric about efficiency and streamlined production” into the household, thereby extending productivist principles and transforming the domestic sphere “into a site of fast, competent production” (Hawkins, 26). American home economist and Taylorist Christine Frederick helped popularize these ideas through a series of articles in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* throughout the 1910s, as well as *Selling Mrs. Consumer* (1929), her book advocating domestic consumerism as an essential American ideal.

The logical extension of this ever-expanding discourse also manifests in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), whose citizens move “steady as the wheels,” delighting in, above all

else, “the principles of mass production at last applied to biology,” among other sectors (7). The novel’s dystopian application of Fordism satirizes modernity’s secular substitution of transcendental mysticism with overtly theological overtones. The majority of the novel’s characters, part of a labor force whose consciousness is homogenized in the name of efficiency, literally worship maximized production and hygiene, reciting Fordism’s hypnopædic slogans such as “Cleanliness is next to Fordliness” and “History is bunk” or meaningless (Huxley 91, 28).<sup>2</sup> This latter aphorism, the aim of which is to lessen the parameters of understanding with respect to products and subjects alike, is telling in a waste-averse culture—one of the dissertation’s central arguments, detailed in the chapter summaries to follow, is that trashy literature aims to expand a historical understanding of objects not merely within, but beyond, the economies through which they circulate.

As the first chapter illustrates, William Viney is correct to assert that the practice of hiding waste matter spatially and ideologically also entails temporal consequences—when objects are only given serious consideration at the apex of their market value, their subsequent degraded forms are omitted or obscured from historical consciousness, thereby constricting the consumer’s view to only a narrow slice of the involved processes of production, circulation, consumption, disposal, and reincorporation. It also proves detrimental to the productivist machine itself, which paradoxically remains inefficient due to its wasteful jettisoning of materials. Productivism therefore aims to maximize market value while simultaneously narrowing the parameters of that value.

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<sup>2</sup> Huxley is directly alluding to an interview Ford gave to the *Chicago Tribune* on May 25th, 1916: “I don’t know whether Napoleon did or did not try to get across there and I don’t care. I don’t know much about history, and I wouldn’t give a nickel for all the history in the world. It means nothing to me. History is more or less bunk.” An abbreviation of “bunkum,” which denotes beguiling, manipulative speech devoid of factual content, the term “bunk” refers to “nonsense” more broadly (“Bunkum, n.2,” “Bunk, n.4”).

Thus far we have considered waste aversion, theorization, and implementation on the corporate scale, particularly the ascendancy of scientific management and productivism under early twentieth-century American capitalism. While productivism mitigates wasted motion and energy of the discrete laboring body, it does not explicitly probe the interior waste matters of that body. A second and slightly messier subcategory of waste studies works at the anatomic level to analyze the production of organic, rather than corporate, waste. Although the fear of wasted energy and materials mirrors the fear of debased human matter, the operating principle here is not efficiency, but disgust, having less to do with values and more with bodies. The corporate subject may disapprove of or discard trash, but it would be an exaggeration to say that it repulses him or her in the way bodily waste usually does. Alongside Douglas, the scholarly precursor here is Julia Kristeva's influential definition of the abject presented in *Powers of Horror* (1982). The abject, neither subject nor object, draws the subject "towards the place where meaning collapses," near but not beyond the margin of understanding (Kristeva, 2). It disturbs "identity, system, order," and violates "borders, positions, rules," attracting and repulsing the subject, threatening its radically contingent integrity, beckoning it towards a fatal destruction (Kristeva, 4).

The parallels between Kristeva and Douglas are abundant, but for Kristeva the analysis revolves around a substance more debased than dirt: bodily excrement. "Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.)" present a fundamental "danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death" (Kristeva, 71). While Kristeva's account emerges from a different framework, waste matter is once again coupled with unstable boundaries and the horrific fear of their undoing, a fear inextricably tied to human relationships with the undesirable. Along the same

vein, Jesse Oak Taylor defines abjection as “the body’s reaction to its own matter out of place” (117). One way to conceive Kristeva’s theory of abjection, then, is to view it as a transposition of Douglas’s reading of dirt onto the human body; whereas Douglas considers “the sociocultural level of the social body,” Kristeva focalizes the individual body’s subjectivity and materiality (Taylor, 117).

Using Douglas and Kristeva as a foundation, recent work in affect studies has sought to thoroughly define disgust, often through a taxonomy of disgusting objects and their effects on human psychology. Disgust is, according to affect scholars Colin McGinn and Carolyn Korsmeyer, primarily an aversion to two loathed facets of human reality: debased materiality and mortality. The emotion of disgust arises, in other words, when the human subject is reminded of the fleshiness and eventual decay of his or her body. McGinn’s *The Meaning of Disgust* (2011) analyzes disgust in terms of its tendency to elicit recoil: we turn away from the disgusting object in order to “preserve our disgust-free state of consciousness,” so as to “keep consciousness ‘clean’” (11). Korsmeyer echoes this directly in *Savoring Disgust* (2011), writing that disgust “erects a protective barrier between subject and object”—i.e. it rejects the subject’s proximity to the object in favor of distance (35). What is actually being kept “clean” is consciousness itself, not merely (and sometimes not at all) the body. Nevertheless, the content of such unacceptable ideas has to do with the corporeality of the body: blood, snot, and semen make it such that “our vaunted quasi-divinity dissolves into the mess of organic reality” (McGinn, 74). Bodily excretion revolts because it disturbs an anti-materialist idealism of transcending one’s flesh, an “ontological distance from our animal bodies” (McGinn, 74). Even as it flows dangerously beneath the surface, waste matter is generally deemed better unseen.

Returning to Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Korsmeyer analyzes the disgust produced by

proximity to corpses, arguing that “the ultimate recoil is from our own mortality” (35). Disgust arises when consciousness is threatened by contamination and dissolution of “bodily integrity,” which here means dying, decomposing, and becoming “the disgusting object itself” (Korsmeyer, 35). When it comes to bodily waste, then, fear is bound up with expulsion: not the expulsion of trash or of inefficiency, but of unpleasant biological facets of lived human experience. Most illuminating for our purposes of examining trashy literature, perhaps, is the idea that such emotions arise indiscriminately in response to aesthetic and physical objects, or to representation and presentation alike. Korsmeyer notes that disgust has the capacity to “impart an intuitive, felt grasp of the significance of its object” in a mode that other emotions do not—that disgust informs the subject of the disgusting object with a sharp, automatic intensity (8). Disgust “achieves a direct and immediate arousal that penetrates the screen of mimesis or artistic rendition,” which is to say that “one recoils viscerally whether the object of disgust is aroused by art or by an object of life” (Korsmeyer, 39).

While dubious as thus boldly formulated, this idea entails potentially radical consequences for the waste scholar, and maps onto a long-standing series of debates regarding the relationship between art and life and the challenges that modern and postmodern art pose to classical conceptions of mimesis. If disgust overrides a suspension of disbelief in the reader, then disgusting literature has the potential to harness a potently disruptive *aesthetic* power, not merely a categorical or conceptual one—one that allows for something akin to mimetic transparency, or, as will be argued in a later qualification of Korsmeyer’s assertion, semi-transparency. In the intermediary space between aesthetic and external reality, the literature of waste forces the experience of abjection onto the reader, but at one layer of removal, bringing abhorred objects back into focus in a way that physical interaction with them cannot.

Given the multitude of economies that function through the production and attempted elimination of waste, trash studies centers on a third and related subcategory: wasted space or spatial waste, which shifts in both focus and scope from the corporeal to the industrial, from the microcosmic view of the body from within to the macrocosmic view of the city from below. Modern systems of urban planning, public sanitation, and urban renewal enact the concerns of a waste-averse culture on a grander scale through the attempted containment of undesirable populations, the construction of sewers and other streamlined waste disposal systems, and gentrification, respectively. In “Walking in the City,” the influential chapter on urbanism in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1980), French philosopher Michel de Certeau follows the through-line inaugurated by Douglas and later taken up by Rabinbach and other scholars investigating rationalization of the body, analyzing the maintenance of polluting behaviors, bodies, and objects in the context of the modern metropolis. City planning, writes de Certeau, regulates and produces space by repressing “all the physical, mental and political pollutions that would compromise it” (94). Civic administrations, utilizing the Fordist efficiency model of the factory, produce a regulatory taxonomy on a much grander scale—a classifying system of “differentiation and redistribution of the parts and functions of the city” that divides and orders subjects and objects according to its streamlined rubric (de Certeau, 94). That which cannot be organized and assimilated in this way then “constitutes the ‘waste products’ of a functionalist administration (abnormality, deviance, illness, death, etc.)” (de Certeau, 94).

What to do with these seemingly unassimilable remainders of urban life? Beginning with de Certeau, Thomas Heise’s *Urban Underworlds* (2010) delineates the material, social, and ideological processes that produce stigmatized zones of urban space and their inhabitants: how industrial capitalism generates rapid industrial expansion, which then leads to population density,

which in turn results in cultural clashes and the production of difference and hierarchy. Heise's text then historically details the manners in which urban planning works to contain and regulate the resultant material and social waste to undesirable zones in the city out of "mandates for efficiency and legibility," as well as sordid entertainment value in the form of slum tourism and the nightlife industry (95). The inhabitants of this underworld form the underclass—"the residuum that remains when all use-value is extracted from a given population"—which forms the basis of the interrelated rubric on social waste that closes the dissertation (Heise, 54). In concert with Heise, David Pike's *Subterranean Cities* (2005) examines how the image of the underground serves as a repository for socially deviant or undesirable populations in the urban imaginary: "alien urban categories," including "ruins of things, places, people, and outmoded commodities" become pathologized and vilified before they are submerged and "metaphorically assimilated to the space of sewers" (3, 12).

The spatial focus of each of these analyses entails, unsurprisingly, an emphasis on perspective and visibility, foreground and background—on where one is relatively positioned and the range of visibility this allows and disallows. "Walking in the City" opens with an analytic description of Manhattan viewed from the 110th story of the former World Trade Center, wherein de Certeau looks at "yesterday's buildings, already transformed into trash cans" (91). De Certeau's elevated position grants him an all-encompassing bird's eye view—he is looking down, "totalizing the most immoderate of human texts" (92). The panoramic view positions the subject as voyeur—it "puts him at a distance," and elevates his perspective from a labyrinthian, immersive, and invested ground-level position to the detached, contemplative, and metatextual (de Certeau, 92). This contrasts considerably with the visibility afforded to the "ordinary practitioners of the city," the pedestrians who exist "below the thresholds at which

visibility begins” (de Certeau, 93). For the everyday subjects whose views are situated and not totalizing, “their story begins on ground level, with footsteps” (de Certeau, 97). For de Certeau, the pedestrian who is barred from the panoramic view also manages to escape its panoptic vision, diving into alleyways, under awnings, into bars, and other public, obscured realms of the underworld. De Certeau therefore deems this subcategory of pedestrians “beneath the discourses that ideologize the city,” unapproved subjects whose illegible, nontransparent refuse-status resists being co-opted by a purportedly totalizing functionalist program, “impossible to administer” as a result of their avoidance of approved byways (95). De Certeau’s account, in tandem with Heise and Pike’s analyses of underground spaces, therefore presents at least three central urban positions: the city seen from skyscraper, the city seen from street level, and the city underground, each with its attendant range of perception.

In light of the relationship between urban space, trash, and visibility, a major question becomes: how does trashy literature superimpose poetic cartographies on top—or, as is more often the case, below—the modernist machine of rationalization that delineates and orders urban design and administration?

The preceding discussion of the urban underground as spatial waste is inextricably linked to its trashy inhabitants, who form the fourth and closely related subcategory of waste discourse. If, as Seltzer says, bodies are things that can be made, then they can be tossed aside; if individual bodies or populations are deemed disgusting or useless, their social value and right to exist can be rescinded. The metaphor circulates widely through the public lexicon: to adhere to various gendered, classed, and racialized principles of appearance, status, and behavior is to be “classy,” whereas to fail is, tellingly, “trashy” (“Trashy, adj. 3”). Thus applied to the social realm, waste studies broadens and draws from historical materialism, gender and sexuality studies, and critical

race theory, all of which critique the asymmetrical configurations of power and value embedded into everyday life. The drunk, the drug-user, the homeless, the prostitute, and all stigmatized subjects who fail to uphold dominant standards of productivity, procreation, cleanliness, and taste, become aligned with inutility, social disruption, and contamination.

Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (2005) describes this as the production of "human waste," or "more correctly wasted humans (the 'excessive' and 'redundant,' that is the population of those who either could not or were not wished to be recognized or allowed to stay)" which "is an inevitable outcome of modernization, and an inseparable accompaniment of modernity" (5). Bauman's text presents human waste as the unwanted refuse of an indifferent productivist machine intent on economic progress and order-building, one that explodes in the last two centuries due largely to population growth. In *Frames of War* (2009), American philosopher Judith Butler scrutinizes ideologies of war that differentiate grievable from non-grievable lives, an uneven discursive structure that produces horror or indifference when necessary to further its agenda. Alexander Weheliye's African-American feminist work *Habeas Viscus* (2014) provides a taxonomy of racialized social categories—from full humans, to not-quite-humans, to nonhumans—which collectively form a fractured but "relational ontological totality" running the gamut from wholly useful to wholly useless (32).

The fourth category of waste scholarship therefore examines the relationship between cultural systems of value and groups historically dispossessed of that value, asking how certain populations acquire what Hannah Arendt calls "the right to have rights" (296) while others are consigned to the paradoxical category of what Lisa Marie Cacho deems "living nonbeings" (6) whose subhuman experiences of existence constitute "something living that is other than life"

(Butler, 15). Accounts of social value and social death ask who gets to matter and who does not, how value is assigned or rescinded in distinct epochs and locations, which groups benefit from the maintenance of these networks, and how they are maintained through the lexicon, tropes, and associations with filth that form the corresponding rhetorical repertoire. If the rhetoric of disposability considers the undesirable characteristics of surplus populations causal rather than symptomatic, the literature of social waste in turn explores them as coping mechanisms and practices responsive to all-encompassing economies and hierarchies. Taken together, these scholarly accounts form a recuperative discourse that aims to ascribe value to the socially discarded and present a counterhistory to the dominant orders that sweep them aside.

The four categories of and approaches to waste just enumerated—corporate, bodily, spatial, and social—correspond directly to the four chapters of this dissertation, summarized in detail in the third section of the introduction. Chapter One examines the roles of waste production and management in Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997) with particular attention paid to the postwar technologies of plastics and sanitary landfills; Chapter Two foregrounds the depiction of feces, semen, and menstrual blood in Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), William S. Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* (1959), and Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984); shifting to a built environment approach, Chapter Three excavates the subterranean spaces in Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1943) and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), while the fourth and final chapter focuses on homeless populations cast as social trash in *Tropic of Orange* (1997) by Karen Tei Yamashita and *Ironweed* (1983) by William Kennedy.

### *0.1. Talking Trash: Waste Terminology in Literature*

Before proceeding to the chapter summaries, a taxonomy of the central terms in waste discourse, and their usage in literary criticism, is in order. The terms “garbage,” “trash,” and “refuse” are largely synonymous, and are often used interchangeably by scholars and laymen alike, though some key differences are worth noting. In *Rubbish! The Archaeology of Garbage* (1992), garbologists William Rathje and Cullen Murphy distinguish garbage and trash thusly: garbage is composed of wet and dry discards alike, while trash is exclusively dry (9, 11).

Architects Rania Ghosn and El Hadi Jazairy make a similar distinction in *Geographies of Trash* (2015), detailing that early twentieth-century Americans physically separated waste into garbage, ash, and rubbish (here synonymous with “trash”), designating organic materials as “garbage” and inorganic materials as “rubbish” or “trash.”<sup>3</sup> These distinctions indicate that “trash” normally designates inorganic, manufactured objects with minimal use-value to others after being discarded, a modest form of value that garbage, usually organic, rotting and pungent, does not.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides three definitions for “garbage”: 1) the offal of an animal used for food; 2) refuse in general; filth, and 3) worthless or foul literary matter (“Garbage, n.”). The first of these corroborates the designation of garbage as specifically organic refuse, the second broadens the scope so as to make it interchangeable with other forms of waste, and the third broadens it further to incorporate literary materials that are not literally but figuratively deemed worthless in accordance to prevailing standards of taste and decorum. Garbage is therefore a highly relative category. As Walter Moses notes in “Garbage and Recycling: From Literary Theme to Mode of Production” (2007), because “each cultural system, or sub-system such as art, has to deal with the category and the reality of garbage within its own

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<sup>3</sup> As Ghosn and Jazairy explain, ash formed a third category when furnaces and chimneys were in daily and necessary usage as means of generating heat and disposing of the unwanted. This practice would recede with the emergence of municipal waste management in the twentieth century.

logic,” what is garbage in one system may serve as a “useful, functional cultural artifact in another” (1). One man’s foul literary matter is thus the beloved tome of another, functioning in a distinct economy of value. This is also generally true of its related terms.

As with “garbage,” the noun form of “trash” has three primary definitions in the *OED*: 1) Discarded matter; refuse; 2) Cultural items, ideas, or objects of poor quality, and 3) A person or people regarded as being of very low social standing (“Trash, n.1”). Similar and occasionally indistinguishable from “garbage” (the *OED*, for instance, defines “trash” as “domestic refuse” or “garbage,” particularly within the United States), “trash” is deployed idiomatically more often than “garbage,” and in a greater variety of contexts, as exhibited in its verb and adjective forms. One can “talk trash,” exist as a “piece of trash,” and exhibit “trashy” or socially deviant, disreputable behavior (“Trash talk, v.,” “Trashy, adj.”). While two of the three definitions overlap to a degree, “trash” includes the social realm and its attendant hierarchies while “garbage” does not, defining both objects and subjects of poor quality. After trash, “refuse” is the term most often deployed as a social value-judgment to mean a “despised outcast,” “worthless group of people,” or “the scum or dregs of a particular group or class” (“Refuse, n.1 and adj.”). As explored in the fourth chapter on social waste, the related term “Skid Row” refers to the “bottom rung of the urban social ladder” (Miller, 80).

As an adjective, “trashy” means “worthless” or “disreputable,” most often with reference to people (“Trashy, adj.”). Likewise, *The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang* (2005) defines “trash” as “a contemptible person,” tracing its colloquial usage back to early seventeenth-century England (“Trash, n.”). Part of what earns disrepute or contempt in this context may be found in distinct definitions of the noun as well as its adjectival form: in drug slang, “trash” refers to illicit substances such as marijuana and heroin, and an individual is considered “trashed” when “very

drunk or drug-intoxicated” (“Trash, n.,” “Trashed, adj.”). The colloquialisms “wasted” and “shitfaced” designate the same, aligning intoxication and generally disruptive behavior with fecal matter and other forms of waste (“Wasted, adj.” “Shitfaced, adj.”). It is therefore the consumption of illegal substances, or the *excessive* consumption of legal substances, that appear to make the consumer “trashy” or waste-like. Here we observe, on the micro-corporeal scale, how trash operates as a polluting behavior—one that moves beyond bodily and social borders, and is to a degree determined by the quantity of the pollutant that makes it across.

*The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang* provides two more useful definitions for the adjective “wasted”: “absolutely exhausted” and “depleted of value” (“Wasted, adj.”). In the discursive field of waste, these notions are tethered to one another—to get wasted is to expend one’s finite energy towards unproductive ends, to exhaust the body without contributing to production. Inefficiency is the enemy of the assembly line, and intoxicating the body, whether as a means of recreation or self-destruction, may worsen this inefficiency. Moreover, the erratic and unknowable elements associated with substance experimentation and abuse violate a fundamental tenet of productivism: the imperative to diagram and direct the corporate worker, making not only the body but interiority itself “visible, legible, and governable” (Seltzer, 95). As we have seen, the central aim of productivism is the complete “elimination of waste” from the labor process, from both the objective and subjective realms (Brown, 18). As Alworth notes in his discussion of Burroughs, “getting wasted, in this sense, entails becoming like material waste,” therefore constituting an undesirable behavior to be eliminated (65). Disorderly, destructive, disturbing, and in various states of decay, “junkies and cadavers” fall into the realm

of “wasted subjects” that populate much of the texts in this dissertation and are the focus of the fourth chapter (Alworth, 59).<sup>4</sup>

Before scrutinizing the term “waste” in its own right, “trash” must be attended to in the aesthetic domain. While the term is used in the public vernacular to refer to the socially disreputable, in literary studies it sometimes refers to lowbrow or popular generic tropes, the remnants of the literary past more generally, or an aesthetic project that knowingly and often ironically incorporates such elements.

Pulp fiction, for instance, is almost ubiquitously considered trashy for its poor paper quality, its Fordist rate and philosophy of production, its titillating and recycled contents, and its predominantly working-class readership. Named for the cheap and fragile woodpulp paper on which they were printed, twentieth-century pulp magazines and novels “were seen as disposable literature produced cheaply on disposable (almost instantly disintegrating) paper,” their quick physical degeneration rendering them “trashy and ephemeral” (Earle, 6, 7). Erin Smith notes that pulp magazines were deemed “unambiguously trash, cheaply produced escape literature designed to be thrown away once read” (19). The pulps, in other words, never aspired to endure physically or enter the historical canon (beyond the 1930s through the 1950s of their peak popularity), but acknowledged and acceded to a built-in obsolescence as ephemera. The transience of pulp fiction was not only material, however, but applied also to the accelerated rate of composition. Pulp companies aimed for maximum profit, neglecting sustainability or consideration of impact; writers were paid by the word, meaning speed of composition took precedence over revision or narrative quality. Pulp writers “had little to say about the aesthetics

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<sup>4</sup> One need not be a drunk or drug-addict to receive this designation. In Ireland, for instance, the colloquial “waster” describes a “lazy, unambitious person” according to the *New Partridge Dictionary of Slang* (“Waster, n.”).

of their fiction, but they recounted with pride their long hours, speed, and productivity,” sometimes producing an extraordinary 200,000 words a month (Smith, 21; Earle, 100).

The contents of pulp fiction also contributed to their disrepute in certain circles, generally among the literary elite associated with high modernism. The pulps were largely genre fiction, comprised of westerns, thrillers, spy novels, horror stories, and melodramatic romances, with sensationalized covers, titles, and stories designed to entertain and sell rather than innovate or spur contemplation. As Clive Bloom notes in *Cult Fiction: Popular Reading and Pulp Theory* (1996), “aggressive marketing, lurid covers, violent and erotic stories about money, drugs, the city, teenage delinquents, mobsters and action combined with a very low price gave these paperbacks an air of sleaze, and cheap soon stood for nasty” (43). In addition to featuring risqué content, the pulps were highly formulaic, indeed even self-consciously and blatantly so.<sup>5</sup> Pulp mystery writer Frank Gruber, for instance, identified the eleven elements necessary for any writer, himself included, to compose a mystery novel, while Frederick Faust claimed to have written three hundred Westerns by use of a single plot (Earle, 95). In the 1930s, companies even began publishing indices of standard tropes specifically written for pulp fiction writers to utilize—one such series was called *The Plot Genie* (Earle, 96).

Defined against the ambitious innovations of contemporaneous avant-gardes, trashy literature became associated with a system of mechanical reproduction that substituted superficially distinct elements within a rigid formula. Bloom details the art-trash dichotomy that places pulp fiction in the latter category: “art is serious and permanent, trash is ephemeral and light; art reveals and trash conceals; art is a new reality and trash is an old reality repackaged; art

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<sup>5</sup> H.L. Mencken and George Jean Nathan, for instance, considered *Saucy Stories* and *Black Mask*, two 1920s pulp magazines they founded and published, “louse magazines” containing mere “boob bait” conceived of as purely commercial enterprises established to offset the debt they had incurred through production of the more prestigious *Smart Set* (Mott, 261-262).

is unique and authentic while trash is formulaic and mechanical; art is history and trash is nostalgia; art is truth but trash is lies” (150). Lurid, hackneyed, mass-produced and largely interchangeable, pulp fiction manifests as a particular iteration of a more general conception of trashiness as the lower stratum of aesthetic production conceived vertically. Since the pulps operate through a plot-by-numbers construction, individual texts, plots, characters, and themes are all replaceable, and hence disposable, from the vantage point of an economy of value prioritizing singularity and innovation.

As with getting “trashed” through intoxication, the association with or ingestion of “trashy” materials renders the subject equally trash-like. Pulp fiction was read by predominantly working-class readers including soldiers, factory workers, sailors, and miners, often with only a grade-school level of literacy (Smith, 23). It was affordable and easily digested on the level of sign and structure, qualities which many of the slick “middlebrow” magazines and the experimental “little” magazines resisted and vilified (Thacker, 24). In a 1933 *Vanity Fair* article tellingly entitled “The Pulps: Day Dreams for the Masses,” for instance, Marcus Duffield deems the aesthetic province of the pulps the “underworld of literature,” into which “most of us never dive” except to browse “the literary preferences of those who move their lips when they read” (26). Likewise, in a June 1937 issue of *Harper's*, pulp fiction is derided as “staple fodder,” its readership comprised of “immature minds” who are “stirred by the same things that would interest a savage” (MacMullen, 98). While drawing from an elitist and Eurocentric hierarchical tradition wherein the poor and non-whites amount to social trash, these proclamations also draw from a more egalitarian rhetoric of contamination: anyone can degenerate if he or she reads enough trashy literature. Margaret MacMullen’s article warns that it is the “*steady reader* of this kind of fiction” who becomes infiltrated by its degenerate predilections (98, emphasis added).

Within a larger system of waste discourse, then, extensive exposure to trash aesthetics lowers the consumer into the lower stratum of social trash.

Trash aesthetics are not limited to the domain of pulp fiction or even lowbrow cultural production, however. Critics Larry McCaffery, Ben Highmore, and Patricia Yaeger employ the phrase “trash aesthetics” or “aesthetics of trash” to describe the more canonically “highbrow” works of Donald Barthelme, Walter Benjamin, and William Faulkner, respectively.<sup>6</sup> In his analysis of *Snow White* (1967), McCaffery notes that “although fiction may not be able to transcend the limits imposed by its trashy, too-familiar materials,” it can “accommodate itself to this condition” through “incorporating this same debased condition into its very fabric” (150). In the context of Barthelme’s experimental novel, the trashy materials McCaffery refers to are the tropes and archetypes of fairy tales and other commercialized, popular forms of narrative which the art-trash dichotomy considers antithetical to high art. An avant-garde work aims for novelty, yet culturally ubiquitous and tired tropes found everywhere are hardly novel; an aesthetics of trash, however, incorporates these base materials into its composition despite or because of their incongruity.

Along these lines, trash aesthetics align with the nexus of ideas sometimes associated with postmodernism, insofar as postmodernism may be said to fixate on John Barth’s conception of literary exhaustion. The year 1967 oversaw the publication of three important texts concerning an aesthetics of trash and an anti-individualist ethos Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard would later associate with postmodernism: Barthelme’s *Snow White*, Barth’s “The Literature of Exhaustion,” and Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author.” A plastic factory tour guide in

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<sup>6</sup> See McCaffery, “Barthelme’s *Snow White*: The Aesthetics of Trash” in *The Metafictional Muse* (1982); Highmore, “Benjamin’s Trash Aesthetics” in *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* (2002); Yaeger, “Dematerializing Culture: Faulkner’s Trash Aesthetic” in *Faulkner and Material Culture* (2012).

Barthelme's novel provides an explanation of the "trash phenomenon" applicable to each of these texts:

Now you're probably familiar with the fact that the per-capita production of trash in this country is up from 2.75 pounds per day in 1920 to 4.5 pounds per day in 1965, the last year for which we have figures, and is increasing at the rate of about four percent a year. Now that rate will probably go up, because it's *been* going up, and I hazard that we may very well soon reach a point where it's 100 percent. Now at such a point, you will agree, the question turns from a question of disposing of this "trash" to a question of appreciating its qualities, because, after all, it's 100 percent, right? And there can no longer be any question of 'disposing' of it, because it's all there is, and we will simply have to learn how to 'dig' it—that's slang, but peculiarly appropriate here. (Barthelme, 103)

"Trash" here is meant in the literal sense, but the novel's frequent metafictional commentaries intimate that the postwar inescapability of trash is also an inescapability of the literary past—just as there is no escaping trash, there is no escaping "the drek of familiar, banal language," in a motif extending Barthelme's predecessors Joyce and Eliot (McCaffery, 121). In this way, Barthelme's trash phenomenon maps onto Barth's calls "the used-upness of certain forms" or the "felt exhaustion of certain possibilities" in postwar literary history (64). Barth argues that there no longer exists an outside to artistic exhaustion, if indeed there ever had to begin with. In lieu of utter abandonment of the creative endeavor, the artist's task is to learn to "dig" trash, to excavate and incorporate it into its very constitution, thereby producing something that, while still garbage, succeeds in some other, perhaps ironic or self-reflexive, capacity. Barthes' seminal "The Death of the Author" produces a similar, albeit broader, position: artistic production in *any* period must make use of a "ready-made lexicon" inherited from already-existing linguistic structures, literary genres, and tropes which precede and proceed the author historically and discursively (53). These three texts hinge around ostensible endings: the exhaustion of literary

forms, the end of originality, and even art itself, insofar as art is conceived of as pure and trash-free.<sup>7</sup>

“Trash” is therefore the operative term in the literary-aesthetic realm, and this dissertation will follow the aforementioned critics in using the terms “trash” and “trashy” with regards to fiction, though the term is employed in reference to literary *decorum* rather than literary *inheritance*. As used here, “trashy” aesthetics and “trashiness” will largely refer to the inclusion of obscene and lurid elements associated with lowbrow fiction, and so will be deployed most often in Chapter Two, focused on bodily waste and its oft-contested inclusion in literature.<sup>8</sup>

While “trash” is therefore central, “waste” is the default term of the dissertation writ large for a number of reasons. The most capacious of the related terms, “waste” includes “garbage,” “trash,” and “refuse,” and it operates on corporate, environmental, aesthetic, bodily, spatial, social, and moral spheres alike. As a noun, “waste” can designate an “uninhabited” or “uncultivated” region, a “lavish abundance of something,” to any “refuse matter” or “unserviceable material remaining from any process of manufacture” (“Waste, n.”). As a verb, waste refers to the act or process of wasting, and any act of “useless expenditure or consumption” (“Waste, v.”). “Waste” therefore refers to regions and wastelands, organic and inorganic waste ejected from the industrial, social, or anatomical body, and to any processes that yield waste, including being “wasted away by disease,” time, or economic neglect (Seltzer, 153). With regards to the rhetoric and practice of modern productivism, the operative term is again

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<sup>7</sup> In many ways, these postwar writers, and Barthes in particular, extend the assertions on impersonality that T.S. Eliot makes earlier in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), namely that “the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” in the form of inheriting and reconfiguring past traditions (40). Eliot responds to what he viewed as the fallacy of Romantic individualism, pervasive in the modernist rhetoric of “make it new.” Barthes and company, by contrast, respond to what they perceive as the residual Romanticism found within modernism—later targeted by Frederic Jameson in his critique of the modernist “monadic subject,” who relies on a “metaphysics of the inside and outside” (11).

<sup>8</sup> This body of obscene and often pornographic literature is also considered “dirty” insofar as it is “unclean in action or speech” (“Dirty, adj.”).

“waste”—wasted movement, wasted energy, wasted materials (Ford, Banta, Rabinbach). The infrastructural systems that deal with garbage and trash together are referred to as “waste management systems” (Alworth, DeLillo, Trumpeter). Garbage disposal in the form of municipal hauling and landfill maintenance is but one facet of a wider system of waste management (alongside urban design, sewage systems, and fecal sludge management).

This dissertation therefore follows a number of other texts in the field that consider waste a “flexible category grounded in social relations,” though also asocial material systems (Hawkins, ix). Moreover, the term is preferred insofar as it foregrounds the economy of its birth: in the terms “nuclear waste” or “medical waste,” for instance, “the wasted material gestures back to the economy that produced it” (Hawkins, vii). In his reflections on the subject in *Object Lessons*, Brian Thill describes waste as “ambient,” thereby associating it with wider networks and environments (3). This dissertation is drawn to the category of waste due precisely to its pervasive ambience, its foundational yet unobtrusive background status, its elusiveness as concept. Thill deems waste “resistant to capture,” since “every thought about waste seems much too big or much too small” (5). Indeed, a central aim of “The Lowly Remains” is to identify the literary, rhetorical, and conceptual cross-pollinations of the various iterations of this porous, multi-discursive category.

The related phrase, “the literature of waste” is also frequently utilized. Richard Poirier first used this phrase in *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life* (1971) to mean a literary text wherein a “writer displays not so much an external waste land as the waste which is his own substance” (50). Poirier defines substance as the “realities impressed upon him by the literature and idioms of his own day and by images from the literature of the past that seem to overlay the landscape of the present” (50).

Poirier's understanding of literary waste as residues of the past and present in the form of the artist's available repertoire of cultural and linguistic materials thus aligns with conceptions of art explored by Eliot, Barth, Barthes, and Barthelme. As utilized in this dissertation, however, the "literature of waste" aligns more closely to the broad usages of Christopher Schmidt in *The Poetics of Waste* (2014) and Susan S. Morrison in *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (2015) to designate the entire corpus of texts dealing with waste matter, whether in terms of direct representation or structural and aesthetic incorporation. The literature of waste therefore includes texts that find beauty or repugnance in waste objects or an aesthetics of waste that intentionally creates baroque excess, structural incongruity, or unassimilable elements.

While most waste scholarship begins with Douglas, her conceptions of dirt and pollution, at least with respect to her literal examples and less so with abstract cultural ideas surrounding purity, cannot be easily equated with trash or garbage *per se*, as the polluting object can be placed back in its rightful place within the spatial taxonomy and utilized as new. Dirty sneakers found in the bed may be cleaned, placed by the door, and worn outside. Dirt designates "unclean matter, such as soils any object by adhering to it" and so is not is not so much the waste product of a process but the polluting material sullyng a "clean" object ("Dirt, n.").

"Pollution" is often the preferred term within moral, corporeal, environmental, and anthropological discourses, and will be used with respect to them. Derived from the Latin *polluerre*, meaning "mortal contamination of a person," the concept of pollution thus exhibits a "theologico-moral origin" (Garrard, 8). Pollution not only includes spiritual or moral impurity, but also "physical impurity conveyed by bodily contact," and so necessarily speaks to contact zones and ingestion of substances and bodily excretions ("Pollution, n."). With regards to

environmental concerns, “pollution” refers to damaging human activity in the form of light, noise, and organic and inorganic waste. “Pollution” and “polluting behaviors” are the primary terms used by Douglas to refer to the rituals that ward off impurity in various cultures (3).

The terms applied to various forms of waste in different disciplines and spheres frequently bleed into and draw from each other. More often than not, this linguistic and conceptual permeability is not accidental but rooted in material conditions, working to produce and solidify a complex ideological constellation of negative associations, the fear-based rhetoric of which may be then put to dismissive or oppressive purposes. Iconoclastic art often works, in turn, to disentangle this cultural web. Trash, race, gender, sexuality, and class, for instance, have formed an associative body for millennia. In *Histories of the Dustheap* (2012), Stephanie Foote and Elizabeth Mazzolini note that since sanitation industries have disproportionately been located and operated in the neighborhoods of working-class and ethnic minorities, literal garbage and social garbage become linked in the cultural imaginary—the latter then “appear to be the source, rather than the victims, of contagion and contamination” (10).

Spatial proximity therefore becomes conflated with causality and moral bankruptcy; this conflation then becomes essentialized, assumed, and reproduced by more socially reputable groups, and challenged by literature and scholarship. In Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), for example, bodily and social waste frequently arise together in telling ways. Pynchon’s characters Tyrone Slothrop and General Pudding undergo scatological and sadomasochistic fantasies and experiences that are symbolically and visually linked to blackness and homosexuality—Slothrop fears being raped by a black man as he falls into a toilet while Pudding cannot help but imagine a black penis while consuming his master’s feces. In their study of the novel, Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger consider these episodes manifestations of a

“deeply unconscious cathexis of blackness and shit,” a troubling coupling that illustrates how human subjects become symbolically substituted by excrement and dehumanized as a result (95).

Such connections bring to light the fact that particular waste-averse discourses symbolically map onto and substitute one form of waste for another, posing a methodological challenge for any study which wishes to perform neat categorical distinctions. These racialized, sexualized, and classed associations have been tethered and essentialized in any number of modes of social regulation and border patrolling, as seen in the historical practices of miscegenation and segregation laws, and, more recently, unofficial systems of urban stratification and institutionalized violence. Far from seeking to quarantine or hermetically seal these categories of castoffs from one another, “The Lowly Remains” asserts that through these cross-pollinations, symbolic substitutions, and confections, an intricate, multi-faceted culture of waste aversion establishes and maintains its regulatory practices across registers at once literal and figurative, conscious and unconscious, microcosmic and macrocosmic.<sup>9</sup> A multi-discursive Scylla of sorts, waste aversion operates through the suggestion and deployment of aesthetic and functional similarities as well as spatial proximities between various forms of unwanted materials, be they byproducts, excretions, places, or lives.

*0.2. Chapter Summaries: (I) “Tracing Trash,” (II) “Excretory Histories,” (III) “Underbellies and Urban Spatial Logic,” (IV) “Disposable Bodies”*

The four chapters of “The Lowly Remains” correspond directly to the four subcategories

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<sup>9</sup> In this way, by deploying narrative, the rhetorical and literary texts of waste “come before us as always-already read” (9) through previous narrativizations and discursive reinforcements, as Jameson argues in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981). These repressed politico-historical narratives operate in the background of “all of our cultural artifacts, from the literary institutions of high modernism all the way to the products of mass culture” (Jameson, 80).

of waste enumerated in the foregoing summary of the theoretical literature: corporate, bodily, spatial, and social. The structure is bisected: the first two chapters consider literal waste, while the last two consider figurative associations of waste with neighborhoods and populations. As noted, however, these boundaries are permeable: the same feeling of disgust elicited from the graphic literature in the second chapter is mobilized as a means of abjecting disposable populations in the third and fourth chapters, while the industrial factory, the urban metropolis, and the social body are sometimes conceived of in corporeal terms. In light of these figurative substitutions, as well as the processes by which the physical environment literally permeates the individual body via air, food, microbes, and contaminants, the segmenting of chapters is more in the service of thematic and organizational coherence than ontological assumptions or claims.

Together these chapters answer the following questions: What are the relationships between waste and the history of modern production—in the form of Fordist and post-Fordist models of efficiency, of classical conceptions of artistic unity and coherence, of urban concentration and ecology, and of social networks of domination, subordination, naming and namelessness? How do these manifestations of waste trouble the situated and ideologically embedded practice of historiography? From which perspectives and with which aesthetic countermeasures does trashy fiction make waste visible? In what ways do modern and contemporary waste-averse practices paradoxically narrow the parameters of value that productivism wishes to widen? How do transformations in waste management map onto broader transformations of the object world under modernity?

The first chapter considers novels that directly foreground trash in terms of subject matter, particularly those that follow the full lives of products beyond the conventional range of consideration. To this end, “Tracing Trash” explores what is perhaps the most sustained and

comprehensive literary exploration of the subject: Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), a sprawling narrative loosely centered around waste management executive Nick Shay (who considers himself a "cosmologist of waste" [DeLillo, 88]) and his prized possession, a home-run baseball from a sporting event in the early 1950s. Chapter One argues that DeLillo's novel, the quintessential narrative frequently cited in studies of literary trash,<sup>10</sup> deploys waste matter in order to problematize the myopic view of trash as useless detritus, instead presenting the full life-cycle of objects in their entirety—both within and beyond their economic production, circulation, consumption, and management. If, as *Nightwood*'s Dr. Matthew O'Connor proclaims, "destiny and history are untidy"—so much so that "we fear memory of that disorder," DeLillo presents trash as an ordering principle, an effective counterweight against the disorder of history, unifying the novel's non-chronological presentation of roughly fifty years (Barnes, 126). Examining the novel's postulations on the notion of an "underhistory" of refuse, as well as its sprawling, epic structure, Chapter One claims that trash in *Underworld* functions as a transgenerational and intersubjective mediator, the effect of which is to reconceptualize and expand our understanding of history itself—inheriting but greatly expanding the scope of the ragpicker's findings beyond the range of the modern or immediate (DeLillo, 791).

The chapter details the particular materials and methods DeLillo's novel utilizes in order to foster an attuned object-consciousness in the reader. It examines the emergence of two revolutionary postwar waste-management technologies, plastics and sanitary landfills, as well as their effects on the consumers and technicians of the novel and the physical world more broadly. Finally, the chapter explores *Underworld*'s nonlinear structure, arguing that the careful

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<sup>10</sup> See Klaus Benesch, "Writing Grounds: Ecocriticism, Dumping Sites, and the Place of Literature in a Posthuman Age" (2009); Thomas Heise, *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (2010); Bill Brown, *Other Things* (2015); David Alworth, *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form* (2016).

asymmetry of the novel constitutes a waste-management effort on a formal, macrocosmic scale—one that traces trash in and out of waste-states defined spatially and temporally in order to ultimately recast the notion of waste as matter in ceaseless motion.

The second literal consideration of waste occupies the next chapter, “Excretory Histories,” which focuses on bodily excess in the form of fecal matter and sexual fluids, and three writers that foreground them to elicit or combat readerly disgust. Chapter Two opens with a particularly telling moment in the history of modern literary standards and social regulations of bodily borders: the unfavorable initial reception of *Naked Lunch* (1959), which was unanimously considered excessively disgusting, indulgent, and lacking in literary value. The chapter then enumerates the many functions of disgust and asks how each work of excretory fiction considered utilizes the emotion to varying ends.

Before returning to *Naked Lunch*, Chapter Two first analyzes the role of fecal matter in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), and argues that Pynchon presents feces as the most potent symbol for death as the prime mover of history, serving as a nauseating and corporeal counterweight to the vacuous and misleading rhetoric surrounding war. Pynchon’s novel, centered on the final months of World War II, follows hundreds of characters through every nation involved as they attempt to uncover the mysterious relationship between protagonist Tyrone Slothrop’s erections and the sites of V-2 rocket explosions. In an early hallucinatory sequence, Slothrop, searching for his lost harmonica, descends through a toilet into its pipes, wherein he gazes at “shit, elaborately crusted along the sides of this [...] tunnel he’s in: shit nothing can flush away” (Pynchon, 66). Crucially, Slothrop finds these “patterns thick with meaning,” and upon emerging from the toilet he, “uncannily shit-sensitized now,” learns to “read old agonies inside poor Dumpster” (Pynchon, 66-67). Towards the end of the novel, German cat burglar Emil Bummer states that “shit is the

presence of death, not some abstract-arty character with a scythe but the stiff and rotting corpse itself inside the whiteman's warm and private own *asshole*" (Pynchon, 701). Through these passages and a series of others detailing scatological fetishism's relationship to wartime occupation alongside harrowing descriptions of concentration camps, shit is presented as a direct and perhaps unmediated manifestation of genocide and death. Moreover, it is textual: shit is a legible and historically signifying text, which, when granted attention, provides access to the reality of death in a way that secular history—deemed a “diversionary tactic”—does not (Pynchon, 170).

Actual death, the novel suggests, is disgusting and nauseating, unlike the abstracted rhetoric which surrounds and instigates it. By contrast, the gritty and unflinching aesthetics of *Gravity's Rainbow* force death upon the reader through its most pungent and poignant byproduct and messenger. The literal reading of human waste matter is therefore tied to the classic Pynchonian motif of the paranoid subject whose discerning eye, directed towards overlooked realms, uncovers secret patterns, underworlds, and covert histories in opposition to a dogmatic and deceptive History. If, for DeLillo, waste is the management of history—the transgenerational link between events and people—it is, for Pynchon, the reality of history, bypassing metaphor and constituting history itself.

After considering the historical and corporeal intimations of an aesthetics of disgust, the chapter examines the disjointed “cut-up” methods utilized by Burroughs and Acker, whose collage aesthetics work to produce textual detritus that violates artistic models of coherence, efficiency, and legibility. Burroughs' novel in particular, which makes excessive use of synecdoche in order to sever limbs from their bodies, amounts to an amalgam of “human parts shaken up around and poured every which way” (112). In this way, Burroughs makes use of a

“dominant trope in pornographic writing” wherein “all bodies were interchangeable” (Hunt, 44). Burroughs focalizes bodily excretions over the bodies themselves, and mixes them in a dehumanized synecdochal sludge that amounts to nonproductive textual anarchy. With regards to form, the frequent use of synecdoche on the local level alongside the broader structural fragmentation amplify and transmute the pornographic ideal of “depersonalized organs,” here detached not only from their bodies and orthodox systems of morality, but also from any semblance of narrative coherence or utility (Sontag, 40).

Chapter Two closes with Acker’s feminist revision of Burroughs and of the asymmetry of disgust more broadly. In *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) and *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990), Acker presents toilets and menstrual blood in order to attack two contradictory conceptions of women in misogynistic discourse: that women are secondary vessels for the reception of male bodily fluids defined by emptiness, and that women are primary organisms defined by the presence of the revolting blood they excrete. Acker draws attention to the uneven application of disgust that creates and enforces gender hierarchies, calling for a “society which wasn’t just disgust” (*Empire*, 227).

Chapter Three, “Underbellies and Urban Spatial Logic,” shifts in focus from bodily to spatial waste, examining urban underworlds and sewers as depicted in mid-century African-American narratives of descent by Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, and the advent of urban planning that structures the social and material spaces the literature explores. As urban scholars Mike Davis, Thomas Heise, and David Pike inform us, slums and other low-income neighborhoods find their institutionalized roots in the twentieth-century practices of urban design, development, and renewal that this chapter takes as its historical backdrop. If the early twentieth-century marks a profound series of transitions from steward to consumer culture, the

mid-to-late-century metropolis oversees its foulest corollary: a grimy landscape characterized by “pollution, excrement, and decay” (Davis, 19). Not all spaces are made equal; crucially, these “underworlds” result from discriminatory urban grids that the rationalized city regulates.

The built environment approach utilized in this chapter is rooted in historical materialism, urban studies, critical geography, and critical race theory, particularly as manifested in the waste-laden rhetoric of “infiltration theory” that dominated the real estate development of Harlem during the mid-century decades from which Wright and Ellison’s narratives emerge. The chapter argues that infiltration theory, a macrocosmic iteration of the rhetoric of bodily contamination expanded to urban scale wherein a contaminant population “blights” a once-prosperous neighborhood, depends on the notion of a surplus population exceeding its boundary. The concept of a surplus population is derived from Michel Foucault in his analysis of race as “the precondition that makes killing acceptable” (254) in “*Society Must be Defended*” (1973), Lisa Marie Cacho in her discussion of racialized conceptions of property ownership and citizenship in *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (2012), and Achille Mbembe’s more recent work on the surplus in *Critique of Black Reason* (2017). Each of these accounts illustrates how disposable populations have been historically assigned to “impermeable spaces according to a logic of enclosure,” in which groups are defined and divided in terms of their capacities as “carriers of differentiated and more or less shifting risk” and are then contained within toxic, waste-filled zones as a result (Mbembe, 35).

The phenomenon of spatial waste operates in a hermeneutic circle wherein spaces are defined by the disposable residents that inhabit them and vice-versa. Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1943) and Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) provide literary cartographies of the mid-century underbellies of urban space, the manifestations of racial and spatial hierarchies

enforced by urban zoning practices and explored along a vertical axis. Both texts submerge their protagonists beneath the city and chart the transformations in ambience and psychology that result as underworld environment and subject begin to constitute one another in a cycle that proves simultaneously degenerative and epiphanic, destructive and productive. Chapter Three argues that the subterranean perspective or the “view from below” that these texts employ paradoxically conceals the black body in order to enact a revisionist history from an African-American standpoint epistemology, the ultimate effect of which is to illuminate the qualitative facets of spatial subordination from the perspective of the lowly and abjected.

There can be no underworld without its inhabitants, and it is to these denizens that the final chapter, “Disposable Bodies,” turns. Chapter Four centers on the category of social detritus in the form of homelessness, tracing the development of the figure in the American cultural imaginary over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries leading to the two postwar novels considered. The chapter examines how the homeless population, as an underclass, is consistently criminalized and rhetorically framed in biological terms as a revolting disease, a quasi-human form of pollution plaguing a healthy social body intent on cleanliness and productivity. In so doing, the final chapter continues and unites the analyses of rationalization, disgust-hierarchies, and surplus populations covered in the preceding chapters, respectively, and concludes the examination of figurative applications of waste to spaces and people by shifting emphasis to the latter.

“Disposable Bodies” focalizes two postwar novels: Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and William Kennedy’s *Ironweed* (1983). Set in Los Angeles, Yamashita’s novel follows a series of low-income individuals and media representatives as they grapple with the forces of neoliberal capitalism and urban renewal. This portion of the chapter picks up

historically where the previous chapter ended, with the advent of the Interstate Highway System in the late 1950s and the resultant displacement of economically marginalized populations caught in its path. *Tropic of Orange* depicts this infrastructural development as both cause of physical dispossession and cultural exacerbation of postwar American alienation, a dematerializing membrane that further severs consumers from their products and each other through speed and insulation.

In order to rectify this and consider those left behind by urban renewal, her novel employs two tactics that obstruct and slow down the highway system. First, the homeless physically and digitally occupy the freeway: a major traffic incident allows them to temporarily inhabit abandoned cars and narrate their stories over radio and television broadcasts. Thus the nation observes “TV from the bottom” or “aspirations of the lowest bum on skid row” (Yamashita, 193). Secondly, Yamashita follows the perspective of Manzanar Murakami, a homeless man who watches and contemplates the highway daily from the elevated, fixed position of a highway overpass; by inhabiting this position, the reader experiences a slowed-down “view from above” of the speedy freeway replete with considerations of “the man-made grid of civil utilities” beneath that invisibly connect Angelenos in spite of their ostensible alienation (Yamashita, 53).

Chapter Four then analyzes the interrelated themes of purgatory, namelessness, and camaraderie in *Ironweed*, a novel populated with what homeless protagonist calls “social maggots” and “streetside slugs” (Kennedy, 160). Life on the streets of Albany is described as a morbid wasteland: Francis’s “eternal landscape” is comprised of “bodies in alleys, bodies in gutters, bodies anywhere,” a “physical litany of the dead” (Kennedy, 29). While veering on the hellishness described in Chapter Three, *Ironweed* characterizes homelessness as a liminal state

closer to purgatory—between one temporary shelter and the next, between past and present, law and lawlessness, survival and degeneration. As the names and lives of the homeless are often lost to posterity, the novel intimates that this purgatorial condition continues after death: as Francis notes, “I never knew a bum yet had a grave” (Kennedy, 12). Without intervention, the symbolic reversal of naming rescinds the identity of the novel’s many fractured subjects. As this section argues, *Ironweed* functions as linguistic tombstone for the discarded and forgotten bodies it buries: through acts of kinship and narration, Francis renames the nameless and transmits their personal histories in an attempt to usher them from the periphery into remembered spaces and times.

The chapter closes with non-instrumental approaches to homelessness by considering *Ironweed*’s nuanced treatment of Helen Archer, a former musician and Francis’s occasional lover. Despite depicting the plight of homeless characters living in squalor, *Ironweed* refuses to serve as social critique in the way *Tropic of Orange* does. “Helen is no symbol of lost anything,” Kennedy’s narrator states, explicitly warning his readership against extrapolating her significance to the realm of category or symbol (135). Rather than view her as a homeless character, *Ironweed* urges its audience to see her as a character who happens to be homeless at the moment the narrative takes place. In so doing, Kennedy presents a non-instrumental methodology distinct to the archaeological impulse employed throughout the dissertation: much like trash is not only economic artifact but physical object, Helen is not only a disposable body but simply a body.

A brief coda, addressing omissions and gesturing towards alternate lines and modes of inquiry, follows the fourth chapter.

Each chapter begins with an epigraph from a novel separate from that chapter’s primary

text(s): the ideas derived from these intertexts are revisited throughout the chapter, forming a crucial conceptual and methodological foundation for its analyses. At the same time, the epigraphs and the novels from which they are derived enable a classification of the primary texts within a broader literary corpus, placing them within a fuller literary history and presenting another route through which interested scholars may explore the same subject.

Each chapter answers questions regarding the relationship between waste and history, in which waste is figured as the seldom-taken access point into knowledge of ongoing systems of production, circulation, and disuse. For DeLillo, waste is the management of history, its transgenerational mediator, the link between events and people; for Pynchon, Burroughs, and Acker, sticky, messy matter and the violence for which it is mobilized is the reality of biology and history; Ellison and Wright ask how, if at all, the modern black subject can position himself to avoid being submerged in toxic environments that come to define him, while Kennedy and Yamashita transmit the personal histories of those abandoned by grand narratives of productivity and belonging. Indeed, the fact that the vast majority of trashy literature raises questions about history speaks to a conception of history as itself a form of waste management, as a process of sorting through the residues of the past through historically-embedded value judgments.

These disparate texts share an impulse to confer visibility to waste in its many manifestations, to trace that which is forgotten or undervalued, and to bring these byproducts into public consciousness. While texts in this tradition function in a variety of ways, they each share an archaeological function: trash is dug up, presented to the culture that spat it out, and imbued with a significance previously unafforded, whether aesthetic, historical, material, or philosophical. Ultimately, the literature of waste shows how modern discourses and practices of efficiency, cleanliness, and utility are haunted by the residues of industrial runoff, excrement,

aesthetic detritus, ghettos, and corpses—and how fiction can re-incorporate them.

Chapter One: “Tracing Trash”

“The engine beckons. Its cylinders shine perfectly. These same engines that propel men into flight. That carry flesh as thoughtlessly as napalm. These workhorses that somehow epitomize luxury, fractured. The pieces of seduction. Polished and warm, each organ, each setting, each cylinder calls to me. Like beginnings without ends.”

—Lawrence Chua, *Gold by the Inch* (1998)

*1.0. Introduction: Beginnings Without Ends*

In this passage from Chua’s postcolonial novel, the narrator watches his uncle take apart a Rolls Royce in an automobile workshop. As the machine is dissected, the narrator employs the language of commodity fetishism to describe his orientation towards the object. The car appears to him as an autonomous agent. It does not await response or input; it beckons, initiating communication. In propelling men into flight, it is the prime mover in the exchange, rather than its manufacturers or operators. It appears lively, organic, and sexual, a living entity, self-originating, bearing neither the traces of its mechanical creation nor of its eventual junkheap-bound future. The product, polished and gleaming, presents itself as an object without history, a beginning without an end.

Such a line of thinking is illusory from at least one standpoint. From the consumer perspective of its human operator, the car *will* reach an end: as its novelty-status wanes, its market value will depreciate; as its pieces wear down from use, certain functions will cease to execute properly, then entirely; when the burden of repair becomes too much, or a newer model beckons, it will eventually be sold, exchanged, or discarded. The moment in which the commodity shines is but an instant in a much lengthier chain of production, circulation, and

disposal, a process of mechanical reproduction, marketing and advertising practices that accelerate the rates at which objects become trash, and, after they are trashed, waste management, concealment, and recuperation. To reveal and interrogate this history, to delineate the origins and destinations of objects through narrative, is one function of the category of art we have been calling the literature of waste. The text which most concerns this chapter and most thoroughly realizes this goal—by moving, as will be shown, through historical and material axes, horizontally, vertically, and back and forth—is the waste-epic *Underworld* (1997).

This chapter details the history of the processes which, by the last decade of the twentieth century in which DeLillo writes, have made trash all but invisible to the American public. Beginning with the Fordist rationalization of the workplace, the advent of ideas and products oriented towards convenience and hygiene, and culminating in the invention of plastics and streamlined trash-concealment technologies such as the sanitary landfill, “Tracing Trash” follows the development of trash production and concealment in the United States throughout the first half of the twentieth century, while exploring its material hangovers and cultural responses in the second half of the century in which the novel takes place.

Through the objects that appreciate and depreciate in value throughout their extensive circulation across the United States, the behavior and foresight of its characters, who work as waste managers, re-use artists, and memorabilia collectors, the sprawling forty-one year span of the narrative events, and the nonlinear yet carefully arranged sequence in which they unfold, *Underworld* considers a panoply of available approaches towards waste unified by an impulse to counterbalance a culture of waste concealment and denial. Focusing first on the processes by which trash, and the object world as a whole, is decontextualized and hidden, then on the countermeasures the novel deploys to recontextualize and historicize its role in a wider

chronology, before finally considering the limitations of these countermeasures in and beyond *Underworld*, this chapter charts the novel's representations of plastics and landfills, two twentieth-century technologies central to waste production and concealment; the homogenizing, distancing, and paradoxical effects of consumer culture on the object world, and the potential that a literary genealogy of trash holds to develop an expanded temporal understanding of the life-cycles and interrelations of objects and subjects alike.

Because a central claim is that DeLillo utilizes waste-content and the long novel form in order to write an expanded history of objects, the chapter reads, at length, items and materials that have yet to deteriorate into the status of trash, particularly plastics and related twentieth-century commodities. Uncovering the archive of early plastic production, in tandem with what this dissertation deems "plastic mysticism," the chapter illustrates the violence embedded into the invention and persistence of plastic, a stubborn chemical that resists containment efforts. Additionally, plastic mysticism is situated within a wider system of technological systems revered for their ability to insulate the user from, and exert control over, the material world.

Shifting from plastics to landfills, the chapter reconsiders critical commonplaces regarding waste as matter out of place. The history of the sanitary landfill as waste-enshrouding mechanism, and its representation in *Underworld*, reveals that waste is both matter out of place *and* time—that the landfill compresses space and time in a manner that transforms the banality of isolated trash into a sizable, transhistorical spectacle. Moreover, this section reveals that by placing landfills in remote locations and restricting their access to waste management workers, the waste management industry transports and contains trash into strictly defined spatial parameters, the result of which is that waste in the postwar era is no longer out of place, but intentionally positioned within the landscape for optimal containment.

After examining the role of these materials in the novel, the chapter turns to the waste-conscious practices deployed by the novel's characters, demonstrating how the Shay family, by reconfiguring their approach from objects-as-beginnings to objects-as-ends and asking where and how their discards will be received, replaces the notion of disposal with the notion of reception. Next, the chapter considers the practices of memorabilist Marvin Lundy, who similarly replaces an attitude of disposal with preservation. Intervening in the pathway of the commodity in order to preserve and transmit an intergenerational history and site of physical contact, Lundy traces objects-as-ends back to their beginnings, and in passing them on to future owners, repositions them as middles in a longer chronology.

As will be demonstrated, the waste-conscious efforts of these characters yield an expanded history of the life-cycles of objects, while also reversing and transforming their waste-status. In so doing, *Underworld* reveals the instability of waste as a category, and in nonlinear fashion, explores the notion of matter as a ceaseless series of transformations, as always constituting middles in an ongoing narrative. Bearing this complication in mind, the chapter closes by considering the structural modes through which the novel self-consciously undercuts its own aspirations, highlighting the infeasibility of waste management as a totalizing endeavor and recasting the notion of waste itself as unruly, turbulent matter in perpetual flux.

While examining these facets of the novel, the chapter frequently returns to the temporal framework presented by Chua and emphasizes the shifting perceptions of trash as diachronic phenomenon. Technological utopianism and commodity fetishism present the new product as beginning without end; waste, conventionally considered an end, implies a not-waste beginning and a becoming-waste middle; decontextualized ephemera in the novel are perceived as ahistorical middles, severed from their beginnings and ends; the Shays and Lundy place waste in

a wider history in which its current iteration no longer functions as end but historicized middle. These considerations ultimately inform *Underworld*'s nonlinear waste historiography as one that does not move from commodity-beginning to trash-end, or trashy end to pristine beginning, but probes the historically, spatially, and categorically contingent nature of waste as a fluid phenomenon that pushes back against attempts to manage it.

### *1.1. From Safeguarding to Replacing: Towards Disposability and Single-Use*

As discussed in the introduction, the opening decades of the twentieth century instantiated a radical paradigm shift in subject-object relationships due largely to the onset of rationalized mass production and modern advertising. For much of the nineteenth century, Americans predominantly produced, re-used and repaired their possessions, embodying an ethos of attuned object-consciousness that Susan Strasser calls stewardship towards objects. In the first half of the twentieth century, by contrast, Americans learned largely to discard and replace them. The domestic-public division of labor lessened the layman's material knowledge of crafting objects or mending them once defunct; from the circumscribed perspective of the alienated user, the processes of labor exportation resulted in gaps in tactile knowledge and consciousness towards the item, eliminating "its origin *and* its final destination" and thereby truncating its narrated history (Hawkins, 29).

Whereas, in earlier decades of the nineteenth century, scavenging was more widely practiced across class boundaries and held an important place in the flow of goods, towards the end of the century it became relegated to the working, and no longer the middle, classes.<sup>11</sup> In

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<sup>11</sup> Late-nineteenth century conceptions of bacteria, product consumption, and class discouraged middle-class Americans from both publicly gathering materials and accumulating possessions more generally. According to a

1872, social reformist Charles Loring Brace listed ragpickers among the eponymous *Dangerous Classes of New York*; a decade later, James McCabe's guidebook for the unfavorable neighborhoods of the city reaffirmed this association. Along this vein, Strasser notes that the *bricoleur's* harvesting of materials in public space became more and more identified with the lower strata of "beggars, scavengers, and ragmen" familiar today (Strasser, 140). Moreover, the neurotic fear of wasted time normalized by Fordist rationalization, compounded with a reduced need for castoff materials in households containing fewer capable craftsmen and less available storage space as a result of accelerated rates of production,<sup>12</sup> made the time-consuming and increasingly stigmatized act of scavenging, and the bricolage it allowed, less viable. In short, as Americans owned more possessions than ever before, and grew increasingly alienated from them, objects that were once harvested and safeguarded slid with greater frequency into the category of trash and were disposed of accordingly.

At the same time, a series of newly-developed disposable products worked to usher in what would be an era characterized by lasting notions of convenience, cleanliness, and disposability. Paper cups, paper towels, paper plates, and paper straws, developed in the 1890s through the 1910s, were popularized via advertising in the 1910s and 1920s (Vinikas, 94; Frederick, 142-143). The price of paper, once exorbitant, declined with the invention of wood pulp and other mass-produced paper materials in the second half of the nineteenth century

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1907 home economics guide entitled *Household Hygiene*, such accumulations "interfere with the amount and purity of the air," "collect dust," "and encourage insect pests" (Elliott, 115-116). Municipal trash collection, which emerged in 1881 with the creation of the Department of Street Cleaning (N.Y., Dept. of Sanitation, 3), provided and streamlined options for disposing of unwanted items; as such, "middle-class people learned to toss things in the trash, attracted by the convenience and repelled by the association of reuse and recycling with a new class of impoverished scavengers" (Strasser, 113).

<sup>12</sup> The first volume of *Recent Economic Changes in the United States*, published in 1929, states that American products tripled in number since the turn of the century (97), while the 1970 U.S. census statistics on productivity and technological development indicate that the horsepower of industrial machinery quadrupled over the same decades (8).

(Munsell, 203). As a result, napkins and tissues began to replace rags and handkerchiefs, and toilet paper replaced re-used newspapers, a commonplace practice before the turn of the century (Strasser, 179; Arnold, 195).

As previously noted, the marketing campaigns accompanying single-use products focused on the convenience and cleanliness they afforded. Because they were quickly thrown away, they did not need attention or maintenance after the fact; no longer held accountable for safeguarding, the user could turn attention from labor to leisure. Literature and advertisements touting convenience predominantly targeted housewives: Lillian Gilbreth's *The Home-Maker and Her Job* (1927) and Christine Frederick's *Selling Mrs. Consumer* (1929) advised housewives to apply productivist efficiency models to domestic labor through consumption of disposable goods advertised in *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies Home Journal*. Both the form and content of mass advertising worked to increase trash production. Not only did the images and phrases found on magazine advertisements, mail-order catalogues, and disposable packaging actively encourage disposal—the materials themselves, designed to be read and cast aside, physically formed new categories of detritus.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to their capacity to alleviate work, packaged products were marketed for their hygienic properties. The advent of modern hygienic discourse, established in the 1870s with the discovery and dissemination of information regarding germs and illness by bacteriologists and put into practice in subsequent decades by sanitation reformists, made single-use products particularly appealing; not only did they alleviate the drudgery of manual labor, they were

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<sup>13</sup> A 1927 advertisement for Kleenex in *Ladies Home Journal* entitled “Allow Us, Madam” instructs consumers to “use 2 or 3 sheets at a time—and then discard them,” promising that “never does a germ-carrying cloth touch your skin” (56). In a 1928 issue of the journal, a Kotex advertisement describes a new deodorizing sanitary pad. In addition to masking the scent of bodily waste, the product allows the customer to “dispose of Kotex instantly, without laundry” (87). The role of feminine waste within waste aversion will be explored in Chapter Two.

scientifically proven to reduce health risks newly associated with dirt (McClary, 34; Cleere, 46).<sup>14</sup> Late nineteenth-century sanitation reformist publications, such as those by New York street-cleaning commissioner George E. Waring Jr., produced in the public consciousness a “fantasy of a sanitary millennium,” or the arrival of a “modern era of cleanliness and hygiene” strikingly similar to and historically concurrent with productivist fear of waste in the restructured, rationalized workplace (Gleason, 65). The spread of household plumbing and commercial laundries facilitated newly elevated standards of cleanliness, and accordingly, per capita expenditures for cleaning supplies doubled from 1900 to 1930 (Wilkie, 654; Lebergott, 149).

Twentieth-century throwaway culture also made use of, and was augmented by, less efficient developments in the history of commodity production and circulation. From the 1920s and onward, American manufacturers disseminated a novel set of ideas that would join convenience and cleanliness in the ideological pantheon of modernity: aesthetic and technological obsolescence. Fully-functioning objects could now be declared disposable based solely on the existence of newer models with modified appearances, and discarded and replaced accordingly. The contrast between the business models of Ford and General Motors in the fledgling automobile industry serves as the essential case study for this paradigm shift. Determined to eradicate waste and maximize efficiency, Fordist productivism worked to relentlessly and continually improve the functionality of its existing model in its early years.

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<sup>14</sup> In her book probing the history of contagion and disease, Priscilla Wald notes that cultural understandings of contagion “remained more or less in flux until bacteriology,” which “demonstrated how specific microbes caused communicable diseases and documented routes of transmission” (13). Examining prominent outbreaks including Typhoid Mary, HIV, and SARS, and their accompanying journalistic, fictional, and epidemiological narratives, Wald argues that the discourses surrounding disease are “among the epistemological technologies that delineate the membership and scale of a population” (19). In that vein, we may say that the advent of bacteriology, in establishing the scientific foundation for modern hygienic discourse, and in tandem with emerging conceptions of convenience and disposal, served to delineate the membership, and expulsion, of types of products in this period.

From 1913 to 1926, Henry Ford's assembly line focused exclusively on the Model T, emphasizing durability, not disposability: Ford stated that his automobiles were "so strong and so well-made that no one ought ever to have to buy a second one" (Marchand, 158). General Motors, by contrast, focused on stylistic change, instantiating the influential practice of annual model updates in 1923, while only making technological adjustments every three years. In terms of marketing strategies, General Motors proved victorious: by 1927, the sleek and stylish Chevrolet had outsold the aesthetically-outdated Model T.

By the late 1920s, then, Americans had learned to discard and consume based solely on stylistic obsolescence, not functionality or use-value. Companies began to diversify the aesthetics of their products, introducing rainbow hues into items that were previously only black and white (Strasser, 190). Newly synthesized and color-malleable materials such as cellulose acetate and formaldehyde "offered bright colors and pastels for consumer goods" (Meikle, 64). As one commentator quipped, "the Anglo-Saxon is released from chromatic inhibitions."<sup>15</sup> In *Selling Mrs. Consumer*, Christine Frederick coined the term "progressive obsolescence," an attitude she defined as "a readiness to 'scrap' or lay aside an article *before its natural life of usefulness is completed,*" and to spend beyond one's means in the name of spurring industry innovation and new and vibrant experiences (246, emphasis original). Moreover, progressive obsolescence became aligned with national ideology and modernity as a whole: Frederick instructed Americans to resist the European attitude of "treasuring the old" and "disdaining the new," which would obstruct both individual and national progress (246). In this way, the interwar period oversaw yet another transformation in the history of trashmaking, wherein objects came to be discarded not only after, but before, their value was extracted.

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<sup>15</sup> "Color in Industry," *Fortune* 1 (February 1930): 85.

By expanding public perceptions of what constituted trash, early twentieth-century developments in conceptions of fashion and consumption therefore formed another branch of waste production and aversion. Indeed, being seen as wasteful served as a source of class distinction, as noted by Thorstein Veblen in his influential analysis of conspicuous consumption in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Having been demoted to only the ranks of the poor, scavenging and bricolage, and now even utilitarian consumption, were increasingly looked upon with disdain—in order to elevate his or her position, the consumer must visibly display an “expenditure of superfluities,” i.e. expenditure considered unnecessary or nonproductive from a strictly instrumentalist standpoint (Veblen, 276). “In order to be reputable,” Veblen observed, “it must be wasteful” (276).<sup>16</sup> While such attitudes precede the twentieth century, conceptions of progressive and aesthetic obsolescence propagated in the 1920s amplified them considerably, expanding their reach beyond the purview of the leisure class. For many Americans, notions of obsolescence in terms of fashion and utility became conflated thereafter, and the rate of obsolescence accelerated dramatically, leading French social critic Gilles Lipovetsky to deem modern consumer culture an “empire of the ephemeral” (119). As obsolescence occurs earlier and earlier in the life-cycle of objects throughout the twentieth century, the reach of trash radiates not only in physical volume but as category and concept.

A number of paradoxes and complications emerge here. The revolution in attitudes and practices in corporate rationalization and consumer culture in the history of trash production cultivated aversion to waste while simultaneously creating that waste and extending the parameters of what counted as waste; at the same time, an ethos of disposability encouraged and

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<sup>16</sup> In *Bodies and Machines* (1992), Mark Seltzer reads Veblen’s broader critique of consumer culture as a critique of the aesthetic realm in particular, presenting aesthetics as a type of formal waste—“the aesthetic as mere fashion, as inutility, or, simply, waste” (62). We will revisit the deployment of uselessness and inutility in literary form and structure throughout this dissertation, particularly in the next chapter on bodily and aesthetic waste.

even valorized waste as emblematic of modernity and progress. Progressive obsolescence would not have germinated as successfully in a culture of stewardship, and makes most directly visible the underlying mechanics and contradictions between productivism and consumerism. Mark Seltzer considers this phenomenon indicative of the “tensions, but also the relays, between an ascetics of production (self-discipline) and an aesthetics of consumption (self-aggrandizement),” competing and complementary systems respectively governed by restraint and excess (60). Rachel Dini similarly notes that “capitalism is thus contingent upon extreme efficiency on the side of production and extreme inefficiency on the side of consumption” (6). In this sense, waste functions as a highly unstable, relative economic category, the moral and social valences of which vacillate between positive and negative representations in different contexts in order to maximize corporate profit; vilified in one sector of industry, matter out of place finds its place in another. In manufacturing and marketing an ethos of disposability in order to spur consumer desire and absorb the material excesses enabled by rationalization, the foregoing history therefore illustrates how, as Michael Tratner asks in *Deficits and Desires* (2001), systems of production can induce “people to consume once again objects that they had already tired of consuming” (23).

### 1.2. “Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry”: Prepackaging and Plastic in Underworld

In an ostensibly unremarkable passage from *Underworld*, retired memorabilia collector Marvin Lundy eats a cantaloupe. It is cut in half, scooped, and filled in advance with “grapes clustered in the scooped-out part” (DeLillo, 193). The narrator explains that “this is how they

sold it in the supermarket, packed in clinging wrap” (DeLillo, 193). In another place and decade, a young Eric Deming, who will grow up to be a nuclear scientist, peers into the fridge of his suburban home. He is transfixed by “the bright colors, the product names and logos, the array of familiar shapes, the tinsel glitter of things in foil wrap, the general sense of benevolent gleam” (DeLillo, 517). The sight of synthetic packaging fills him with a sense of “a world unspoiled and ever renewable,” or, in Chua’s parlance, of beginnings without ends (DeLillo, 518). This romantic sense of eternal renewal stems directly from the developments in product manufacturing and marketing, and the rhetoric attending them, previously enumerated. It is also, as we will detail in this section, a result of what this dissertation terms early “plastic mysticism,” and, in the next section on the sanitary landfill, a result of streamlined systems of waste concealment.

Such quotidian descriptors abound in *Underworld*, the pages of which are littered with “crushed paper cups,” “little waxy napkins,” and a wide assortment of the new throwaways of the twentieth century (DeLillo, 16). DeLillo, whom Bill Brown deems “both critic and poet of the late-century object world,” including “its buildings and dumps, its baseballs and radios, its station wagons, computer screens, toxins, and art,” has a long history in thinking about postwar technological transformations and their consequences (14).<sup>17</sup> Waste appears as a motif, dominant or otherwise, in the majority of his early novels, including *Americana* (1971), *End Zone* (1972),

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<sup>17</sup> Much of Brown’s work, in what he calls a “version of new materialism,” asks “how material culture impresses itself on the literary imagination,” and how literature “itself works to imagine materiality” (5). In his analyses of the relationship between the realm of objects and various literary and visual iterations of modernism, Brown frequently considers the capacity for objects to disclose a form of materiality that goes unseen in everyday life. The found objects of Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, which he scrutinizes in *Other Things* (2016), prompt a diachronic evaluation of context that helps reveal the object’s institutional, historical, and aesthetic contingency. The properties that exceed the object’s seemingly autonomous or stable objecthood allow the artist to manipulate and redirect it—an excess that enables them to tease out or activate what Brown considers a latent “thingness,” always present but previously hidden from view. As will be demonstrated in the analysis to follow, DeLillo’s treatment of objects in *Underworld* brings this facet of the historical avant-garde to bear upon the postwar American landscape, presenting trash and landfills as conduits for overlooked histories of production, consumption, and disuse.

*Great Jones Street* (1973), *Running Dog* (1978), *The Names* (1983), and *White Noise* (1986). It is therefore no exaggeration when DeLillo stated, in a 2002 interview, that he'd "been thinking about garbage for twenty years."<sup>18</sup>

*Underworld* is littered not only with trash, but also, in what forms the subject of our present line of inquiry, the banal items that have yet to decline into the status of trash. The two descriptions that open this section are indicative of a prose style attentive to material surfaces; the narrator attunes the reader to the particular materials encasing the items of the prepackaged food Lundy and Deming encounter, in this case the postwar food-preserving technologies of Saran Wrap and aluminum foil, respectively.

This section unearths the history of plastics mid-century, in which the novel begins, and explores its treatment of trash-bound synthetic materials in the forms of condoms and gloves. These postwar technologies serve to amplify the reach of twentieth-century throwaway culture and the discarded materials both produced by, and jettisoned from, that culture.

DeLillo's text follows a wide range of characters and objects loosely bound by their relationships to various forms of waste and a baseball that circulates between them. Moving nonlinearly between the years 1951 and 1992, the novel follows Nick Shay and Brian Glassic, waste management executives at Waste Containment who travel domestically and internationally to oversee systems of disposal and concealment; Nick's brother Matt, who, along with his colleague Eric Deming, is a scientist working on nuclear warhead safety protocols and calculations in the New Mexico desert; Cotter Martin, an African-American child who catches a famous home run baseball which, over the years, finds its way through memorabiliaist Marvin Lundy to protagonist Nick Shay; Klara Sax, a junk artist who repurposes decommissioned war

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<sup>18</sup> "Interview with Don DeLillo." *The Book That Changed My Life: Interviews with National Book Awards Winners and Finalists*. Ed. Diane Osen. Random House, 2002: 18.

planes and other defunct items for aesthetic purposes; the nuns Edgar and Gracie, who work alongside graffiti artist Ismael to care for the impoverished and diseased street-dwellers in the Bronx, and a host of other characters, products, and events encompassing the Cold War era. While the novel traffics in social, spatial, medical, and nuclear waste at length, our present line of inquiry focuses on trash, particularly inorganic corporate and household trash resulting from the invention of plastics and other synthetic materials.

The revolutionary role plastic serves in the history of trashmaking cannot be overstated. While the first plastic, celluloid, was invented in the 1870s, it was the introduction of thermoplastics in the late 1930s that would permanently alter industrial, rural, and psychological landscapes alike (Meikle, 63). Unlike celluloid, thermoplastics such as polyvinyl chloride, polyethylene, and polystyrene could be molded into any shape or color without manual labor (Meikle, 68). As Jeffrey Meikle explains in *American Plastic: A Cultural History* (1995), mid-century plastics were seen as “magically assuming any desired form, flowing continuously from chemical refineries into injection molding machines from which emerged the pristine artifacts of commerce and consumption” (18). Completely mechanized, injection molding machines dramatically reduced labor costs and allowed for a host of new product designs. Lighter in weight and chemically synthesized, the materials themselves were cheaper, easier to transport, and seemingly unlimited in volume and application (Meikle, 19).

Plastic proved to be *the* material of the twentieth century. In the service of World War II, plastics were molded for use in aircraft covers, helmets, and atomic bombs; over the course of the war, annual plastic production tripled, reaching 818 million pounds in 1945 (Meikle, 1). The most dramatic growth occurred postwar, however: by 1960, annual plastic production exceeded a stunning six billion pounds, up over 700 percent from the end of the war (Meikle, 2). Plastic now

came in the forms of garbage pails, laundry baskets, Saran Wrap, picnic coolers, and Tupperware. As Meikle puts it, over the course of a single century, plastics pervaded the world, “moving from almost no presence at all to near ubiquity” (xiii). Plastic bottles, Styrofoam cups, and plastic bags, popularized in the postwar decades, “made trash proliferate in previously unimagined quantities” (Bozcagli, 228).

Notions of limitlessness, malleability, and dominion over nature dominated plastic discourse from its introduction in the 1930s through its proliferation during and after the Second World War. In his 1954 eponymous essay on the subject, Roland Barthes wrote that plastic embodied “the very idea of... infinite transformation” (97). The “innate formlessness” of plastic suggested “the outlines of a material world ever more malleable in the face of human desire” (Meikle, xiv). Indeed, the etymology of the word itself indicates as much: “plastic” is derived from the Greek *plastikos*, meaning “something capable of being molded or shaped” (Meikle, 4). In a 1938 volume of their magazine, explosives manufacturer Du Pont informed its readership that plastics were not “substitute materials,” but rather were designed “by man to his own specifications.”<sup>19</sup> (It is no coincidence that Du Pont’s advertising slogan, “Better Things For Better Living Through Chemistry” is the title of the fifth section of *Underworld*, which takes place in a disquietingly synthetic depiction of 1950s suburbia.)

The glorified mythology surrounding mid-century plastics stemmed not only from their malleability, but also the mystery, from the layman’s perspective, of their state of existence altogether. Plastics joined a series of postwar waste-management technologies so complex and esoteric so as to defy comprehension. The domestic-public division of labor implemented by industrial capitalism, compounded with the ethos of disposability cultivated earlier in the

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<sup>19</sup> “A Little Cotton and a Little Camphor Make You This Finer Fountain Pen!” *Du Pont Magazine* 32 (Summer 1938): inside front cover advertisement.

century, had already lessened the American public's tactile knowledge of producing or repairing items composed of traditional materials—but while some could still sew their own clothes, for example, plastic was completely mystifying. Strasser notes: “nobody made plastic at home, hardly anybody understood how it was made, and it usually could not be repaired” (267). As with the historically concurrent advent of garbage disposals and trash compactors, plastics formed part of an emerging body of postwar technologies that required highly technical specialization to safeguard, thereby deflecting stewardship, augmenting the mysticism of commodity fetishism, and increasing trash production.

The characters in *Underworld* interact with plastic commodities in a fashion that mirrors plastic mysticism and foregrounds the alienation such mysticism rests upon. When Nick takes his wife Marian on a hot air balloon ride for her birthday, the nylon aircraft buoying them “did not seem like a piece of science so much as an improvised prayer,” a “larger-than-life toy” (DeLillo, 124). The synthetic polymer appears miraculous, even transcendental, exceeding the known bounds of secular existence, quite literally elevating them above their natural station. In a parallel passage from *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), the narrator reads the invention of nylon as “an announcement of Plasticity's central canon” (Pynchon, 253). Chemists, “no longer at the mercy of Nature,” could now “decide what properties they wanted a molecule to have, and then go ahead and build it” (Pynchon, 253). Here, too, plastic is deified, capitalized as a proper noun and pronounced the center of the universe, usurping the omnipotence of the divine. Divorced from the technical processes that yield the material, the Shays perceive only a narrow slice of the object's history, limited to the act of leisurely consumption, a brief passage in a much lengthier narrative. As we will see in the novel's treatment of landfills, DeLillo's text ultimately deflates the elevated dreams of what Meikle calls “plastic utopianism” (and what we've been calling

“plastic mysticism”) and the ephemeral consideration of their origins, by revealing the enormity and permanence of the resultant waste.

While most studies of *Underworld* examine its treatment of waste, little attention has been given to the novel’s exploration of items which have not yet become waste. Plastic condoms and gloves in the text are presented as instruments of insulation, dematerialization, and neurosis, anti-waste technologies that further sever consumers from systems of production and disposal. In a Phoenix suburb in 1992, Nick Shay and Brian Glassic visit Condomology, an ostentatious store in a “neat clean minimall” containing a vast array of bright and unusual condoms (DeLillo, 109). Brian feels, smells, and licks sample condoms in the store, ultimately purchasing one for his son. Thirty years earlier, in a New York comedy club, comedian Lenny Bruce performs a standup routine using a condom as a prop. Though he and Glassic are separated by time and space, Bruce directly echoes the other man’s actions in a series of crass gestures: he “licked and rubbed the condom. He fingered it, twirled it, snapped it,” then tells his audience that “this is what the twentieth century feels like” (DeLillo, 584). (Modernist scholar Judith Brown concurs with Bruce: in her analysis of cellophane’s relationship to modernism, she calls plastic the “most twentieth-century of materials” [144].)

In their varied tactile and olfactory exchanges with these items, Glassic and Bruce draw attention to the elasticity befitting a product capable of molding itself to genitals of various shapes and sizes. The twentieth century feels elastic: chemistry and industry have united to create a malleable, permutable, impersonal commodity designed for the most personal of organs and exchanges; the textual echoes dilate the reach of the material across the century, suggesting its emerging omnipresence. As a technological manifestation of aversion to corporeal waste, condoms embody one iteration of a recurring paradox in the history of waste: isolating the body

from one undesirable form of matter, they themselves come to form another when they are used once and cast aside. Waste-averse but themselves constituting waste, condoms and similar products create the conditions they decry.<sup>20</sup>

Phallic-shaped, designed to enable penetration and catch bodily excretions, and composed of plastic, condoms exist at the nexus between sexuality, violence, waste, and technology. As *Underworld* and *Gravity's Rainbow* frequently suggest, plasticity arises from and is a kind of violence. Indeed, the histories of plastics and of war are inextricable: polyurethane, the material from which many condoms are comprised, was first implemented in World War II to insulate military aircraft, while Styrofoam was developed for life preservers (Meikle, 189). The central narrative arc of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the international search for the deadly V-2 rocket component known as the Schwarzgerät, centers on plastic: the sought-after material which determines the outcome of the war is ultimately revealed as nothing other than an aromatic polymer called Imipolex G, a newly synthesized plastic that can withstand incredibly high temperatures. Pynchon's text repeatedly underscores the connection between V-2 rockets and sexuality: aside from the obvious phallic shape of the missiles themselves, much of the plot concerns the bizarre phenomenon wherein rockets mysteriously land on any location protagonist Tyrone Slothrop has sexual intercourse; the maps of Slothrop's sexual conquests and rocket strikes "match up square for square" (Pynchon, 87). Imipolex G is described as "erectile," moving "from limp rubbery amorphous to amazing perfect tessellation, hardness" (Pynchon, 713). The ominous threat haunting the novel, which opens and closes with the firing of missiles, is that a "Rocket can penetrate, from the sky, at any given point" (Pynchon, 743). In making the earth elastic to

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<sup>20</sup> Condoms make an early literary appearance in Canto XIV (1925), one of Ezra Pound's early cantos depicting a Dantean vision of Hell. Here, the speaker depicts a disgusting underworld populated by self-serving and unproductive sinners surrounded by the waste of "blood sweetened with shit," "living pus," and a "condom full of black-beetles," collectively forming "the cesspool of the universe" (Pound, 1703, 1753, 1769, 1716).

mankind's will, plasticity also yields worldwide vulnerability. Recurring in Pynchon and DeLillo is the omnipresence and sexuality of plastics, wherein condoms and rockets function as phallic instruments of violence on micro-personal and macro-national scales; the legacy of this brand of techno-fetishism is sexual waste, plastic and nuclear waste, and wasted lives.

Plastics not only allow chemists to modify the material world; in practice, they mediate human contact with its more harmful substances and enable a sense of domination over them. Latex gloves and sanitary landfills, two other waste containment technologies enabled by the invention of plastic, are frequently sexualized and likened to condoms in *Underworld*.<sup>21</sup> When Sisters Edgar and Gracie visit the Wall—a Bronx ghetto “adrift from the social order” and characterized by the presence of Styrofoam cups, babies abandoned in Glad Bags, and homeless men and women dying from HIV—they always are sure to wear latex gloves (DeLillo, 239). Sister Edgar admires the “milky-slick feel of these synthetic gloves,” and feels “masculinized,” “condomed ten times over” (DeLillo, 241). Again we observe attention to the specific materials of, and fascination with, the object by the narrator and character respectively. Sister Edgar gains pleasure from the tactile sensation the glove provides; moreover, she feels empowered, insulated from trash and disease alike, able to penetrate a hazardous space while keeping herself impenetrable. Likewise, when Shay visits a landfill his company manages near Los Angeles, he describes it as a “high-density membrane that was oddly and equally beautiful in a way, a prophylactic device” (DeLillo, 285).

It is therefore not only the malleability and boundlessness of plastic that contributes to its mysticism, but the protection from, and domination over, undesirable matter it provides.

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<sup>21</sup> Australian glove manufacturer Ansell first produced disposable latex gloves in 1964 (Strasser, 288). The first sanitary landfill was introduced in Fresno in 1937, although the technology would not become widespread until after World War II (Melosi, 23).

Alongside this protection often comes a hubristic sense of dominion over the material world itself, an expansion of previous industry practices of rationalization. While gloves and landfills are arguably passive technologies insofar as they block and receive, condoms are designed for active, penetrative purposes; by frequently comparing the other plastics in the novel to condoms, *Underworld* positions condoms to stand in for plastics as a whole, suggesting that the technological fetishism accompanying plastic mysticism amounts to a war on matter. Plastics do not merely replace existing materials in manufacturing; as membranes, they insulate subjects from the organic world altogether, seeking to redefine and conquer its limitations. Judith Brown echoes this in *Glamour in Six Dimensions* (2009) when she writes that the “glassy sheen of cellophane,” an early form of plastic, “provided a protective veneer from dusty reality” (150). In so doing, the advent of plastic formed part of a wider technological “idea of conquering nature” (Brown, 162).

If early plastic discourse imagined a convenient, efficient, hygienic future free from waste, the violence and intractability embedded in the history and composition of the materials would come to define the limits of that future. Whereas early twentieth-century plastic discourse was characterized by a sense of optimism and boundlessness, the end of the century, wherein a “dawning recognition of the environmental costs of the explosion of cheap disposable products” emerged, oversaw the fallout of that optimism and revealed the bounded realities of mass chemical production (Brown, 166). Because the perceived ephemerality of plastic in consumption is haunted by its physical permanence, notions of infinite possibilities became supplanted by the finitude of space in an increasingly crowded, polluted world. The characters in *Underworld* use condoms and gloves briefly before tossing them; when Nick and Marian ride the hot air balloon, its life-cycle is grasped only fleetingly; it appears as a toy or miracle, not a

moment in a complex system of synthesis, manufacturing, marketing, circulation, consumption, disposal, and endurance. To take another example, the average time a consumer uses a plastic bag is approximately twelve to fifteen minutes; the plastic bag thus shifts “from being a carrier of goods to useless waste with remarkable speed” (Ford, 1; Clapp, 202).

While from the standpoint of the modern consumer, synthetic, single-use materials exemplify an empire of the ephemeral, plastic ephemera are anything but. Plastic materials take hundreds to thousands of years to degrade; when they do, they do not biodegrade, but photodegrade, only breaking down into smaller pieces (Clapp, 201). In this sense and given current technological capabilities, plastic is immortal: every piece ever manufactured still exists somewhere on the planet, and likely always will. Of the Great Pacific Garbage Patches, each of which doubles the size of Texas, ninety percent of the materials are plastic.<sup>22</sup> There therefore exists a wide disparity between trash as social practice and as physical condition; alongside systems of disposability and plasticity, this disjunction results from streamlined postwar systems of waste management, such as the sanitary landfill, to which we now turn.

### *1.3. “No One Saw It or Thought About It:” The Sanitary Landfill and Waste Concealment*

In a passage taking place during the mid-1980s, Waste Containment executive Brian Glassic makes a trip to the Fresh Kills Landfill to meet with engineers and surveyors. Upon arriving, he gazes in awe at the panorama of trash before him:

Three thousand acres of mountained garbage, contoured and road-graded, with bulldozers pushing waves of refuse onto the active face. Brian felt invigorated, looking at this scene.

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<sup>22</sup> Also known as the Pacific Trash Vortex, the Great Pacific Garbage Patches are two large bodies of debris and chemical sludge located between the West Coast of North America and Japan. Marine detritus from nearby continents collects in two gyres where ocean streams converge (Fraser, 6).

Barges unloading, sweeper boats poking through the kills to pick up stray waste. He saw a maintenance crew working on drainpipes high on the angled setbacks that were designed to control the runoff of rainwater... It was science fiction and prehistory, garbage arriving twenty-four hours a day, hundreds of workers, vehicles with metal rollers compacting the trash... (DeLillo, 184)

Classic's astonishment arises not from apocalyptic horror or environmentalist concerns. The tone is reverent: Classic feels "invigorated," finds the sight "inspiring" and admires the "ingenuity and labor" of the project, with its many complex operations that serve as a "delicate effort to fit maximum waste into diminishing space" (DeLillo, 184). As with mid-century Americans revering a new generation of arcane plastic products, Classic comprehends but a fraction of the totality before him; because it exceeds him spatially and conceptually, the landfill threatens to overwhelm him. Simultaneously inspiring and unnerving in its enormity and scientific abstruseness, the Fresh Kills Landfill, and the wider, streamlined system of postwar waste management to which it belongs, embodies what David Nye calls the "technological sublime."

Indeed, the link to plastic mysticism is not incidental but historical and material: the sanitary landfill, which had become "the dominant mode of refuse disposal" by the end of World War II, was enabled in part by plastic materials (Alworth, 52). Alongside clay and soil, each layer of a sanitary landfill is encased with plastic underlining, which enables the landfill to amass in height while masking the stench, deterring scavengers, and catching leachate, the viscous liquid which seeps to the bottom of the dump; plastic tubes also collect methane gas generated by organic waste, which is then burned as an energy source (Ghosn and Jazairy, 88). Like plastics, landfills dominate the landscape of DeLillo's novel, as Classic and Shay visit them regularly for business; like plastics, they function as dematerializing membranes, further divorcing the consumer from the material realities of garbage by way of esoteric technological innovation. Unlike plastics that have yet to become trash, however, sanitary landfills are situated at

considerable distances from domestic space, usually in peripheral, peri-urban areas wherein urban clusters transition to rural, less-concentrated areas, meaning they go largely unseen.

Fresh Kills is located on Staten Island to the south of New York City, separated from New Jersey by the Atlantic. By the time Christoph Lindner writes of the landfill in 2015, roughly twenty years after the fictional Brian Glassic visits it, Fresh Kills has expanded from three thousand to twenty-two hundred acres, containing piles of trash over two hundred feet high (Lindner, 101-102). The landfill has received the majority of New York City's household garbage since 1948, and remains the single largest domestic waste depository in the world (Lindner, 100).<sup>23</sup> While Fresh Kills is comprised of the purchased and discarded commodities of urban households, a streamlined system of waste transportation and concealment keeps its contents literally and figuratively apart from them. In tandem with strong and elastic material that could "stretch to envelop irregular forms" while "reliably containing smells and liquids," postwar waste management became a highly efficient, streamlined system of dematerialization (Ghosn and Jazairy, 22). Insulating the consumer from trash, the already-wrapped-and-ready garbage bag also accelerated municipal trash pickup, moving it quickly away from the household and to the landfill.

In this vein, it is not merely scientific ingenuity that contributes to the sense of wonder Brian experiences as he gazes upon Fresh Kills, but the effect of redistributing waste-objects in space. There is, in other words, an element of spectacle at play in this passage working alongside its invocation of technological sublimity. Glassic sees the landfill as the endpoint of all forms of transportation: "bridges, tunnels, scows, tugs, graving docks, container ships, all the great works

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<sup>23</sup> As of the time of this writing, the largest landfill in the world is the Apex Regional Landfill in Las Vegas (Karuga).

of transport, trade, and linkage *were directed in the end to this culminating structure*” (DeLillo, 184, emphasis added).

Relocated and condensed in this way, trash exists in new, contradictory modes. The landfill is not merely individual pieces of garbage side-by-side, but a nexus of industry and productivity—piles of garbage collected, transported, and resituated, culminating in a towering monument that is more than the sum of its parts. In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas writes that “the origin of the various bits and pieces is lost” when trash is conglomerated, as the once-discrete objects enter “the mass of common rubbish” (197). On this reading, the effect of the landfill is homogenizing, resulting in an indistinguishable mass.

At the same time, however, by gathering the remains of various eras and locations in one locus of abandonment, and increasing their collective mass, junkyards compress space and time, existing diachronically and in some spatio-temporal sense heterogeneously. By removing the everyday from everyday spaces, landfills alter the everyday: composed of banal objects that are repositioned and superimposed so as to take on new and uncanny signification, landfills invert the quotidian, transforming useless items into spectacles by redistributing and consolidating them in a concentrated environment beyond urban and rural boundaries. What is easily and frequently overlooked in one setting in part due to its miniscule size—the detritus tucked away in domestic waste baskets or littered in dirty alleyways—once amassed, draws attention in another. Exported from their contexts within the spaces of the everyday, and collectively expanded in size, such fragments decrease in banality.

If, by transporting and piling undesired matter into a dense, strange mass, the landfill functions as transhistorical spectacle, its peripheral location and restricted access ensure that this is a predominantly private view limited to specialists and technicians. As Glassic observes:

The mountain was here, unconcealed, but no one saw it or thought about it, no one knew it existed except the engineers and teamsters and local residents, a unique cultural deposit... And he saw himself for the first time as a member of an esoteric order, they were adepts and seers, crafting the future, the city planners, the waste managers, the compost technicians... (DeLillo, 185)

Because dumps are both science fiction *and* prehistory, because they contain the objects of the past, the indestructibility of which necessarily makes them the persistent objects of the future, expelling them to remote sites alienated from the origins of their constituent materials not only severs the public from the material realities of its consumption in that historical moment (thereby enabling further consumption and disposal), but from access into a wider history of objects preceding and proceeding that moment. In its distant location and arcane complexity, the landfill serves as the apex, or perhaps the nadir, of a century-long narrative of disposability and waste aversion; in increasingly specializing systems of production, circulation, and disposal, waste production and management make trash, and the object world to which it belongs, the realm only of an “esoteric order.” While trash is matter out of place, landfills are, by contrast, quite intentionally placed, “territorially embedded” at great distances so as to keep matter out of sight (Ghosn and Jazairy, 13).

Here we arrive at another tension in the history of modern waste—namely, the inverse relationship between the rate of trash production and its general visibility over the course of the twentieth century. As Alworth notes, postwar waste management technologies “address the ‘ubiquity’ of garbage while keeping it far from view” (57-58). Moreover, as our discussion of plastic commodities in the preceding section argued, there exists another, parallel tension between the increasing ephemerality of commodities and their simultaneously increasing permanence, a contradiction between social practice and physical condition, a disparity widened

by the symbiotic relationship between disposability in marketing and advancements in waste concealment. As Kevin Trumpeter observes in his discussion of the advent of domestic electric and heating appliances emerging in the interwar years, the “wired home radically decreased the individual’s contact and concern with the waste that their visibly cleaner households continued to produce in ever greater volumes” (310). Just so, the postwar emergence of the garbage bag and the sanitary landfill allowed for an inverted relationship between trash production and trash consciousness, wherein trash becomes physically omnipresent and subjectively invisible.

As systems of production and disposal become more efficient than ever, the life-cycle of commodities and trash in public consciousness evanesces; as the material endurance of the landfills and plastics attests to, however, this perceived transience is haunted by physical remainders that will not disappear. When an industrialized country exports its waste to a developing country, for instance, or when a city exports its waste to its outskirts, the perceived disappearance of trash in one region results in its appearance and endurance in another, shifting the burden elsewhere in what Jennifer Clapp calls “ecological shadows” of waste (206). The stubborn persistence of trash discloses that waste can only be *deferred*, continually transported and expelled, not eliminated.<sup>24</sup>

#### 1.4. “It Is All Part of the Same Thing:” Free-Floating Ephemera and the Flattening of History

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<sup>24</sup> It must be admitted that, because it deals with the highly relative and spatially-situated category of perception, the discussion of the landfill as “out of sight” in this section is restricted largely to the perspective of privileged middle- and upper-class neighborhoods from which municipal trash collection *extracts* garbage. For a thorough analysis of classed and racialized urban zones wherein literal and social waste are *deposited*, see Chapter Three on spatial waste.

*Underworld* considers how waste aversion has dematerialized the layman's relationship to the object world, and how this in turn yields a decontextualized, ahistorical conception of the world in general, which the novel works to reverse. We now shift our attention from specific materials and sites that the novel employs to a series of broader juxtapositions and responses employed by the characters and structure of the novel itself, which serve to recontextualize trash within a broader, more totalizing framework.

Just as the invention of plastics and landfills form part of a wider system of waste production and containment, the obfuscation of matter and history brought on by waste management is itself a piece of a broader historical condition DeLillo draws attention to: the flattening or erasure of history resulting from the confluence of commodity fetishism, mechanical reproduction, and an oversaturation of media. Because the origins and destinations of things are seldom considered—or rather, because the development of the material world has positioned its subjects so as to make this a process to be sought after, rather than a default condition of daily existence essential to survival—the postwar American subject finds him or herself unmoored from the full experiences and narratives of objects, adrift in a series of ahistorical middles without beginnings or ends.

*Underworld* best illustrates this in its prologue, “The Triumph of Death,” which takes place in New York on October 3rd, 1951, a day that oversaw a dramatic home run in a baseball game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers. The prologue is set at this event, following the experiences of fictional characters and fictionalized versions of nonfictional characters (including J. Edgar Hoover, Frank Sinatra, and Jackie Gleason) as they watch the game.

This opening section cleverly establishes the narrative arc, motifs, and methods of the text. The home run ball, which will shift ownership over the next four decades, circulates between the players throughout the chapter, becomes imbued with national identity, and is caught by chapter's end; a gentle ambience of waste operates rhythmically in the background, as the narrator regularly reports that scorecards, matchbook covers, and the like are being continually thrown by fans and flying through the air; and events and objects echo one another across geographical and temporal lines: Federal Bureau of Investigation Director J. Edgar Hoover is preoccupied with the Soviet Union's atomic test that occurred exactly a week prior, on September 24th; October 3rd, 1942, exactly nine years prior, is also the date of Germany's first successful V-2 rocket test. In what serves as a frequently recurring narratorial device, the narrative thus begins with a juxtaposition between two events and industries; as such, the lighthearted and leisurely tone of the game is haunted by the sinister threat of nuclear waste which, like the home run ball, will persist through and beyond the duration of the novel.

As the flurry of ephemera continues to fall, a pattern emerges:

Baby food, instant coffee, encyclopedias and cars, waffle irons and shampoos and blended whiskeys. Piping times, an optimistic bounty that carries into the news pages where the nation's farmers record a bumper crop. And the resplendent products, how the dazzle of a Packard car is repeated in the feature story about the art treasures of the Prado. It is all part of the same thing. Rubens and Titian and Playtex and Motorola. (DeLillo, 39)

A number of processes yield the blurring of categories at consideration here. Product advertising is interpolated between narratives of economy, history, and art. The individual elements, like trash in a landfill, permeate one another, dissolving into an indistinguishable mass. No longer producing the tools at hand, the consumer relies on mechanically reproduced images of mechanically reproduced commodities, which are placed side by side with other forms of media

and subsequently associated with them. DeLillo positions the magazine here as an agent further severing the consumer from the object world, muddying the boundaries between distinct sectors of industry and sources of knowledge acquisition, and physically functioning as ephemera itself.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in the act of tearing and throwing the pages, the baseball fans further fragment the medium: no longer intentionally arranged, the pages flow haphazardly downwind. By the time it reaches them, the information the audience receives is utterly disembodied and decontextualized several times over.<sup>26</sup>

The most telling moment of this phenomenon occurs when a portion of a painting hits the F.B.I. Director:

In the box seats J. Edgar Hoover plucks a magazine page off his shoulder, where the thing has lighted and stuck. At first he's annoyed that the object has come in contact with his body. Then his eyes fall upon the page. It is a color reproduction of a painting crowded with medieval figures who are dying or dead—a landscape of visionary havoc and ruin. Edgar has never seen a painting quite like this. (DeLillo, 41)

Transfixed, he studies the painting—Pieter Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* (1562), notably filled with the corporeal waste of diseased and rotting bodies—at length, before later discovering, “when the left-hand page drifted down,” that “he was seeing only half the painting” (DeLillo, 49). In this moment, as the object moves through space, it moves also, with momentous speed, through ostensibly disparate categories: initially an irritating piece of trash violating

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<sup>25</sup> In opening his novel with the first nationally televised sports broadcast and closing it with the development of the Internet, DeLillo further emphasizes the role of new media in this process of dematerialization—a related, but largely distinct, line of inquiry.

<sup>26</sup> While the scope of this chapter is limited to trash, this passage also lends itself to readings of corporeal waste and the bodily, the focus of Chapter Two. A parallel is established between biological and mechanical reproduction, between the corporeal and industrial body, between people and products—baby food, bumper crops, and Playtex all draw associations with fecundity, while the paintings of Rubens and Titian are consistently fixated on fleshy female forms. The horror of feminine waste, in its most radical incarnation defining the female *by* this purportedly unspeakable and disgusting waste, is the guiding line of inquiry for our examination of menstrual blood in the work of Kathy Acker. In the cases of both corporate and corporeal waste, waste aversion dematerializes processes of (re)production vital to everyday existence.

Hoover's personal space, it quickly becomes a fascinating, captivating work of art; decontextualized and free-floating as it is, the painting elicits a short-lived moment of scrutiny and interpretation, the contingency and instability of which is made clear by the arrival of its second half. This passage therefore illustrates the instability of trash as a category relative to space and subject, the homogenization of experience and history wrought by specialization in waste production and management, as well as the fluidity and renewability of ephemera in particular, which circulate haphazardly, and in so doing, shift cultural significance in radical and unpredictable ways. If the expulsion of waste threatens to flatten history, the circulation of waste may flatten *or* transform it—depending upon where it lands.

Opening with a prologue wherein trash floats about chaotically and ahistorically, *Underworld* goes on to juxtapose this phenomenon with trash that is exhaustively anticipated, contemplated, contained, and redirected. Nick Shay and his family exhibit a waste-consciousness so acute that it precedes their waste disposal strategies, beginning with ethical product consumption. In “Long Tall Sally,” the first section of the novel following the prologue and historically situated in 1992, Shay explains the role such foresight plays in their grocery shopping:

Marian and I saw products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought. We didn't say, What kind of casserole will that make? We said, What kind of garbage will that make? Safe, clean, neat, easily disposed of? Can the package be recycled and come back as a tawny envelope that is difficult to lick closed? First we saw the garbage, then we saw the product as food or lightbulbs or dandruff shampoo. (DeLillo, 121)

The contrast between this passage and the paper ephemera of the prologue could not be more pronounced. The Shays' (French for “home,” as befits their suburban, containment-oriented lifestyle) approach to consumption, and to the object world more generally, is deliberate and far-

sighted; employing the long view of history, they attempt to apprehend the widest range of the life-cycle of the materials they encounter and consume. The comically hyperbolic consequence of this foresight is that everything becomes garbage: if, in contemplating the Rolls Royce, the narrator in *Gold by the Inch* sees beginnings without ends, Nick and his family appear to see primarily ends, the beginnings almost an afterthought. While matter flows erratically out of place for some, who only partially and fleetingly grasp its significance, for others it is considered in and out of many places, at distinct stages across a lengthy temporal axis, in varied states of production, circulation, depreciation, disposal, and persistence.

The conscientious practices of the Shays form part of a broader series of attitudes and tactics employed by the characters of *Underworld* to counter the twentieth century's dematerializing, decontextualizing effects. Shay and company contextualize trash through waste management, Klara Sax<sup>27</sup> re-contextualizes trash as art, and Marvin Lundy re-contextualizes trash as memorabilia. In each of these efforts, matter out of place finds sanctuary either within or beyond the object's original economy of value. In a refrain that appears, with slight modifications, five times throughout the narrative,<sup>28</sup> Nick explains his waste disposal practices in extensive, ritualistic detail:

On pickup days we placed each form of trash in its separate receptacle and put the receptacles, from the Latin verb that means to receive again, out on the sidewalk. We used a paper bag for the paper bags. We took a large paper bag and put all the smaller bags inside and then placed the large bag alongside all the other receptacles on the sidewalk. We ripped the wax paper from our boxes of shredded wheat. There is no language I might formulate that could overstate the diligence brought to these tasks. (DeLillo, 102-103)

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<sup>27</sup> It is fitting, given that Klara's stated artistic goal is to scrutinize that which has been obscured or overlooked, that her name is Latin for "light."

<sup>28</sup> See *Underworld*, 89, 102, 119, 803, 807. The structural significance of this refrain will be discussed in this chapter's closing section on the relationship between waste and neurosis.

Far from thoughtlessly discarding these materials, the Shays employ a detailed trash taxonomy, dividing and subdividing their castoffs into distinct categories distinguished by the materials of composition and their corresponding destinations. Informing this method is, of course, Shay's position in the waste management industry, but also his knowledge of etymology acquired through childhood Jesuit training. As a result, Shay engages in an acutely discerning relationship with the trash receptacle: he knows where it is from, where it will go, and what constitutes its broader conceptual function and origin.

Such an approach to waste is profound not only in its expanded view of the life-cycle of objects, but in its radical reorientation of subject-object relationships. Defying a consumer paradigm wherein items are thought of in terms of personal use-value and subsequent disposal, Nick analyzes the items not from the site *from which* they depart, but from the site *to which* they arrive. Because the objects are viewed from where they will be received rather than from where they have been expelled, the notion of disposal itself is supplanted by the notion of reception. Something is waste or not-waste relative to a subject or site which assigns or rescinds its value; by shifting the primacy of that site elsewhere, reception not only yields expanded perception but reconfigures the locus from which value radiates, subtly transforming the subjects and objects in its radius. Waste aversion becomes waste-consciousness; trash becomes a product to be exported.

Crucially, it is language that enables contextualization and reconfiguration. Thirty-seven years prior, Shay learns this in a childhood conversation with his priest, Father Paulus, who explains the link between discourse and perception. Paulus introduces detailed terms through which to apprehend the banal particulars of Shay's boots, telling him: "You didn't see the thing because you didn't know how to look. And you didn't know how to look because you don't know the names" (DeLillo, 540). He goes on to explain the etymology and significance of the

word “quotidian,” “an extraordinary word that suggests the depth and reach of the commonplace,” of the “most overlooked knowledge” (DeLillo, 542). Shay thereafter dedicates his life to the quotidian through waste management, and interfuses his practices with linguistic prowess, expanding his perceptions of language and objects and thereby accessing a deep historical axis outlining the movements of everyday things. The invisibility of trash and obfuscation of matter begins to recede: Shay begins to “see it everywhere because it is everywhere,” in some local sense resolving the contradiction of twentieth-century waste production and concealment (DeLillo, 283).

The parallels with modernism, which are explored in the next section, are plentiful. The emphasis on the quotidian recalls the insistence of the historical avant-garde on the everyday and the overlooked, particularly in the found art of Dada, the banal archaeology of surrealism, and the hypervigilant scrutiny of the stream of consciousness novel. Equally important is the notion that language precedes and shapes these categories, a recurring philosophical concern in the early twentieth-century works of Joyce, Ferdinand de Saussure, and William Faulkner. As wide-scale deployments of language paramount to the works of these writers, the roles that the form and structure of experimental novels play in underscoring and performing the relationship between discourse and physical reality—particularly the historiography and material status of waste—is the question to which we turn next.

### *1.5. The Role of Narrative and Structure in Waste Historiography*

*Underworld's* emphasis on language as instantiating and foregrounding everyday categories of perception brings us to a question fundamental to any inquiry on waste and

literature, namely: what does a literature of waste enable, as opposed to other disciplines, practices, and forms of media? Narrative and waste both unfold in time: a story of course moves through temporal parameters of some kind, while waste, as an “end,” automatically implies a beginning or middle in which it was not-waste or becoming-waste. The reader will recall that in *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (2014), William Viney recasts Douglas’s definition in terms of time, rather than space: waste is matter out of time insofar as the period in which it held conventional use-value has terminated. Viney states that “thinking about time requires acts of narration”: that narrative plays, alongside waste, a pivotal role in thinking of the histories of objects (5). In their 2016 literary studies of waste and climate change, respectively, Rachel Dini and Jesse Oak Taylor argue for the primacy of the novel as the form through which to consider such questions. Dini writes that her focus on novels stems from a recuperative impulse and capability, a belief that “language and narrative have a unique capacity to reclaim meaning out of waste,” to confer meaning onto meaninglessness through storytelling (20). Taylor focuses on the novel form because “climate is an abstraction that can only be apprehended in and through time,” a comprehension that the “expansive scale and diffusive complexity” of the novel form facilitates (14).

In this vein, waste is best understood as a diachronic phenomenon—not a noun in stasis but a verb, an ongoing action, a process of becoming. The novel as a genre, particularly the long novel, can readily encapsulate the expanded temporality necessary to thoroughly examine transformations in matter over time; by taking the long view of history, yet choosing nonlinear narrative, the lengthy novel that is *Underworld* achieves this in particularly complex fashion.

In one of the many metatextual moments in the text, Albert Bronzini, the chess tutor of Matt Shay, considers the compressed temporality the novel form can produce: “Time passes in

books in the span of a sentence, many months and years. Write a word, leap a decade” (DeLillo, 236). DeLillo’s text does just this, leaping erratically across decades between sections; unifying the fragments and grounding the narrative are the objects circulating between the characters over the years. Walking through the Bronx and peering at street trash, Bronzini wonders: “How deep is time? How far down into the life of matter do we have to go before we understand what time is?” (DeLillo, 222) The spatial implication here suggests archaeology, excavation, landfills: a vertical axis through matter, implying that time is both wide *and* deep, and that waste is both matter out of time *and* place, not one or the other. In attempting to write the “secret history, the underhistory” of waste, the structure and parameters of *Underworld* must move along both temporal and spatial axes, down, backwards, and across (DeLillo, 791).

By foregrounding lowly objects and narrating their life cycles in multidirectional fashion, DeLillo’s text positions the underworld of waste as a complex physical network of intersubjective mediation forming the foundation of personal and collective histories. “When you see a thing like that,” the narrator pronounces in the prologue, “a thing that becomes a newsreel, you begin to feel you are a carrier of some solemn scrap of history” (DeLillo, 16). *Underworld* consistently suggests that objects are not merely scraps of history, but that history itself is an accumulation of scraps. Once carried and transmitted, the object forms a material link; placed within a narrative economy, it discloses the wider implications of that link.

The modernist precursors for DeLillo are abundant, and help illustrate the scope of time and space *Underworld* formally encapsulates. Much like DeLillo, James Joyce works against the notion of the object without history. In the “Ithaca” chapter of *Ulysses* (1922), frequently considered a pastiche of the Catholic catechism structure or the language of detached

empiricism,<sup>29</sup> the unnamed narrator and interlocutor examines the origins and movements of the water which runs through protagonist Leopold Bloom's kitchen sink faucet.<sup>30</sup> The interlocutor asks, "Did it flow?" before launching into what is certainly the most technically and minutely detailed literary description of the hidden, quotidian life of domestic water (of which the following is only a snippet):

Yes. From Roundwood reservoir in county Wicklow of a cubic capacity of 2400 million gallons, percolating through a subterranean aqueduct of filter mains of single and double pipeage constructed at an initial plant cost of £5 per linear yard by way of the Dargle, Rathdown, Glen of the Downs and Callowhill to the 26 acre reservoir at Stillorgan, a distance of 22 statute miles, and thence, through a system of relieving tanks... (*U* 17.164-169).

Ariela Freedman considers this particular passage "symptomatic of the historical insistence of the text," and also asserts that, more broadly, the novel in its entirety "insists that nothing comes from nothing and emphasizes the materiality of the tactile, lived world" (854). *Ulysses*, then, rejects the ahistorical conception of existence *ex nihilo*, a conception which a thorough and serious consideration of the quotidian works to undermine. Frederic Jameson's earlier essay on the same passage, "Ulysses and History" (1982), contends that this moment performs "dereification," since the flow of water is "disalienated and by the most subterranean detours traced back... less to its origins in Nature, than to the transformation of Nature by human and

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<sup>29</sup> Harry Blamires deems the aesthetic in Joyce's chapter akin to a "rigorous catechistical analysis," and also notes that Joyce emulates the "techniques of formal logic, scholastic deduction, and scientific analysis" (213-214).

<sup>30</sup> Perhaps the most pervasive case of waste in Joyce's novel is the recurring "throwaway" motif which manifests in the various re-uses and afterlives of printed texts throughout. In one instance, Bloom uses a short story to wipe himself in the bathroom (*U* 4.537); in another, Bloom purchases a copy of the *Freeman's Journal* to find information regarding Paddy Dignam's funeral, then repurposes it in manifold ways throughout the day, tapping it against his leg while walking (*U* 5.48-50), smelling it at the post office (*U* 5.58-60), covering and disguising a salacious letter (*U* 5.221-222), wrapping it around a bar of soap (*U* 5:543-544, *U* 6.494-497) and sitting on it while praying (*U* 6.585-588). In a third instance, Bloom is handed a religious pamphlet (*U* 8.5-6), deemed a "crumpled throwaway" (*U* 10.294) which the narrative intermittently traces through the River Liffey after Bloom discards it (*U* 10.752-4, *U* 10.1096-9). Each of these cases pairs language with trash, both as literal printed ephemera with a truncated lifecycle designed for brief use and disposal, as well as the figurative denigration of the linguistic medium more broadly.

collective practice *deconcealed*” (151, emphasis added). By making manifest the invisible human labor responsible for the purportedly autonomous technological object, *Ulysses* reveals the intricate and wide-reaching social, economic, and infrastructural matrices which facilitate the most banal yet essential experiences of everyday life. Illuminating the clandestine pathways that connect production, consumption, and disposal through meticulous attention to the transmission and transformation of waste objects throughout time is perhaps the central function of the literature of waste, realized most fully in *Underworld*.<sup>31</sup>

*Underworld* shares this function but within vastly distinct temporal parameters. In his discussion of the role of the intersubjective in the novels of Virginia Woolf, wherein the narrator frequently transitions between distinct streams of consciousness by way of a mutually considered object, Douglas Mao refers to a more “complex situation in which the gazers are separated in time or space” (54). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, various citizens of London gaze upon the clock tower, Big Ben, on June 13th, 1923. The trash and memorabilia gazed upon by the characters of *Underworld*, by contrast, circulate throughout the United States and Europe, over the course of forty years. In such narratives, “the object negotiates loss or geographical separation as well as intersubjective distance” (Mao, 54). We have seen instances of this phenomenon in our inquiry into the novel, when, for instance, Brian Glassic and Lenny Bruce

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<sup>31</sup> The preceding discussion challenges György Lukács’ critique of modernism, particularly its interest in abstractions and subjectivity, in “The Ideology of Modernism” (1962). On his account, modernism privileges alienation and asociality, thereby exacerbating, rather than intervening in, capitalist ideology. Because modernism does not trace the source of alienation, but posits it as Romantically autonomous and self-originating rather than socially or historically rooted, it produces an “attenuation of reality” (Lukács, 400). Moreover, he specifically condemns Joyce and his ilk for utilizing the stream of consciousness aesthetic merely to replicate subjectivity and prioritize form, rather than deal with history, environment, or circumstance. While in some strains of modernism we can certainly locate residually Romantic conceptions of the self-originating subject whose “I” precedes the Other—even Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) succumbs to this to some extent, despite revisions evident in *Ulysses*’ criticism of Stephen Dedalus—the “Ithaca” chapter of *Ulysses*, along with its broader historical insistence and thematic explorations of repeating iterations of history through mythology and metempsychosis, as well as Jameson’s positive Marxist reading, throw a wrench into such overstated generalizations.

contemplate and touch condoms with several decades and states between them, or Sax and Shay make separate trips to see the Watts Towers in Los Angeles, in 1974 and 1978, respectively.

In other words, although these authors are occupied with the manner in which quotidian objects unite their observers, the scope of their texts differs greatly. DeLillo is concerned less with, say, a clock tower producing a transient union of focus between spectators (as with Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*), or a glove producing a collective, psychological glimpse into the uncanny or irrational (as with André Breton in *Nadja*), as he is with examining the mediation of objects transhistorically, with a long view spanning several decades as opposed to the detailed minutiae of an instant or day.<sup>32</sup>

By contrast, modernist novels frequently halt narrative sequence in favor of thematic and subjective exploration. As Joseph Frank convincingly claims, the various sections of *Ulysses* “relate to each other independently of the time sequence of the narrative,” and in *Nightwood* (1936), Djuna Barnes presents a “static situation, not a narrative,” leaving the reader instead with “only the various facets of this situation explored from different angles” (18, 34). Given that the temporal fields of these novels is dramatically truncated, passages and motifs are related spatially rather than temporally. The reader is invited to notice textual correspondences and place them in conversation with one another through a discursive framework not dependent on the unfolding of time, but instead in an abstract space of comparison and juxtaposition. Time dilates, and Joycean and Barnesian questions of national belonging or the violence of romantic desire, to name two prominent examples, are explored within that moment of stillness.

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<sup>32</sup> It should be briefly qualified here that synchronic and diachronic narrative strategies are not mutually exclusive, and that modernism’s interest in minutiae does not foreclose, but in fact paradoxically explores, their resonance with deep structures of history—as suggested, for example, in Bloom and Molly’s discussions of metempsychosis and the novel’s broader structural, thematic, and intertextual echoes. There is, in fact, a wider history invoked within these truncated temporal nodes, a sense of the past and the eternal situated within the present. In a literal, chronological sense, however, the point stands.

Simultaneity, or the occurrence of contemporaneous activities without recourse to sequential development, is therefore a strategy paramount to the structure of the modernist novel. *Underworld*, as we have seen, instead presents its textual correspondences across a lengthy temporal range spanning decades. If we consider time a horizontal axis, Woolf, Joyce, and Barnes probe the depth or verticality, through extreme detail, of a single point on that axis, while DeLillo seeks to move along both axes, sacrificing some depth at individual nodes in order to dive into the world of matter at a great many points and settings. To return to Albert Bronzini's ruminations, *Underworld* wishes to both dig "far down into the life of matter" and "write a word, leap a decade" to unearth it from a separate access point. Characters do not gaze at Big Ben or observe a crumpled throwaway in the same city on the same day; they touch condoms and visit landfills in different cities during different decades. If, as Frank argues, the modernist novel gives its reader space, and not time, DeLillo's postmodern novel works to create, at the structural level, a broad sense of time rooted in matter—to capture the essence of time through a narrative sequence loosely unified through space, through an underworld of forgotten objects.

The home run ball most thoroughly illustrates this more complex case of intersubjective mediation across geographical and temporal boundaries. As the ball shifts ownership throughout the text, the waste-matter embedded into its fibers is repeatedly underscored and valorized. Cotter Martin, the child who catches the baseball at the end of the game, seeks it due to its material persistence: "The crowd can have the game. He's after the baseball now, it's the ball they play with, the thing they rub up and scruff and sweat on" (DeLillo, 45). Martin distinguishes the event from the object: the former is transient, the latter is durable, and while the event cannot be lived again, its physical traces can be. The ball metonymically encapsulates the event by association, touch, and endurance, linking it to Martin through the perspiration expelled from the

bodies of the players. When we next see the ball, it is in the possession of Nick Shay; over the course of four decades, it has found its way to him from New York to Arizona. Again, the grimy and used texture of the ball is emphasized: it is a “deep sepia, veneered with dirt and turf and generational sweat,” “old, bunged up,” “bashed and tobacco-juiced and stained by... the lives behind it” (DeLillo, 131). Here, waste matter is not expelled and carted off, but preserved and revered; without the dematerializing membrane of plastics or postwar waste management systems, waste functions as a form of contact, a transgenerational haunting that narrates and unites.

When it is not swept aside, but delineated, traced, located, and preserved, trash therefore poses the potential to function as a countermeasure to disembodiment and dislocation, an object that allows for a tangible connection to other bodies and places. The journey of the baseball, and the many characters who preserve and transmit it, serves as a case in which *Underworld* works to contextualize waste matter in an era marked by its invisibility. In so doing, however, the fans, memorabiliasts, and collectors reverse the object’s trash-status. Now imbued with historical importance, the *everyday* object becomes the priceless relic of a *single*, remarkable day; jutting out from a homogenized field of time and matter, the ball ceases to count as waste matter. (In fact, Shay purchases the ball from memorabiliast Marvin Lundy for a sizable sum.) Lundy, whose life is spent “chasing down exhausted objects,” utilizes the narratives transmitted by history to cast the lost item as something to be found and brought back into history, in some sense replenishing what has been exhausted (DeLillo, 191). Much like how Shay interfuses etymological knowledge with an attentive trash taxonomy to supersede the notion of disposal with reception, Lundy traces the genealogies of objects to supplant disposal with preservation.

The object finds its place in a distinct economy of value and continues its life-cycle; the end becomes the middle.

Preservation, like reception, is a concept that enables a challenge to waste aversion, and even what constitutes waste as a category altogether. Dini reads the baseball as “an object that has been *saved* from the path to the landfill,” an “intervention of sorts into the natural fate of commodities” (157). Put into practice, preservation re-routes the avenues that tether production, consumption, and disposal. Dini goes on to say that nostalgic preservation forms a link to “both the physical and cultural body, bearing associations of eros and death alike” (157). Similarly, Stephanie Foote and Elizabeth Mazzolini write that old and broken things serve as “repositories of feeling”—namely, a vexed feeling that moves from esteem to apathy, embodying loss as the object deteriorates and depreciates (5). From the circumscribed position of the consumer who casts it aside, the commodity has reached the end of its life-cycle, thereby achieving a kind of local death; found again, it bears the traces of its prior use, perceived uselessness, and abandonment. Such a sense of loss emanates from the ball, which one of Shay’s coworkers deems “melancholy junk from yesteryear” (DeLillo, 99). Notably, Shay purchases the Thomson home-run ball not to commemorate victory, but to “commemorate failure”—both that of his preferred team and his own personal failures (DeLillo, 97). The item thus binds individual and collective histories, not only as a membrane that absorbs the particles of its users as it travels geographically and temporally, but also as symbolic site that embodies and conjoins narratives of loss, forgetting, and remembering through metonymic association.

Although the baseball, along with the waste that circulates the text, poses the potential to counterbalance a limited, truncated understanding of the histories of objects, it cannot do so on its own. As we have seen, *Underworld* suggests that trash must be narrated in order to

thoroughly expand historical perception; it is etymology that enables Nick to see the trash receptacle as facilitating reception, and it is the story of the baseball game, referred to as the “Shot Heard Round the World,” which helps Lundy trace, recuperate, and safeguard the baseball. As Maurizia Bozcagli argues in *Stuff Theory* (2014), the ex-commodity “allows one to rethink relationally,” situating “the object and myself in a multiplicity of relations” with “other materialities, people, discourse, events” (229). In the same vein, Bill Brown writes, in his reconsideration of subject-object relationships *Other Things* (2016), that “people and things cannot be disaggregated; agency must be distributed among multiple actants” in a complex historical and material network (6). The historiography of objects, then, can only occur through such a conglomerate of discursive and material forces and a thorough understanding of their interrelations.

While a central function of *Underworld* is to present waste as an access-point into a deep axis of history, at least two major textual elements frustrate and complicate this purpose: the genealogical gaps within the narrative and the disjointed, nonlinear fashion in which distinct portions are presented chronologically. Marvin Lundy is able to trace a nearly complete lineage of the ball in order to prove its authenticity; he traces generations of owners back several decades to a man named Charles Wainwright, but cannot locate “the last link” that would allow him to “connect backwards from the Wainwright ball to the ball making contact with Bobby Thomson’s bat” (DeLillo, 181). For Thomas Heise, this makes the ball a “broken link more than a sturdy connector,” something that attempts, but ultimately fails, to unify the sprawling text (237). Lundy, Shay, and the other characters never find that missing link, but the reader does: after Cotter Martin catches the ball, his father steals it from him and sells it to Wainwright for a profit. Because the reader has privileged access to a macroscopic, long view of history obscured from

the characters embedded in the narrative, *Underworld* produces uneven levels of knowledge—a disparity between intradiegetic and extradiegetic epistemologies. While the link is broken within the narrative, it remains whole outside the narrative. Ruminating on his encounters with the various owners of the ball, Lundy thinks: “their stories would be exalted, absorbed by something larger” (DeLillo, 318). As it turns out, that larger something is the aggregate of stories that constitutes the novel.

When Shay visits the Watts Towers, the Los Angeles building composed of defunct railroad tracks, broken porcelain, soda cans, cement and mirror fragments, he observes a fraught wholeness: “Whatever the cast-off nature of the materials, the seeming offhandedness, and whatever the domination of pure intuition, the man was a master builder. There was a structural unity to the place, a sense of repeated themes and deft engineering” (DeLillo, 277). The structure of *Underworld*, with its plethora of historical and thematic correspondences and juxtapositions, makes it difficult not to read this passage metafictionally. The narrator seems to assure the reader that the text is not a “large loose baggy monster,” with “queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary,” as Henry James famously said of some nineteenth-century novels (x). This long novel, DeLillo intimates, may be large and baggy, but is also deftly engineered, tight rather than loose, intentional rather than arbitrary.

To demonstrate this, an analysis of the novel’s structure is called for. The novel’s eight sections are as follows:

1. Prologue – “The Triumph of Death” (3 October 1951)
2. Part 1 – “Long Tall Sally” (Spring-Summer 1992)
3. Part 2 – “Elegy for Left Hand Alone” (Mid-1980s – Early 1990s)
4. Part 3 – “The Cloud of Unknowing” (Spring 1978)
5. Part 4 – “Cocksucker Blues” (Summer 1974)
6. Part 5 – “Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry” (Selected Fragments Public and Private in the 1950s and 1960s)

7. Part 6 – “Arrangement in Gray and Black” (Fall 1951 – Summer 1952)
8. Epilogue – “Das Kapital” (Sometime After Part 1, Likely 1992)

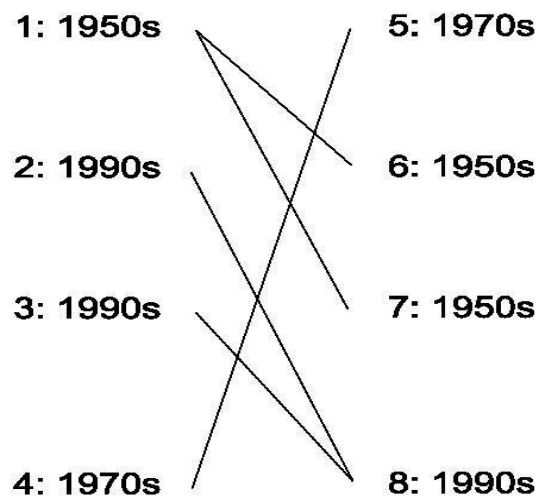
A number of musical, painterly, commercial, and philosophical allusions in the titles, all of which are directly borrowed and echo the flattening or homogenizing of media previously examined in the prologue, are worth noting briefly. “The Triumph of Death” (1562), as previously stated, is the title of the Renaissance painting by Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel that strikes J. Edgar Hoover in the prologue. “Arrangement in Gray and Black” is the title of a notable 1871 portrait by James Whistler, the American painter who frequently titled his paintings “Nocturnes” in an effort to evoke the abstraction of musical compositions towards which his work aspired. “Long Tall Sally” is the name of a 1956 rock and roll song by Little Richard (as well as the name of Klara Sax’s junk art installation incorporating defunct WWII airplanes), while “Elegy for Left Hand Alone” and “Cocksucker Blues” refer to a 1929 composition by Polish-American pianist Leopold Godowsky and a 1970 Rolling Stones track, respectively. “The Cloud of Unknowing” is a textual prayer guide in the Christian mysticism tradition, written anonymously in Middle English during the fourteenth century. “Better Things for Better Living Through Chemistry,” as stated earlier, served as the advertising slogan for plastic manufacturer DuPont from the 1930s through the 1980s. Finally, “Das Kapital” is the most extensive text detailing the historical materialist philosophy of Karl Marx.

In borrowing from four different kinds of media, themselves incorporated into a fictional literary mode debatably constituting a fifth, the novel’s section titles enact the dilemma presented in the prologue on a macrocosmic scale. Much like magazine advertisements, trash, and reproductions of paintings move haphazardly through the baseball stadium, the distinct genres invoked here flutter messily through the titles that serve to organize the text. Severed from the

contexts that endow them with meaning, and requiring intellectual labor to historicize, they prove challenging to delineate. Taken together, these fragments suggest that it is “all part of the same thing,” a history received in amorphous, flattened form, one that the reader, like the contemporary subject confronted with an overwhelming matrix of media, must work to separate, unearth, and recover.

In terms of specific structural correspondences, each of the novel’s eight parts is historically paired with another: for the three sections that take place predominantly during the 1950s (1, 6, 7), there are three sections that take place largely during the 1990s (2, 3, 8). Bisected, each half of the novel mirrors the other, albeit obliquely. This is illustrated in the following simplified diagram:

### Structure of Underworld



While this diagram ignores some structural irregularities (namely, that the third section takes place during the 1980s *and* 1990s, and that the sixth takes place during both the 1950s *and* the

1960s), even these irregularities are symmetrical: each portion that spills out over two decades corresponds to another that does the same. Within the text itself, a number of figures and sites balance one another: George's cellar and the Watts Towers are both filled with detritus and situated in low-income neighborhoods, but the former is melancholic, the space of a dying junkie in the East Coast, while the latter is joyful, an inspiring work of junk sculpture in the West; for every landfill in the text, there is a Marvin Lundy intervening to create a collection that is to be displayed, not hidden; the Soviet nuclear bomb test is the dark twin to the baseball game occurring in the same week; the prologue and epilogue both depict collective public gatherings centered on advertising media (the magazine and newspaper flurries in the former, a large billboard in the latter).

The reader, observing the organization of the text and experiencing its full narrative arc, has access to a history of waste in a way distinct from any character or nonfictional subject non-discursively interacting with trash. DeLillo juxtaposes intradiegetic blind spots with a unified extradiegetic structure, a worm's eye view with a bird's eye view, in order to showcase the strength that a literature of waste can manifest and highlight the particular potential that a fictional tracing of trash poses. The epic narrative of *Underworld* thereby attempts to produce an exhaustively expanded temporal understanding of waste, and the object world in general, through complex aesthetic flourishes accompanying the waste matter and waste-conscious practices of its contents. It should be noted, however, that while the novel suggests that trash-consciousness requires acts of narrating trash, such acts of narration need not be necessarily (or only) linguistic. The efforts of junk artist Klara Sax, which exceed the scope of our current inquiry, gesture towards the ways in which visual art can perform a similar task—as Sax states, “We took junk and saved it for art. Which sounds nobler than it was. It was just a way of looking at something

more carefully” (DeLillo, 393). In this sense, DeLillo’s novel is but a single iteration of a much wider recuperative field of cultural production which excavates in order to scrutinize, with the collective goal of inventing the avenues through which to look at things more carefully.

### *1.6. Conclusion: Nonlinear Histories, Matter in Motion*

We have yet to thoroughly account for the nonlinear chronology of the text, which complicates the foregoing considerations. If the novel aims to write a thorough material history accounting for the periods preceding and proceeding the narrow period of consumption, the choice to present sections out of sequence, in muddying the genealogies it seeks to trace, is a strange one. The concluding section of this chapter proposes two functions of *Underworld’s* nonlinear genealogy, one that demonstrates the archaeological function of waste management as a temporally reversed process, and one that points to the futility of waste management, literary or otherwise, altogether.

To illustrate the first point, let us look again to Marvin Lundy, the collector who attempts but fails to locate the missing link in the story of the home-run ball. Recall that Lundy struggles to “connect backwards” the sequence of ownership to the origin resulting in a genealogical gap, albeit only of a single day (DeLillo, 181). In another suggestively metafictional moment, Lundy’s wife Eleanor urges him to “finish the story,” pointing out that “without the final link to the baseball there’s no way to be sure how the story ends. What good’s a story without an ending? Although I suppose in this case it’s not the ending we need but the beginning” (DeLillo, 314). At this stage in the narrative, Lundy knows the ending (or, more accurately, *an* ending)—he possesses the ball—but fails to access the entirety of the beginning. So too will the reader

recall that Nick and Marian have “reverse-garbage vision,” wherein they perceive all products first as garbage, then as new commodities. These processes suggest that trash historiography moves backwards: the trash is first excavated, ostensibly at the end of its life-cycle, then scrutinized to discover its prior histories.

Were the idea this simple, however, the novel would merely unfold in reverse, rather than back and forth. We have seen, however, that the economies of value which assign an object’s trash-status can also call it back, make it not-trash. Products not only become trash; recyclers, collectors, and artists recuperate and reroute trash, reviving it from disuse and allowing it to circulate once more. The categorical assignation of objects is highly variable and contingent; after all, as Mary Douglas says of dirt, it is “never a unique, isolated event,” but always a “by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter” (45). In *Underworld*’s prologue, Bruegel’s “The Triumph of Death” rapidly shifts from art to pop culture print to annoying ephemera and back to art again as it travels through transformations in site and medium. Because waste is, according to Brian Thill, “resistant to capture,” an ever-shifting locus, a process of becoming and unbecoming, an ambitious waste historiography must account for this fluidity (5).

It is therefore fitting that the novel employs neither a linear nor a reverse-chronology. If the problem with trash in consumer culture is the mirage of beginnings without ends, DeLillo is not content with tracing fresh commodities to their trashy ends, or exhuming trashed objects to unearth their shiny beginnings; rather, *Underworld* grants access to a much wider history of unruly matter in perpetual motion—in various, impermanent states of use, disuse, dislocation, alteration, and appropriation—none of which are privileged, but instead gesture towards one another in fluid, multidirectional fashion, unsettling the notions of beginnings and endings altogether. The novel thereby seeks to provide the most comprehensive underhistory possible

while simultaneously maintaining skepticism about the feasibility of such an undertaking, which manifests as fractured, nonlinear cartography, an oblique roadmap into American history.

DeLillo's novel makes it clear that a comprehensive or totalizing system of waste management—the productivist utopia of a system without traces of waste whatsoever, whether in hygienic practice or narrative discourse—is impossible. When suburban housewife Erica Deming uses “rubberoid gloves” to clean the dishes by hand before placing them in the dishwasher, she does so “because if you don't get every smudge of organic murk off the fork tines and out of the pans before you run the dishwasher, it could come back to haunt you in the morning” (DeLillo, 519). Elsewhere, Sister Edgar attempts to eliminate waste by filtering it through multiple hygienic processes, which result in further processes:

That night she leaned over the washbasin in her room and cleaned a steel wool pad with disinfectant. Then she used the pad to scour a scrub brush, cleaning every bristle. But she hadn't cleaned the original disinfectant in something stronger than disinfectant. She hadn't done this because the regression was infinite. (DeLillo, 251)

In the novel, as in the universe, the smudges of organic murk come back to haunt us in the morning; what is used to cast aside dirt and filth is itself tainted by contact with the debris in question. In cleaning, it is dirtied. In spite of the many attempts to the contrary—from the advent of hygienic discourse and bacteriology, to the Fordist vilification of waste in systems of production, to advanced waste concealment technologies at work in the sanitary landfill—a totalizing hygienic system, a world without byproducts or remainders, remains an unachievable ideal. In the final instance, the lowly remains, a residue that can be incrementally deferred but never eliminated, a problem of infinite regress and physical persistence. In his analysis of the topic, Jesse Oak Taylor writes that pollution “provides a way for conceptually managing rather than eradicating the production of waste” (109). In no system of value or waste containment is

“the eschewed substance or practice actually eradicated” (Taylor, 120). The dust-averse housewife is left with the ceaseless persistence of “insidious, all-pervading, unconquerable fluff” polluting the furniture, a never ending and, if its goal is absolute, ultimately futile war on matter (Campbell, 200).

*Underworld*'s narrative form thus serves as a macrocosmic attempt, though opposite in intent, parallel to the efforts of Erica Deming and Sister Edgar: rather than try to eliminate waste, the novel produces a re-historicized, multi-directional expansion of consciousness towards the objects that become, and cease to be, waste. At the same time, it recognizes that this historiographical effort itself is part and parcel of a wider neurotic impulse, less to do with the objects in question and more to do with an untenable mastery over a messy, disordered morass of objects that exceed subject and system, literary or otherwise. Because “disused or decaying matter, in its liminality, plasticity, and abjection, occupies space in new, unexpected ways,” the subject cannot “own it as she owns every other type of object” (Bozcagli, 231). Taken together, the fluidity of matter in motion, compounded with the problems of infinite regress and physical persistence of waste, frustrate attempts to organize and contain. “Cleanliness is a form of apprehension,” Matthew O'Connor reminds us in *Nightwood*—left to its own devices, matter is untidy, and the battle against undesirable matter is ceaseless, cyclical, and potentially maddening (Barnes, 126). As William Burroughs writes in a 1954 letter to Allen Ginsberg, the process of imposing “some form on material... catapults me into a sort of madness” (22).

In recuperating trash as a “form of historical reclamation,” *Underworld* therefore also casts the exhaustiveness of that reclamation into doubt, as an “obsessive-compulsive effort to classify and order” that cannot hold (Dini, 25-26). Unable to contain the unruly material that is its subject, the text fissures. In exceeding the atomized subject, waste allows for

transgenerational mediation, the formation of collective experiences, and the revelation of obscured narratives; by the same token, this very excess also disallows its mastery. Pushed aside, waste pushes back, exhibiting its “own momentum” and agency (DeLillo, 287). When classified and recycled, trash is redirected to the proper places and channels; re-assigned a lost importance and preserved, it is guaranteed to continue being in place in some alternative history or economy. These practices, while allowing for an expanded view of the history of objects that in some important sense counterbalances the historical myopia of consumer culture, constitute middles, not ends; elusive, waste wiggles out of co-optation, re-use, and narration, telling its own story and slipping out of place once more.

Chapter Two: “Excretory Histories, Wasting Words”

“They call me Hogg ‘cause a hog lives dirty. I don’t wash none. And when I get hungry, I eat my own snot. I been wearin’ these clothes since winter. I don’t even take my dick out my pants to piss most times, unless it’s in some cunt’s face. Or all over a cocksucker like you... I got worms, boy—had ‘em ever since I was a kid. But I won’t get rid of ‘em cause I like the way they make my asshole itch... I got a hairy ass and it sure cakes up crusty. But I just don’t believe in wipin’ when I got a freaky little son of a bitch like you to eat it out for me.”

—Samuel Delany, *Hogg* (1995)

*2.0. Introduction: The “Other Tradition”*

Meet “Hogg” Hargus, the eponymous secondary protagonist of Samuel Delany’s graphic, transgressive novel dedicated to filth, depravity, and brutality. *Hogg* follows an unnamed narrator (whom the other characters simply dub “Cocksucker”), an eleven-year-old boy who meets and accompanies Hogg as he goes about his grotesque work. In what may be considered a twisted form of the picaresque genre, *Hogg* follows the titular rapist-for-hire as he inflicts his particular brand of disgust and violence upon a series of women, men, children, and infants—its loose, episodic structure is filled with toe jam, fecal crust, smegma, mixtures of blood, pus, and plasma that seep from torn-open, improvised, and sexually assaulted orifices created in thighs and other unconventional locations, and indeed every imaginable convergence of bodily discharge. The gang rape passages, which comprise the vast majority of the text, are so detailed, complex, and extreme that they dissolve into a disorienting mass of limbs and holes spewing various expulsions; the narrator is frequently unable to tell whose genitals or weapons are penetrating which orifices, or whose feces or mucus he’s consuming. The novel comes to a close when Cocksucker, who has come to prefer smegma (a cheese-like substance derived from

fermentation of liquids in the foreskin) to his usual nourishment, leaves Hogg for another man with even poorer hygiene.

*Hogg* belongs to an enduring corpus of fetishistic, pornographic fiction that can be traced at least as far back to the work of the Marquis de Sade in late-eighteenth-century France, and in fact further back to seventeenth-century England. In *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity* (1993), Lynn Hunt traces the early history of the literary genre, which, in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, was “most often a vehicle for using the shock of sex to criticize religious and political authorities,” before developing into its more familiar, predominantly sexual iteration towards the end of the nineteenth (10). Hunt’s history presents pornographic writing as a literary-political underworld dissenting beneath many major intellectual transitions in Europe, including the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution: “pornography came out of the demimonde of heretics, freethinkers, and libertines,” she writes, constituting the “underside” of those developments (11).

Michel Foucault’s “Preface to Transgression” (1963) looks at the early development of pornography through the fiction of the Marquis de Sade and the rise of the modern state. De Sade’s disturbing texts “lifted us into the night where God is absent, where all of our actions are addressed to this absence in a profanation which at once identifies it, dissipates it, exhausts itself in it” (Foucault, 31). De Sade’s pornography therefore marks the beginning of a modern tradition of transgression that responds to secular cultural limits, and in so doing, defines those limits. Though less violent, the eroticism and irrationalism championed in the life and poetry of Restoration satirist John Wilmot, who became emblematic of the figure of the “libertine” in the seventeenth century, also plays an important precedent. Indeed, American social reformist Henry Ward Beecher’s eponymous essay on the subject bears a strikingly direct resemblance to Hogg’s

ideals: the libertine, eschewing morality and restraint, is “proud to be vile; his ambition is to be viler than other men” (128).

The intersection between transgression, sexuality, and excess established in this earlier French pornographic tradition brings us back to the twentieth-century explorations of bodily waste explored in this chapter, texts that are less about trash so much as they are trashy. Generally disturbing, disorienting, and sadomasochistic (the term “sadism” is, in fact, etymologically derived from de Sade (“Sadism, n.”)), these novels depict the unheard, the unseen, the unsmelled. In “A Few Notes on Two of My Books,” Kathy Acker, the postwar American writer to whom we turn later in the chapter, proclaims that the work of de Sade, Georges Bataille, and William S. Burroughs belong to “the other tradition,” “the non-acceptable literary tradition,” or “the black tradition” (6).

In this chapter, we examine four texts from the postwar American iteration of that “other tradition”—*Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) by Thomas Pynchon, *Naked Lunch* (1959) by William S. Burroughs, as well as *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) and *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990) by Kathy Acker—specifically the facets that foreground, or frequently represent, the waste products of the human body, as opposed to those of households, factories, or cities. In turning from trash to excrement, from the inorganic to the organic, the literary analysis that follows necessarily entertains slimier considerations. In parallel fashion with the broader literature of waste to which it contributes, the literature of excretion reveals that the human body, like the economy of a nation, the grid of a city, or a class hierarchy, is a system of production, circulation and disposal: one that builds, consumes, extracts, and expels. Moreover, excretory fiction reveals the vexed relationships between humans and their oozing containers—namely, the waste-averse tendencies to deny the biological realities of embodiment, death, and putrefaction.

This broad correspondence notwithstanding, the readerly attitudes accompanying excretory fiction differ importantly, in content and degree, from those accompanying other subcategories of the literature of waste. From the perspective of the reading public, the most common reaction to these texts, and the matter that they describe, is unmitigated *disgust*. A brief inspection of the initial reception of *Naked Lunch*, the last U.S. novel tried for obscenity in 1966, makes this clear. In a 1962 review in *The New Republic*, John Wain wrote that *Naked Lunch* “consists of a prolonged scream of hatred and disgust, an effort to keep the reader’s nose down in the mud for 250 pages. From the literary point of view, it is the merest trash, not worth a second glance” (21). A few months later, in February of 1963, Mary McCarthy of *The New York Review of Books* stated similarly that the novel was “disgusting and sometimes tiresome, often in the same places. The prominence of the anus, of feces, and of all sorts of ‘horrible’ discharges... from the body’s orifices, becomes too much of a bad thing.”

These assessments and those that followed established and developed two critical motifs. Firstly, the book was disgusting because it depicted bodily waste (and far too much of it—an excess of an excess); furthermore, its wastefulness made it lack literary merit in both content and form. In a 1963 *Times Literary Supplement* review tellingly entitled “UGH...”, John Willet calls the writing “grey porridge” and “pure verbal masturbation,” a text that is both unpleasant to the senses and excessively self-indulgent, seemingly without a proper (to continue the analogy, reproductive) product (919). British poet Edith Sitwell concurred with Willet’s perspective, stating that she “did not wish to spend the rest of [her] life with [her] nose nailed to other people’s lavatories” (49). Finally, when the novel was on trial for obscenity in 1966, Justice Paul C. Reardon of the Massachusetts Supreme Court found the book to be “a revolting miasma of unrelieved perversion and disease,” or, put concisely, “literary sewage”: not simply lacking in

literary value but so foul as to be considered a contagion, a threat on a nearly corporeal level (55).

The fact that the same text spurred largely similar disgust responses in different contexts—across lines of gender, discipline and nation—is noteworthy, and forms the basis of the major analytic framework of this chapter. In psychology and affect studies, disgust is considered, alongside anger, fear, surprise, joy, and sadness, one of the six basic human emotions; relative to complex or reflective emotions, a basic emotion is more or completely automatic (Korsmeyer, 24). This definition prompts a series of questions central to an examination of bodily waste: In which ways does disgust align with the forms of waste aversion thus far examined, and in which ways does it deviate from them? To what varying ends is disgust deployed by the literature of waste? Are there forms of excretory fiction that do not elicit, or intend to elicit, disgust? Can an individual subject's disgust with corporeal waste be reconfigured through exposure to that "other tradition"? Given the ostensibly automatic, kneejerk nature of disgust, what does its use within the literary arts, the aims of which are often contemplative and subtle, enable or obstruct?

In the chapter that follows, we consider these questions in relation to some of the more revolting themes and passages in the novels of Pynchon, Burroughs, and Acker, in that order. After first establishing some of the biological, psychological, cultural, and spatial qualities of disgust, the second section examines depictions of scatological sadomasochism and excretion-filled concentration camps in *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon's text places waste in direct conversation with death, war, and genocide, foregrounding feces as the visceral manifestation of human history defined as a series of unrelenting antagonisms. Fecal matter operates in *Gravity's Rainbow* as undeniable material counterpoint to the vacuous and manipulative rhetoric

surrounding and spurring war; put simply, history is war, war is death, and death is shit. Just as DeLillo does with trash, Pynchon posits corporeal waste as an access point into history itself. If *Gravity's Rainbow* is disgusting, this is because human behavior often is, in its darkest and most historically impactful episodes, equally so; disgust here speaks both to the driving forces and messy consequences of political economy, and the reader must attempt to overcome this reaction in order to see its place within a wider narrative of deception, disposability, and violence.

The third section demonstrates that Burroughs depicts bodily waste not as emblem of the violence of history, but of human biology and embodiment. If, in turning away from its own undesirable products, disgust allows the human subject to deny its own undeniable corporeality, *Naked Lunch* fosters readerly embodiment by enacting that corporeality textually. It does this by, in Edith Sitwell's terms, nailing the reader's nose to a seemingly endless series of lavatories that function to dismantle humanity into its biological components. Through minimal usage of protagonists and characterization, and maximal usage of synecdochal mixtures of limbs and fluids, Burroughs congregates large, undifferentiated masses of excretion, which, on one view, signify a collectivist corpus of humanity comprised of disgusting materials, and on another, signify nothing. Against critics who suggest that *Naked Lunch* may be considered a formal embodiment of a landfill or a sewer, this portion of the chapter also argues that a more apt metaphor for the textual anarchy of the novel would be a cesspool, but one that has been critically punctured. Less political than both Pynchon and Acker, Burroughs comes the closest to deploying excrement intrinsically and non-instrumentally, in line with French philosopher Georges Bataille's notion of "nonproductive expenditure."

Turning from the subject matter of corporeality writ-large to structural concerns of collage and nonlinear narrative, the fourth section examines the manners in which both

Burroughs and Acker utilize the cut-up technique to create textual inefficiency at the level of the linguistic signifier. Working within and beyond the anti-individualist, anti-rationalist underpinnings of pornographic fiction and collage aesthetics, Burroughs and Acker not only depict waste, but make words themselves inefficient, unassimilable, and wasteful.

Given that the majority of excretory fiction is pornographic, and pornography has and continues to be a patriarchal institution that makes use of the hierarchical nature of disgust, the fifth and final section privileges content once more, considering a specifically female and feminist iteration of excretory fiction in the work of Kathy Acker. Examining waste in Acker's novels reveals two prevalent misogynistic attitudes: firstly, that women are considered hollowed receptacles for semen and other male excretions, and, secondly, that menstrual blood is inherently disgusting and must be kept out of sight and speech. More so than the male authors considered, Acker's work is anti-disgust; while Pynchon retains but insulates the efficacy of disgust to elucidate political and biological realities, and Burroughs generates maximum disgust to nonproductive ends, Acker seeks to reclaim the female body by refuting that it is disgusting.

To summarize: the goal of the present chapter is to consider the varied functions of disgust in postwar excretory fiction. The excretions in question, and their significance, differ from author to author—whereas Pynchon probes feces, Acker focalizes semen and menstrual blood, and Burroughs unleashes an indiscriminating deluge of every imaginable kind. In each case, excretion works to materialize what has been dematerialized by streamlined waste-management systems, whether literary, philosophical, infrastructural, or biological: by the euphemisms and symbols that avoid directly addressing death, by the idealism that denies human embodiment, or by what Karen Houppert calls “menstrual etiquette.” As we will soon see, each of these texts also explores the relationship between waste and its containers, although again to

different ends: Pynchon performs a genealogical analysis of fecal matter as it moves in and out of human bodies to illustrate its tangibility, sovereignty, and political utility; Burroughs dissolves the corporeal containers distinguishing discrete bodies to produce an anarchic waste-cacophony, and Acker criticizes the misogynistic tendency to view women as faulty, leaking containers for male substances and desires. Each text also considers how the hierarchical nature of disgust is used to establish social and conceptual hierarchies, be it fascism in Pynchon, individualism in Burroughs, or patriarchy in Acker.

### 2.1. *The Nature(s) of Disgust*

“There has to be meat; meat stinks.”

—Kathy Acker, *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990)

As a biological, psychological, cultural, and spatial phenomenon, disgust serves variously as a necessary evolutionary deterrent, an irrational response without a clear function, an oppressive discursive category, and a mechanism that orders subject-object relationships. In this section, we establish the foundational characteristics of disgust pertinent to our analyses of excretory fiction. As it turns out, disgust, and the forms of waste to which it responds, speaks fundamentally to issues of containment and leakage, dichotomies of public and private space, asymmetrical hierarchies of class, race, and gender, as well as aesthetic hierarchies of the senses, each of which are essential contexts for our examinations of Pynchon, Burroughs, and Acker.

As we will see, Burroughs is interested in retaining the full range of disgust in order to depict an explosion of waste that amounts to both excretory and textual anarchy, while Pynchon

and Acker mitigate the efficacy of disgust in order to allow reflection and reconsideration towards the lowly bodies that its politicized manifestations abhor, albeit to varying degrees. If the reader can overcome their disgust—a significant “if”—they can confer attention to, and analyze the historical deployment and consequences of, excretion.

At the broadest and simplest level, disgust exists in a framework co-extensive with other forms of waste aversion, wherein perceptions of value and valuelessness serve to establish and delineate boundaries. In the majority of cases, the object of disgust is rejected in favor of distance—be it physical distance from the body, psychic distance from the forefront of consciousness, or ideological distance from identification with the behavior or social group in question. In this sense, disgust marks its object as inferior, disposable, trash-like. As with trash, the default response is banishment to the periphery. In accordance with other streamlined waste-concealment technologies detailed in the preceding chapter, such as municipal trash collection and the sanitary landfill, modern technological developments in disgust-management, such as the toilet (a subject central to each of the writers that follow), work to remove waste with minimal disturbance or effort on behalf of the waste-producing subject.

Nevertheless, while trash is frequently considered useless or irksome, it is not usually deemed disgusting. In fact, as Colin McGinn notes in *The Meaning of Disgust* (2011), disgust, properly defined in psychological and non-metaphorical terms, arises only with respect to the biological, not the mechanical or plastic (71). While disgust is frequently utilized in moralizing rhetoric, only organic matter causes visceral disgust responses in humans; oil leaking from a car may be dirty, and one may be figuratively disgusted by the behavior of competing social formations, but Hogg’s ass-crust is truly revolting in a physiological sense.

Studies in neurobiology and animal physiology have probed this visceral link: exposure to disgusting stimuli lowers a subject's heart rate and blood pressure, and in extreme cases, causes nausea and vomiting (Korsmeyer, 19). Certain stimuli, such as fecal matter, can cause harm if consumed. Excretion, or the removal of harmful waste products formed as a result of metabolic activities, contains a series of toxic nitrogenous compounds, such as ammonia, that the body of a mammal cannot tolerate in large concentrations (Rastogi, 285). While coprophagia is safer than is sometimes thought,<sup>33</sup> toxic amounts can lead to illness and death: Brigadier General Ernest Pudding, the central coprophage of *Gravity's Rainbow* examined in the next section, does in fact die from the practice. These biological facts seemingly point to the conclusion that disgust developed genetically as an evolutionary mechanism of protection—that, unlike the historically contingent developments of productivist efficiency or disposability seen in the preceding chapter, disgust is an essential, universal phenomenon designed to protect against bodily contamination.

A quick examination of particular details and a refinement of related but distinct categories of emotion suggests that this simplistic reading is incomplete. According to affect scholars, disgust and fear are distinct, and fear is the default emotion if one legitimately expects bodily penetration of contaminants. “Physical harm is not the aversive stimulus where disgust is concerned,” McGinn notes, because disgust frequently arises in cases wherein there is no possibility of bodily harm; in cases of potential physical harm, “fear is the appropriate response” (11). This observation leads McGinn to conclude that disgust is “consciousness-centered, not body-centered,” that disgust arises in response to perceptions and experiences that often do not present a biological threat in and of themselves (11).

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<sup>33</sup> Nitrogenous compounds, the only elements of fecal matter that pose a medical threat to mammals, make up only 0.7% of the total fecal content (Nwaneri et al., 19). The other components—oxygen, hydrogen, undigested nutrients (including carbohydrates, fibers, fats, and proteins)—are generally not dangerous (Rummel, 141-148). Consuming the feces of another person or species, however, increases risk considerably (Ing et al, 151).

Such an idea gains more credence when we consider the relationship between bodily waste and the spaces in which it is situated and experienced. Like dirt and trash, organic matter categorically transforms as it circulates. As is often the case in this discourse, returning to Mary Douglas yields a fruitful spatial and analytic framework: recall that dirt is dirty in a home but not a garden, that shoes are dirty inside a bed but not outside. As the magazine reprint of “The Triumph of Death” moves through the baseball stadium and collides with DeLillo’s fictionalized J. Edgar Hoover in *Underworld*, it is sometimes intriguing art, sometimes irritating ephemera.

Anatomically and psychologically, organic fluids passing within the body (secretions: one organ secretes its materials to another) are, at worst, neutral or unremarkable, while organic fluids expelled from its borders (excretions: an orifice excretes its materials from the body) are frequently met with disgust and horror (Rastogi, 282). Blood and saliva circulating in their proper channels within an organism are simply serving their biological functions, while blood spurting from a wound and saliva spat from the mouth are generally met with repulsion. Saliva transferred from mouth to mouth is also acceptable so long as it is not *observed* passing between vessels, *visibly* leaking from either orifice. In these examples, then, disgust arises when organic matter is out of place—while true that disgust only responds to corporeal phenomena, it is less concerned with the organic content of the materials, and more concerned with the disruption to a consciousness that perceives their escape from the containers that keep them hidden. We therefore have reason to believe that, had Burroughs simply kept his discharges where they belonged, his critics would not have responded with such revulsion.

Disgust, like the waste it abhors, is a highly contextual phenomenon; understanding this allows us to consider its usage as a mechanism that in turn demarcates spatial and social contexts. In other words, while disgust gains its meaning through space in the abstract, it is

subsequently deployed to define and distinguish broad spatial categories and their specific, tangible manifestations. Disgust with bodily waste is anti-biology, against the necessary functions of the body; as such, sites wherein these repellant biological realities appear are walled off symbolically and practically. As will be demonstrated, Pynchon, Burroughs, and Acker each take up this tension, unsettling its boundaries and thereby revealing the underlying assumptions and historical ramifications entailed therein.

Put into cultural practice, disgust manages the historically and geographically variable conceptions, and tangible spatial divisions, between what constitute public versus private behaviors. The divisions of the discrete anatomical organism are also the divisions of the urban-social organism writ-large; abhorred matter that must be hidden within the containers of individual bodies must also be restricted to specific devices and situations. Depositing or exchanging excretions becomes a private matter reserved for bathrooms, bedrooms and sex dungeons, spaces designed for and imbued with privacy.

At the same time, a toilet does not exist *ex nihilo* as a private excretory-conduit; it exists and operates through public engineering and wide-reaching infrastructural mechanisms, mechanisms that comprise portions of the body of waste-concealment technologies developed over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As explored in the preceding chapter, the development of municipal trash collection and the sanitary landfill over the course of the twentieth century enacted a paradigm shift wherein individual households were no longer directly responsible for managing their waste. In this vein, toilets and sewage systems do for excretion what trash collection and landfills do for trash. In *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London* (2008), Michelle Allen describes the excretory equivalent of this paradigm shift. Until the mid-nineteenth century, cesspools functioned as the repositories for

domestic waste in England and the United States. Pits dug into the ground adjacent to one's home, cesspools had to be manually maintained and dumped by residents. As urban concentration made corporeal waste accumulate in unprecedented amounts, sewers eventually replaced cesspools as a more streamlined, all-encompassing, and dematerializing form of waste management.

Sewers supplanting cesspools as the dominant excretory containment system transformed the public-private dichotomy in a number of ways. Like the factory model of industrial capitalism with which it was historically coterminous, the sewer system made formerly private matters public: as commodity production became exported from the home to the factory, excretory maintenance became a civic rather than a domestic duty, migrating from ground-level to beneath, from semi-visible home-adjacent sites to invisible subterranean circulatory systems. As another iteration of modern waste-concealment, it worked to materially and psychologically distance laymen from their byproducts and bodies—removing the presence of waste matter from daily life also removed it, and the embodiment it implicitly disclosed, from public consciousness.

In a tangible, spatial sense, the cesspool-sewer shift linked private households to a vast public network. Allen reads this paradigm shift as one that “posed a threat to the ideals of domestic privacy and enclosure,” wherein once-discrete containers were now opened and joined to a “vast drainage system” (25). As with the landfill, the sewer system existed out of sight for most citizens. While disgusting to sojourn into its depths, for the aboveground layman it functioned more like an enclosed kiss, circulating excretion from container to container without visible spillage and thus no disruption to consciousness. More broadly, waste-management became a public health issue for which the state and its contractors were responsible. Susan Strasser notes that, in the postwar United States, “American cities of all sizes embraced the

Progressive position that government—and not free enterprise—was responsible for public health and should exercise that responsibility in the matter of refuse” (120).

These transformations in civic infrastructure and the public-private dichotomy mitigated the presence of disgust by lessening exposure to the bodily. Landfill-like, they also conglomerated formerly separate byproducts in one locus; as we will see, such a comingling of fluids both serves as the subject matter and formal arrangement of *Naked Lunch*.

Before proceeding to our primary texts, the hierarchical facet of disgust, taken up by Pynchon, Burroughs, and Acker in their respective critiques of fascism, individualism, and patriarchy, is worth noting. Disgust is invoked asymmetrically with respect to race, class, and gender. The preceding discussion of Anglo-American sewer systems illustrates this clearly: one’s bodily byproducts must be deposited privately in adherence to public/private etiquette, but this itself is a privilege largely reserved for those with access to private spaces. Economically vulnerable groups, such as slum dwellers and homeless populations, automatically violate the decorum of disgust by lacking adequate access to privacy. As Mike Davis explains, slums notoriously do not have toilets; if they do, they exist in major disproportion to the population, meaning most who live in slums must defecate and urinate in public and inevitably become associated with filth and degeneracy (141). In an interrelated hierarchy dictated by rejection of biological realities, women are frequently considered disgusting by virtue of their menstrual capacities, an involuntary case of waste-matter spilling beyond its container. Disgust also functions unevenly in the subject’s interior hierarchy of self and other. McGinn presents a common example to illustrate this phenomenon: when presented with the same category of substance produced by the self versus that of another (i.e. one’s own spit or feces versus those of a stranger’s), we are usually more disgusted by excretions that are not our own (42).

In these examples, we observe the vertical component of disgust: disgust tends to target that which is lower on the anatomical body, physical setting, or social hierarchy. Indeed, disgust appears to be an *intrinsically* hierarchical emotion. As Ian Miller observes in *The Anatomy of Disgust* (1997), “disgust evaluates (negatively) what it touches, proclaims the meanness and inferiority of its object,” and, as a corollary, the superiority of the disgusted subject (9). In this regard, disgust may be seen as a taxonomic and performative gesture, wherein the disgusted subject intimates an elevated position within a stratified system of values and substances.

Operating within a framework of high and low, near and far, disgusting materials also speak to a hierarchy of the senses. Historian of visual culture Martin Jay writes that “most commentators in the West since the Greeks” have placed the “distancing senses of vision and hearing” above the “other, more proximate three” senses of touch, taste, and smell (310). Music, an intangible, abstract phenomenon, exists in a quasi-ethereal mode; it cannot be touched, smelled, or tasted. Perhaps by virtue of this, it cannot be disgusting in a literal sense. Disgust is anti-proximity: placed in contact with the loathed object, the disgusted subject seeks distance. Such theories of aesthetic sensibilities work to separate artistic beauty from the bodily and the sensuous, privileging that which fixates on artistic and intellectual development, positioned as distant, transcendent goals, as opposed to the viscera that is nearby and within.

Part of this paradigm has to do with the subtlety and critical thinking frequently associated with high art: as Joseph Conrad writes in the preface to *The Nigger of Narcisuss* (1897), the artist appeals to the “less obvious capacities” of the audience (8). At first glance, the existence of the excretion that elicits disgust appears incredibly obvious, a biological fact that any mammal must face in the experience of daily existence, and which usually provokes an immediate, clear response. Does art, conceived in terms of its capacity for nuance and insight,

need to reinforce such a rudimentary capacity? In this framework, disgust and waste are categorically incompatible with the elevated realm of art. At worst, they violate the idealism and abstraction upon which it rests; at best, they needlessly reiterate trite, universal knowledge.

How, then, can an aesthetics of disgust be considered artistic? What kinds of cultural and aesthetic work does literary exposure to abhorrent tastes, smells, and forms of contact perform? We turn now to our three writers to examine the functions of disgust and excretion in their novels.

## 2.2. Gravity's Rainbow, *the Body Politic*, and *the Semi-Transparency of Disgust*

“The body does not lie.”

—Kathy Acker, “A Few Notes on Two of My Books” (1989)

*Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon's monstrous World War II epic published in 1973, is a notoriously challenging text. Following several hundred characters in dozens of locations across the United States, England, France, Germany, Switzerland, the geographical reach of the novel is wide in scope. As various organizations with differing political and philosophical allegiances attempt to discover the true nature of protagonist Tyrone Slothrop's relationships to the mysterious V-2 rockets believed to be the keys to victory, the reader is exposed to dense bodies of data from a variety of disciplinary experts, including military commanders, statisticians, psychologists, rocket scientists, electrical engineers, and plastic experts. Unlike *Underworld* (1997) and *Invisible Man* (1952), the other two gargantuan novels in this study (examined in the preceding and proceeding chapters respectively), the temporal scope of the narrative is fairly

limited. Excepting the hallucinatory, time-skipping epilogue, the novel takes place primarily during the final year of the war. What confounds in *Gravity's Rainbow* is not a density of time but of data, plot, and location, all of which is further muddled by epistemological uncertainty: as with other Pynchon novels, the characters find themselves bound up in complex, far-reaching conspiratorial mechanisms, the effects of which make delineating paranoid delusion from fact a challenge, if not an outright impossibility.

*Gravity's Rainbow* is also notoriously disgusting, difficult to stomach on a visceral level, depicting a graphic series of scatological sexual encounters and oozing piles of bodies decimated in concentration camps. Upon its publication in 1973, the novel elicited disapproving responses much like *Naked Lunch*. The novel was in fact selected, and later vetoed, for the 1974 Pulitzer Prize: despite the jury's unstinted praise and unanimous recommendation for the award, the overseeing advisory board rejected the recommendation on the ground that Pynchon's novel was "obscene" due to its extensive passages detailing scatological fetishism and coprophagia (Kihss, 38).

As in *Underworld*, the presence of waste loosely unifies the disparate narrative strands of the novel. Unlike *Underworld*, that waste is excretion, most often feces. Restricting our analysis to the fecal motif in *Gravity's Rainbow*, we see that it operates as a quasi-textual object requiring readerly attention, and that this attention yields an understanding of feces as a manifestation of brutality in wartime, a counterweight to the manipulative rhetoric of imperialism, and a tangible representation of the abstract power relationships behind these forces. The body does not lie, Acker tells us, and Pynchon suggests that it is through the revolting expulsions of the body that we may approach something resembling truth in times of mass deception.

Early in the novel, Pynchon explicitly presents fecal matter as an important form of signification demanding attention. When Slothrop goes to the bathroom in the Roseland Ballroom, he accidentally drops his harmonica in the toilet. What follows are a series of hallucinatory passages wherein Slothrop enters the toilet and travels through the plumbing system in search of the harmonica. As he traverses this waste-filled nether region, he becomes attuned to its textures:

For some time he has been aware of shit, elaborately crusted along the sides of this ceramic (or by now, iron) tunnel he's in: shit nothing can flush away, mixed with hard-water minerals into a deliberate barnacled of his route, patterns thick with meaning... He finds he can identify certain traces of shit as belonging definitely to this or that Harvard fellow of his acquaintances. (Pynchon, 66)

Slothrop's fecal journey proves illuminating. Sticky and resistant, the feces coating the tunnel cannot be fully flushed away: deferred downstream, it persists against management efforts, leaving pathways, traces. Resistance and durability proves paramount to the novel's belief in the power of waste to counteract the dematerializing, euphemistic rhetoric of war. When granted attention, the shit discloses a history: it traces his route like a trail of (digested and excreted) breadcrumbs, and its varied textures help identify its producers. "Uncannily shit-sensitized now," Slothrop begins to discover hidden stories, to "read old agonies inside poor Dumpster," including the fecal movements or migration patterns of his friends and "who'd tried suicide last semester" (Pynchon, 67).

The diction is telling: Slothrop *reads* the shit as he would a text, which in turn reveals submerged and forgotten narratives. Here, feces are both legible and historically signifying; this introductory passage signals to the reader that the many excretory passages that follow are to be

taken seriously, that their patterns are in fact “thick with meaning” beyond their mere appearance or disgust-content.

While strange, the idea that excrement can disclose detailed information is less far-fetched when we consider that it is a central method of communication between mammals. In a 2018 study published in the *Journal of Zoology*, researchers found that scent marking, “a common mode of communication in mammals,” conveys more information than previously thought (McGuire et al., 163). In fact, not only the biochemical and olfactory contents of the excretions, but their spatial arrangement and volume, are significant: in order to maximize visual and olfactory transmission, most mammals urinate as high as they can, and in the greatest volumes, on elevated objects. The farther away from dirt, and the longer the reach, the more likely the scent is to be distinguished and registered. When another mammal investigates the excretion, they learn highly specific details about its producer, including “individual identity, sex, age, reproductive status, health, kinship, and histocompatibility,” (McGuise, Olsen, Bemis, Orantes, 163). Whether the animals have met before, whether their relationship is friendly, antagonistic, or sexual, where they fall on a hierarchy of health and dominance—all of this is disclosed by way of excremental interpretation. In a very literal, material sense, waste can function as a mode of communication, not unlike (but, as will be argued, not reducible to) a text.

Slothrop’s fecal sojourn thus establishes corporeal waste as legible, quasi-textual, communicative, and historically-signifying object. Like a zoologist,<sup>34</sup> the reader is asked to put aside his or her disgust and grant attention to what information can be culled from the material. As *Gravity’s Rainbow* proceeds, bodily waste frequently appears during violent, pornographic episodes depicting fetishistic exchanges. These passages probe the interfaces between excretions

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<sup>34</sup> But also, crucially, *unlike* a zoologist, who actually touches and smells feces, the reader is textually insulated from the material. See discussion of semi-transparency of disgust at the end of the current section.

and the bodies through which they pass, zeroing in on the materials as they leak from one container and are received by another. Bodily waste, and the body more generally, is presented as a simplistic, honest counterweight to the vacuous rhetoric that spurs war and the dense layers of espionage, conspiracy, and bureaucratic bloat involved in global conflict. Moreover, in concretizing abstract, intangible power relationships, it aids in their comprehension.

In one illuminatingly grotesque passage, British Brigadier Ernest Pudding, an old, infirm World War I veteran, consumes the urine and feces of Katje Borgesius, a Dutch spy and dominatrix. The highly ritualized exchange, but one in a nightly series that eventuates in the Brigadier's death, relies upon the visceral reaction of disgust as a form of erotic domination—paradoxically, because it proves identifiable and comprehensible, the pain incurred through waste consumption ultimately provides a profound sense of relief. Pudding, “bare as a baby” upon removing his military garb, gets on his knees, approaches Katje as she sits on a high chair, calls her “*Domina Nocturna*” and offers himself to her torturous whims (Pynchon, 236, 235). After kissing her ring and boots, she whips him repeatedly, then commands him to consume her bodily expulsions. Groveling on the ground in paradigmatically lowly fashion, Pudding waits for gravity to do its job.

What follows is a passage that unflinchingly describes the appearance, touch, sound, taste, and smell of excrement, while thoroughly tracing a full trajectory of the waste products before and as they move through Katje's body through their emergence and transmission. It begins with the residue of what Katje has consumed—just before she begins the process of excretion, Pudding glances at “the bottles on the table, the plates, soiled with juices of meat, Hollandaise, bits of gristle and bone...” (Pynchon, 238). In this moment, Pudding briefly perceives the remnants of the ingredients for his impending meal, the nourishment that has

become waste and will soon become nourishment again. As Pudding kneels beneath her genitals, the narrator describes the motions of her “thigh and abdominal muscles” that facilitate the resulting spray (Pynchon, 238). When Katje then urinates, Pudding “opens his mouth to catch the stream, choking, trying to keep swallowing, feeling warm urine dribble out the corners of his mouth and down his neck and shoulders, submerged in the hissing storm” (Pynchon, 239). Pudding is unable to contain the warm, noisy torrent of urine as it moves between their orifices, exceeding their containers, drenching his upper body and clinging “golden clear” to “the glossy hairs of her quim” (Pynchon, 238).

Next, the narrator details the sensory experiences of both the expelling and receiving bodies as Katje begins to defecate onto and into Pudding. Again, this begins *within* the body just before the moment of expulsion, when Katje’s “intestines whine softly” as she feels “shit begin to slide down and out,” through and beyond her rectum and anus (Pynchon, 238). Kneeling below, Pudding observes “a dark turd” emerging “out the crevice, out of the absolute darkness between her white buttocks,” which he subsequently envelops “with his lips, sucking on it tenderly, licking along its lower side” (Pynchon, 238).

As it crosses beyond the threshold and into his body, Pudding begins to taste and smell the feces, triggering memories and ruminations:

The stink of shit floods his nose, gathering him, surrounding. It is the smell of Passchendaele, of the Salient. Mixed with the mud, and the putrefaction of corpses, it was the sovereign smell of their first meeting, and her emblem. The turd slides down into his mouth, down to his gullet. He gags, but bravely clamps his teeth shut. Bread that would only have floated in porcelain waters somewhere, unseen, untasted—risen now and baked in the bitter intestinal Oven. (Pynchon, 238)

The “stink of shit” momentarily discloses a memory, a historically significant one, transporting him backwards through time and space: from London, 1944, to the battle in World War I where

he and Katje met, in Passchendaele, 1917. Feces, nature, and war all form a nexus of association, as Pudding's sensory apparatus groups the smell of shit with the mud of the trenches and the piles of rotting corpses. The scent is tellingly *sovereign*: powerful, evocative, but also, because it competes with other senses, transient—the repulsive taste and sensation of the feces moving into his body overpowers the scent, returns him to the present moment wherein his body is gagging uncontrollably in an attempt to expel the abhorrent substance. Experienced with these matters, he resists his impulse and obstructs its exit with his teeth. While swallowing, he likens the material to bread, bringing the excretory genealogy full circle, back to the earlier glance of Katje's dinner plate. He thinks of her intestines as an oven: both are systems of production that receive, process, and expel organic outputs. The metaphor grants her feces value in a twisted, alternate economy of needs. Rather than allowing it to float in some nebulous, wasted state, he consumes it—that which is usually “unseen, untasted” is seen, tasted, smelled, and valued.

A series of parallels with *Underworld* emerge here: we observe the circulation of matter in and out of borders and so in and out of waste-states, albeit across microcosmic, biological interfaces rather than on industrial, corporate, or national scales. So too does Pynchon posit waste as a seldom-taken conduit to submerged memories and histories with particular attention paid to textures and surfaces. Like the material surface of the trash-object that unites two geographically and historically separate subjects, the fecal particles that penetrate Pudding's nostrils register and recognize similar olfactory content from another international war, an earlier iteration of an extended narrative undercoated with waste. Moreover, in this slimier case, it is a powerful, natural material—disgusting, but sovereign, situated on the threshold of something that may be considered nondiscursive.

The notion of waste as conduit, however, operates somewhat differently for Pynchon—and that difference stems from the important distinction between inorganic and organic waste. While all forms of waste, as argued in the introduction, result from a confluence of discursive and material forces, excretory fiction privileges the material as direct manifestation of undeniable, powerful biological truths pertaining to embodiment and mortality.

Pudding's brief reminiscence is cut short by the commanding sensory experiences of the coprophagia he is engaged in, by a gag reflex that exceeds a consumer's disinterest in trash. Psychological distance from the moment at hand is undercut by the overwhelming emotions of pain and horror: "Spasms in his throat continue. The pain is terrible. With his tongue he mashes shit against the roof of his mouth and begins to chew, thickly now, the only sound in the room" (Pynchon, 238-239). Unrelenting, the textual reproduction of the senses continues; much as the scent of excrement gathered and surrounded Pudding a moment prior, now the sound of his teeth chomping on the warm, thick fecal matter radiates in reach, all-encompassing, leaving him only with the experience of revulsion and suffering occurring within his body. There is a directness, an immediacy to the act that is powerful, and this power lies largely in its capacity to elicit the commanding presence of disgust.

Pudding's internal monologue during the scene of torture reveals that pain and disgust with bodily waste, and pain and the bodily more generally, offer him a momentary reprieve from the convoluted, intangible systems of discourse, hierarchy, and ideology present elsewhere in the text. At Katje's scatological mercy, Pudding finds himself:

bound by nothing but his need for pain, for something real, something pure. They have taken him so far from his simple nerves. They have stuffed paper illusions and military euphemisms between him and this truth, this rare decency, this moment at her scrupulous feet... no it's not guilt here, not so much as amazement—that he could have listened to so many years of ministers, scientists, doctors each with his specialized lies to tell, when she

was here all the time, sure in her own ownership of his failing body, his true body: undisguised by uniform.... Above all, pain. The clearest poetry, the endearment of greatest worth. (Pynchon, 237)

The passage invokes a conventional dichotomy (nature versus culture, concrete versus abstract, material versus discursive reality) to unconventional ends (the justification and exaltation of coprophagia). On one side we observe the complex, indirect mechanisms of culture: “paper illusions,” invoking the linguistic as thin and insubstantial, as well as a means of distortion and trickery, and “military euphemisms,” the use of rhetoric to recast the horrors of war in more palatable, and thus manipulatable, terms. In their most extreme form, these terms amount to “specialized lies,” methods of avoiding the truths of the body, of the torture and death and putrefaction it will endure. Operating antithetically to these dematerializing systems are his “simple nerves,” working directly to transmit data from one organ to another within his “true body,” the decaying body of an old man experiencing pain.

Being forced to eat excrement, while revolting and horrific, is a direct process—unlike the invisible, conspiratorial, manipulative war machines that drive human history by foregrounding nationalist and fascist platitudes and backgrounding the resultant waste, Pudding can follow the path of the food from the plate to Katje’s body to his own, a form of waste-empiricism. Moreover, he can feel it in the simple, linear process of input and output his nerves experience: harmful stimulus in, painful feeling out.

As will be further explored in our closing section on Acker, the body here functions, albeit by negative example, to reveal the political: since the body is the site onto which the political is inscribed, it is also the site from which political critique must emanate. The body, with its simple nerves, discloses a truth that war, in its complexity of operations and dematerializing rhetoric, does not. Pain is elevated to the realm of poetry, a pure poetry that, in

an echo of imagism's "direct treatment of the thing" itself, captures its object as closely as possible, the word transmitting the thing to the reader like the nerve transmits the sensation to the mind: a linear, transparent move from a to b (Flint, 199).

Nevertheless, Pudding's metaphor erases some crucial differences between pain and poetry, between excrement and excremental fiction. Let us take this comparison at face-value for the moment; in the closing pages of this section, we will challenge the equivalence posited here and present a more qualified consideration of the potency of disgust in Pynchon and the literature of waste more broadly.

Finally, *Gravity's Rainbow* directs us to the ultimate waste-products of World War II—the rotting piles of corpses resulting from Nazi concentration camps. In a lengthy episode from the third section of the novel, entitled "In the Zone," the reader follows Franz Pökler, a young German chemical engineer whose daughter Ilse is held hostage by Captain Blicero. Ilse is held in Mittelbau-Dora, a concentration camp dedicated to producing the V-2 rockets that are the focus of the novel. Pökler, a plastics expert who is forced to engineer the ballistic missiles, is allowed to see Ilse once a year until his work is complete and she is released (although, as yet another figure of Pynchonian paranoia, he is never certain that the girl he meets is actually his daughter or a similar-looking prisoner). Upon her ostensible release, Pökler decides to enter the camp, where he observes a gruesome scene:

He was not prepared. He did not know. Had the data, yes, but did not know, with senses or heart...

The odors of shit, death, sweat, sickness, mildew, piss, the breathing of Dora, wrapped him as he crept in staring at the naked corpses being carried out... to be stacked in front of the crematoriums, the men's penises hanging, their toes clustering white and round as pearls... while he lived, and drew marks on paper, this invisible kingdom had kept on, in the darkness outside... all this time... Pökler vomited. (Pynchon, 439-440)

The camp is filled with waste, in the form of the expulsions of dying and dead bodies. It is also centrally animated by waste: by the genocide-enabling notion that its occupants, superfluous to humanity, amount to living waste and are fundamentally disposable. Again, the strength of its physical presence is underscored, as Pökler, conceptually aware of the proceedings but unexposed to them in person, is overcome with pain and disgust: the sights and smells of Dora yield profound effects that mere knowledge, as an abstract phenomenon, did and could not.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, bodily waste speaks the truth of wasted lives in a way that discourse cannot. It reveals, without lies or euphemisms, the cruelty of war, destruction, domination, and death. The resulting mess, the byproducts of the deadliest war in human history, is disgusting. Pynchon therefore belongs to a group of postwar writers whose texts foreground waste as emblematic of the increasingly violent tendencies of the human species. As Acker's fictionalized Arthur Rimbaud states in *In Memoriam to Identity*, "history is the flow of human blood" (202). So too does Johnny Truant, one of the narrators in Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000), call "sweat, urine, shit, blood, flesh, and semen" the "scent of human history" (xvi). Human history, of course, is not homogenous, and shifts during and after the Second World War: not only in the sheer quantity of lives wasted, but in the streamlined waste management systems that increasingly alienate postwar subjects from the many iterations of waste and the physical plane altogether.<sup>35</sup>

Such statements do not simply imply that exposure *to* the scents of human history is essential to understanding that history, but that history is *itself* comprised of the flow of human blood and piles of festering corpses. As put bluntly in *Gravity's Rainbow*, "shit is the presence of

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<sup>35</sup> See discussion of the dematerializing effects of the sanitary landfill and municipal garbage pickup in Chapter One, and urban alienation exacerbated by the Interstate Highway System in Chapter Four.

death, not some abstract-arty character with a scythe but the stiff and rotting corpse itself' (Pynchon, 701). Fecal matter is not a *symbol* of death like the grim reaper, which abstracts away from, and sanitizes, the sensory experience of death by depicting it indirectly; it *is* dead matter itself. Real death, unlike the symbols and euphemisms that dance around it, is disgusting and horrifying; Pynchon's novel attempts to transmit this sensory experience through its most pungent and poignant byproduct and messenger.

Is it possible for a novel to transmit disgust directly, as our foregoing analysis suggests? Can descriptions of disgusting substances disgust as much as the substances themselves? If not, what role do they play in literature? Recall that, in many cases of disgust, the repulsed subject does not believe the stimulus poses a bodily threat—its mere perception constitutes a threat to a disgust-free, waste-averse consciousness. As explored in the introduction, an aesthetics of disgust appears to hold unique potential due to its seemingly transparent mode of signification. In *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (2011), Carolyn Korsmeyer defines the “*transparency of disgust*” as the phenomenon whereby disgust elicits “a direct and immediate arousal that penetrates the screen of mimesis,” which is to say that the audience “recoils viscerally whether the object of disgust is aroused by art or by an object of life” (53, 39, emphasis original). According to Korsmeyer, the extreme, automatic, and visceral characteristics of disgust blur the distinctions between art and life, representation and presentation, signifier and signified. In its failure to distinguish between mimesis and reality, Korsmeyer holds, disgust overrides the distancing effects of suspending one's disbelief, thereby circumventing the “paradox of fiction” recurring in literary studies (53).

Korsmeyer's account is fruitful but overstated. While true that the reproduction of disgusting materials in the *visual* arts often provokes extreme and undiscerning responses, it is

not clear that the same holds for all media, or for all senses. Consider olfactory perceptions, which often elicit the quickest and most drastic disgust responses, as in the scents of excrement or putrefied corpses. How disgusting—in the rigidly psychosomatic sense we have been considering—are such passages in *Gravity's Rainbow*, given that the reader does not actually smell the stench described? In his analysis of sensory hierarchy, Martin Jay argues for the inefficacy—and perhaps the nontransparency—of literary representations of scent: “Who, after all, would settle for a description of a rose’s scent rather than the real thing?” (309) The very opposite could be said for the object of disgust: excepting outlier cases of coprophages and others with deviating emotional wiring, who would prefer the scent of shit, to inhale its repellent molecules, over its description?

It appears that, at least in certain categories of sensory experience, disgust is not a fully-transparent sign. In *Gravity's Rainbow*, shit may be “death itself,” but its depiction is not reducible to shit itself. Pynchon’s novel, as a novel, *is* discursive; the reader experiences excrement indirectly, through language.

For Pynchon, the grim reaper, and even symbolism of any kind, is ultimately ineffective; it abstracts away from the raw matter of excrement, the offal of corpses piled high and left to rot. If Pynchon presents excretion as a counterweight to the dematerializing effects of military discourse—a tangible, smellable, consumable manifestation of the death wrought by its euphemisms and other diversionary tactics enacted through language—what function could its textual reproduction, similarly mediated, serve?

As it turns out, excretory fiction retains, but weakens, the visceral potency of disgust in order to enable a mode of reflection disallowed by the overwhelming revulsion most experience in the physical presence of excrement. In excretory fiction, disgust operates in a *semi-*

*transparent*, rather than wholly transparent, fashion: literary reproductions of waste repel just enough to disturb and unsettle, but do not disgust so thoroughly that the audience, psychosomatically overwhelmed by its appearance and scent, disavows the subject matter entirely. Insulating the reader from the most poorly-tolerated elements of biological reality, but highlighting their important ability to disclose the consequences of history, the excremental author allows the reader to confer attention towards a sphere of matter almost universally disregarded and unread.

Literature can thus transmit a comprehension of the material world that waste aversion makes difficult. In his analysis of art and materiality in *Other Things* (2016), Bill Brown suggests something similar: while possible, as we have done, “to argue that any medium (by definition) denies immediate (unmediated) access to materiality,” he notes that “a more robust line of reasoning has insisted that media disclose an *otherwise inapprehensible* materiality” (40, emphasis added). By overriding the most potent facets of disgust, fiction allows for a comprehension of the subject matter that, paradoxically, unmediated matter frequently disallows.

Exposure to repulsive art can even transform disgust into something else entirely. Let us return again to the key moment in *Underworld* wherein J. Edgar Hoover is literally and figuratively struck by the discharge-ridden vista depicted in Pieter Brueghel’s morbid “The Triumph of Death.” In this passage, “dear germ-free Edgar, the man who has an air-filtration system in his house to vaporize specks of dust,” exhibits “a fascination in cankers, lesions and rotting bodies so long as his connection to the source is strictly pictorial.” (DeLillo, 50). Not only does the highly waste-averse Hoover not turn away in repulsion, he studies the image with intense interest. By aestheticizing the grotesque, Brueghel has simultaneously enabled and obstructed its transmission. In the cases of Hoover and, arguably, every author examined in this

dissertation, aesthetic insulation can mitigate disgust and even transform it into fascination. Exposure to this “other tradition” allows its subjects to overcome their cultural and biological programming and widen their ranges of experience and comprehension in both aesthetic and historical spheres of existence.

In their discussion of nineteenth-century slumming literature in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986), Peter Stallybrass and Allon White note a tension in the function of such texts, which simultaneously made “the grotesque *visible* while keeping it at an *untouchable* distance” (139, emphasis original). This is true of the entirety of the literature of waste, and is also its greatest strength.

### 2.3. “Human Parts Shaken Around and Poured Out Any Way They Fell”: Anti-Individualism, Synecdoche, and Waste-Anarchy in *Naked Lunch*

“I don’t know what or who’s happening.”

—Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984)

Most of the texts in this study are concerned with the relationships between waste and modern history, zeroing in on one or several decades of the twentieth century. How have the systems and materials of commodity production and waste management changed over the last century, and how have these developments transformed habits of consumption and disposal? What histories does excrement grant access to, and in what capacity? DeLillo and Pynchon often explore these questions genealogically, by tracing the circulation of trash or feces as it moves to a landfill or down a toilet. The pathways through which waste travels imbue it with significance, and the texts map the pathways in order to interrogate the narratives submerged therein.

*Naked Lunch* presents a peculiar case in this regard. As an artifact of 1950s postwar containment culture, “a prolonged scream of hatred and disgust,” it is very much a product of its historical moment: after decades of war, depression, and unrest, waste has been concealed and compartmentalized within and beneath the American suburban facade, and *Naked Lunch* works to transgress those barriers with an eruption of semen, blood, and pus (Wain, 21). While not ahistorical, however, the novel cannot be said to trace a history in any meaningful sense. A chaotic series of vignettes largely lacking a plot, discernible settings or time periods,<sup>36</sup> recurring characters, or even a throughline of enduring waste-objects, the novel operates more like a waste-cacophony: rather than following plastics through a half-century or feces through a war, it presents an incoherent deluge of discharge and putrefaction in an unspecified time.

To take a cue from Pynchon: what can we, “uncannily shit-sensitized now” like Tyrone Slothrop, learn from reading excrement in *Naked Lunch*? A Slothropian descent into the lavatory tunnels of the novel reveals a frenzied pool of discharge severed from its once-discrete containers that does away with the boundaries separating the bodies responsible.

By utilizing the pornographic trope of interchangeable bodies, minimizing the presence of complete characters, stylistically severing their expulsions from their bodies by way of impersonal lists, and mixing the results together in a writhing, synecdochal morass of sludge, Burroughs's novel presents bodily waste as a permeable, unstable series of interfaces, the stinking materials bridging zones of bodily contact that dissolve personal boundaries to no discernible end. While it may be read to this or that end, the result is too erratic and haphazardly

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<sup>36</sup> A qualification: while the novel briefly mentions New Orleans, St. Louis, Tangier, Texas, Mexico, and Sweden, it cannot be said to “take place” in any of these places due to its elliptical narration and highly transient duration in each locale. The only exception to this would be Interzone, the Tangier-based fictional setting that is explored at some significant length.

structured to trace the developments of anything: a textual anarchy of waste, dangerous and uncontained, a release of energy without utilitarian purpose.

In the “Atrophied Preface” that follows the main body of the text, Burroughs states that the novel does not “presume to impose ‘story’ ‘plot’ ‘continuity’” (184). To this we can also add characterization, which, while occasionally present, is not a focus of *Naked Lunch*. With the occasional exceptions of Doctor Benway, the sadistic madman who relishes controlling, torturing, and killing his patients, and the informant William Lee, a junkie always on the hunt for the next score, the novel is without what one would conventionally term “characters” in the fullest sense of the term.

Instead, there are nameless types, generally categorized by race, gender, sexual position, or occupation. In a section emblematic of this phenomenon, we observe what appears to be a violent sex club. It is occupied by a “Satyr,” a “naked Greek lad,” a “Negro,” a “Chinese boy,” a “Javanese dancer,” an “American boy,” “two Arab women with bestial faces,” and “a little blond French boy,” among others, all of whom are ejaculating, urinating, bleeding, or defecating onto and into one another (Burroughs, 66-67). Elsewhere, in a section that shifts from prose to drama, the dialogue is attributed to figures who are likewise defined only as categories: “SUBJECT,” “TECHNICIAN,” “ARTISTIC ADVISER,” “LIEUTENANT,” “JUNKY,” “PROFESSOR,” “FAG 1,” “FAG 2,” and so forth (Burroughs, 115-120). Even Lee, whom critics often consider the protagonist as well as the author’s textual surrogate,<sup>37</sup> describes himself in categorical terms: “I tied up for a shot,” he tells us, “my hand trembling with eagerness, an *archetype dope fiend*” (Burroughs, 176, emphasis added).

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<sup>37</sup> Burroughs’s earlier, semi-autobiographical novels *Junkie* (1953) and *Queer* (1955) were originally published under this pseudonym.

While deviant from a conventional realist perspective, impersonal narratives devoid of individuality are a common characteristic of pornography. As Susan Sontag writes of the subject, the “pornographic imagination” prefers “ready-made conventions of character, setting, and action” (51). As a result, pornography “is a theater of types, never of individuals” (Sontag, 51). By eliminating the presence of individuals in the narrative, Burroughs instead foregrounds the exchanges *between* separate, deindividuated bodies, the moments and sites wherein their fluids spray and intermingle, and the resulting pools of discharge.

As a theater of types, pornography utilizes archetypes in order to minimize difference and maximize sexual exchange. According to Sontag, pornographic narratives “function to multiply the possibilities of exchange. Ideally, it should be possible for everyone to have a sexual connection with everyone else” (66-67). To achieve this, the author “tends to make one person interchangeable with another and all people interchangeable with things” (Sontag, 53). The ideal pornographic system is an open one intent on maximal sexual production, wherein every piece fits or could fit into another. At first glance this may appear similar to a productivist system: every subject and/or object (they have become interchangeable) plays a role in the network, and there is no sexual remainder, no superfluous body, no wasteful excess.

Pornographic systems, like rationalized factory systems, *do* produce excess—every Fordist assembly line terminates in a landfill, (most) every climax a discharge. *Naked Lunch*, comprised of a series of gratuitous, graphic sexual encounters that depict and bring out the materials that *exceed* the boundaries between bodies and between public and private, may thus be said to epitomize excess. Most importantly, however, it is an excess of a *nonproductive* kind, one that leads to nothing else, in accordance with Georges Bataille’s notion of “nonproductive expenditure.”

In “The Notion of Expenditure” (1933), Bataille presents a critique of the “principle of classic utility,” or the idea that cultural practices, in order to be valid, must be useful with respect to some productive principle (117). The principle of classic utility measures human behavior against “the fundamental necessities of production and conservation” of matter and energy in accordance to rational ideas (Bataille, 117). Bataille divides consumption into productive and nonproductive, or instrumental and innate, categories, arguing that the latter are largely excluded from dominant economies of value, but nonetheless exist as valid and fundamental zones of experience. He defines nonproductive expenditures as “luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e. deflected from genital finality)—all these represent activities which, at least in primitive circumstances, have no end beyond themselves” (Bataille, 118). Bataille’s pornographic novella *The Story of the Eye* (1928) demonstrates this through the increasingly unorthodox sex acts of its protagonists. Despite the constant occurrence of sex in the story, penetrative, vaginal intercourse is nearly nonexistent. Instead, labias are dipped in milk, bodies are peed upon, and eggs are cracked within rectums. While orgasmic climax, or “genital finality,” is often achieved, the modes of contact responsible are circuitous, inefficient, and bizarre. Consequently, they become difficult to evaluate within a purely rationalist framework.

The concepts of nonproductive expenditure and perversion are essential to understanding *Naked Lunch*, and place the twin dyads of disgust/attraction and inefficiency/efficiency in conversation with one another. Acts of nonproductive expenditure, which place matter in motion without secondary intent, defy productivist and rationalist paradigms. So-called perverse sexual behavior, the subcategory of expenditure which concerns us presently, occurs when the dialectical relationship between disgust and attraction careens too far towards attraction with

respect to something that most frequently elicits disgust.<sup>38</sup> From the perspective of the non-fetishist, perversion is nonproductive expenditure insofar as it incorporates superfluities and appears irrational and incomprehensible.

Perversion of all kinds is the dominant sexual mode of excretory fiction; the presence of consensual heterosexual coitus motivated by reproductive or orgasmic purposes is almost entirely absent from these narratives. When sexuality is measured by the metric of productivist efficiency—minimize waste and maximize production of a useful kind—straightforward, reproductive intercourse becomes the ideal, if extreme, model, followed by intercourse motivated by, and culminating in, orgasm. Coprophagia, urophagia, torture, and other fetishistic practices that fail to adhere to this model may thus be said to confound as much as they disgust, or perhaps confound because they disgust, and vice-versa. As a man only named “PROFESSOR” states, coprophilia is a “redundant vice” (Burroughs, 118). Fetishes that incorporate the excesses of bodily waste and violence appear superfluous to the goal of genital finality, which is, in non-fetishistic intercourse, usually achieved without their incorporation. In certain cases, then, there appears to be a direct relationship between the perceived inefficiency or uselessness of a sex act and the disgust felt by the reader, viewer, or subject otherwise “outside.”

*Naked Lunch* imagines modes of contact not tethered to production, reproduction, or any form of utilitarian expenditure. No one procreates; the sex is predominantly homosexual. Semen and fecal matter leak from almost all encounters: of the twenty four sexual exchanges in the novel, only three fail to mention waste.<sup>39</sup> In the majority of these cases, the resulting discharges

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<sup>38</sup> McGinn notes that preferences deemed perverse “are cases in which aversion is eclipsed by attraction,” such that the “disgusting becomes wholly or mainly attractive, with the averse element in retreat or silenced” (49). Because disgust and attraction exist in a spectrum with some variance between discrete subjects, inclinations towards necrophilia and coprophilia “appear as extreme cases of the norm” (McGinn, 49). In this regard, the perverse fetish reveals the broader dialectical processes by which all feelings of repulsion and attraction are structured.

<sup>39</sup> See *Naked Lunch*, 15, 35, 63-65, 65, 66, 66, 66, 66, 66, 67, 67, 68, 68, 68, 71, 75-79, 81-83, 83-84, 86, 98, 98, 105, 160, 188.

are treated as mere byproducts—they are not fetishized, consumed, paid attention to, or endowed with value.<sup>40</sup> Receding into the background as another exchange immediately supplants them, they are never incorporated back into the system.

For a novel exclusively containing fetishistic intercourse privileging excretion, waste is deployed wastefully, in a mode antithetical to Slothrop's toilet readings or Pudding's fecal consumption. In a passage epitomizing the manner in which both bodies and their excretions are forgotten, an anonymous young man, called only "the boy," is sexually violated before being killed. As he climaxes, he "crumples to his knees... shitting and pissing in terror. He feels the shit warm beneath his thighs. A great wave of hot blood swells his lips and throat. His body contracts into a foetal position and sperm spurts hot into his face" (Burroughs, 63). Later in the sequence, another nameless boy "snarls, bites, kicks, collapses in tears as his cock rises and ejaculates" (Burroughs, 66).

These figures are but two iterations of a ubiquitous type, penetrated by a series of similarly interchangeable and ruthless older men. Such descriptions abound throughout the text, and follow a largely uniform pattern, one that suggests a lack of bodily agency. While there is genital finality, it is unconventional. The penetrating partner almost never achieves ejaculation, as is frequently the goal of sex; rather, the receiving partner always ejaculates and defecates without intent or volition of any kind. In these passages, the prime mover is the bodily, the pathways and default responses of corporeal containers subject to the whims of another—bodies appear as senseless, helpless, waste-producing machines.

To argue that these exchanges are useless, nonproductive, anarchic eruptions of waste in line with Bataille's formulation, we must consider and disprove potentially productive functions.

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<sup>40</sup> The only exception occurs during a viewing of a pornographic film, wherein a woman swallows a man's semen (Burroughs, 76).

While there are a number of possible positive or logical reasons that may be suggested to explain this bizarre phenomenon—sex-positivity and arousal appear as the most viable candidates—in the final analysis it is fundamentally nonproductive.

One tempting reading emerges from the nonfiction writing of fellow excretory author Samuel Delany. Delany, like Burroughs, valorized, promoted, and participated in radically open, deviant, and public sexuality both within and beyond his writing.<sup>41</sup> In *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), Delany recounts his experiences having intercourse with men in movie theaters and other public spaces in New York from the 1970s through the early 1990s. He traces the subsequent repression of this sexual subculture as a result of gentrification and real estate development, particularly the Forty-second Street Development Project of 1995, which closed down porn theaters, bath houses, and other cruising spots in the name of public interest.

Delany explains this phenomenon as a resurgence of hygienic discourse, here coded in terms of safety and danger: the valorization of safe sex, safe neighborhoods, and safe cities espoused by urban renewal efforts of the late twentieth century functions as a form of regulation and discrimination “much the way the notion of ‘security’... did in the fifties” (122). Delany argues that the notion of safety only applies when viewed from the narrow standpoint of a heteronormative middle class, since “the danger is rarely specified in any way other than to suggest its failure to conform to the ideal bourgeois marriage” (122). The real function of urban renewal and gentrification is to demolish “the various institutions that promote interclass communication” in the interests of the bourgeoisie (Delany, 122).

In *Naked Lunch*, this rhetoric appears in the fictional setting of the Freeland Republic, the culture of which amounts to a “hygienic facade” of citizens who are “above all clean” (18). In an

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<sup>41</sup> For Burroughs’s infamous accounts of personal drug use and sexual exploits, see the autobiographical *Junkie* and *Queer*.

extreme form of hygienic discourse, all forms of contact, bodily, linguistic, or otherwise, are forbidden: “No one ever looked at anyone else because of the strict law against importuning, with or without verbal approach, anyone for any purpose, sexual or otherwise” (Burroughs, 20). In the name of cleanliness, all forms of communication and contact are barred.

That such a cultural paradigm is harmful is the central thesis in “Times Square Red,” the second portion of the text wherein Delany switches from social history to social criticism in order to argue that public sites of sexuality, particularly among queer and other “perverse” subcultures, are essential in a democracy. “Interclass contact and communication in a mode of good will” is the most egalitarian form of social contact in post-industrial capitalism, but is constantly eroded by forms of invisible class warfare masquerading as social justice or progress (Delany, 111). As such, we must perpetually imagine and produce new modes of enabling these practices.

To return to Burroughs: does *Naked Lunch* provide for the outcasts of a newly suburbanized midcentury America what the porn theaters and bath houses of New York did for queer urbanites in subsequent decades? Do its gratuitous queer sex passages reflect sex-positivity, or work to widen the parameters of the normative paradigm beyond the classed and gendered limitations of the bourgeois marriage?

In short, no—while the novel is replete with interclass contact and communication, it is decidedly not conducted “in a mode of good will.” While intercourse frequently occurs between the wealthy and the poor, the majority of it is unambiguously rape, much of which results in, and often continues after, murder. It is tempting, given the novel’s anti-individualistic ethos and frequent depiction of orgies, to read the function of sex and waste in *Naked Lunch* as a Delanyan form of connection and unity, rather than a Pynchonian manifestation of brutality and death.

Death and ill will, however, occurs far too frequently for this to hold: of the twenty four sexual exchanges in the novel, sixteen are unambiguously nonconsensual or result in serious harm or death.<sup>42</sup>

*Naked Lunch* therefore belongs instead to the sadistic history of the libertine. As Alphonso Lingis writes of the work of de Sade, sodomy “is not simply anal eroticism,” but “anal eroticism biblically and theologically interpreted as an act that functions neither for the reproduction of the species nor for species bonding, as an act done to gore the partner and release the germ of the species in his excrement” (xiii). Violent, excretory intercourse—goring the partner and releasing his excrement—constitutes the dominant sexual mode of the text.

But what of eroticism? Sexual arousal, a prominent characteristic of pornography, appears as a second explanatory function which, if convincingly argued, would endow the novel with productive purpose. This explanation can be discredited by demonstrating that the novel is unlikely to provide sexual satisfaction, in the cases of both dominant and deviant communities, i.e. non-fetishists and fetishists alike. While sexual arousal varies greatly between individuals and cannot be fully accounted for here, for a text to prove sexually gratifying, it follows that it should attempt a convincing mimesis of sex acts—the text should comport to a realist paradigm of sensory detail and duration, such that the reader can imagine the scene and occupy it long enough to achieve release. *Naked Lunch* may titillate, but because it fails in both these regards, the text is ultimately unsuitable for sustained arousal or genital finality.

Firstly, the novel’s descriptions of sex acts are incredibly fleeting, occurring only in zoomed-out, impersonal, vague terms. Of the twenty four pornographic passages in the novel,

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<sup>42</sup> For possible exceptions, see *Naked Lunch*, 66, 66, 66, 67, 68, 68, 98, 98. These passages appear to exhibit mutual pleasure or consent, or the vignette is too brief and decontextualized to determine whether or not the act meets Delany’s requirement for “good will.”

only five could be considered detailed.<sup>43</sup> The majority of the excerpts amount merely to a sentence or two, providing only an image or a mention, rather than an enduring exploration, of intercourse:

“Sharp protein odor of semen fills the air. The guests run hands over twitching boys, suck their cocks, hang on their backs like vampires,” reads one paragraph, while the next appears unrelated: “Naked lifeguards carry in iron lungs full of paralyzed youths” (Burroughs, 68). In a panoramic mode, the focus suddenly and repeatedly shifts to something else. This erratic, single-sentence style constitutes the dominant mode of the novel’s sexual narration, wherein an exchange is briefly depicted, then abruptly dropped:

Wooden cubicles around a hot spring... rubble of ruined walls in a grove of cottonwoods... the benches worn smooth as metal by a million masturbating boys. Greek lads white as marble fuck dog style on the portico of a great golden temple... naked Mugwump twangs a lute. (Burroughs, 98)

While such descriptors may *initiate* arousal in the reader, their vagueness and transience makes *sustaining* that arousal difficult. The bodies at play are termed only “twitching boys,” “masturbating boys,” “lads white as marble.” Few, if any, details regarding genitals, orifices, faces, physiques, or motion are present. As such, they prove weakly mimetic and unenduring; they put forth an image or a fantasy only to wrest it away.

The five detailed passages that deviate from this paradigm, and may thus be said to arouse through sustained focus and sexual detail, are, for the overwhelming majority of readers, abhorrently disgusting. They read as similarly deceptive, a means of thwarting rather than gratifying sexual desire. The lengthiest pornographic episode, and one of only two depicting heterosexual intercourse, best illustrates this point. It begins rather innocuously, with a woman

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<sup>43</sup> See *Naked Lunch*, 63-65, 65, 75-79, 81-83, 83-84.

named Mary performing anilingus on a man named Johnny. As the passage continues, it becomes more perverse: the characters break each other's necks, light each other on fire, then kill and eat each other (81-83). After murdering Johnny and having sex with his corpse, Mary "bites away Johnny's lips and nose and sucks out his eyes with a pop... She tears off great hunks of cheek... Now she lunches on his prick" (Burroughs, 82). In a case of radical discontinuity that seemingly occurs only to enable further excess, the next passage sees both figures inexplicably alive and unharmed; thus reset, they proceed to immediately kill each other once more in another series of violent sex acts. "Blood spurting out his cock," Johnny gives Mary "a douche of jungle bone-softener," which makes her "vaginal teeth flow out mixed with blood and cysts" (Burroughs, 84). So ends the scene.

The average reader is not typically aroused by necrophilia, cannibalism, and vaginal teeth. As the survey of responses that opened this chapter revealed, the overwhelming response to *Naked Lunch* at the time of its publication was horror and disgust—not at the graphic nature of the sexual passages, but rather at the overwhelming presence of repellant bodily fluids involved in them. As argued earlier, the secretions involved in sexual intercourse do not generally repel as they move within and between bodies, but the presence of excretion, which *Naked Lunch* makes very present, does.

The pornographic interludes of the novel therefore constitute acts of nonproductive expenditure; their nonconsensual violence and cruelty make them ineligible for a liberal politics of sexual progressivism, and their fragmented form and repulsive content make them unsuitable for sexual arousal for all but extreme fetishists interested in cannibalism, pedophilia, and necrophilia.

Having examined absence, our reading now considers presence. What remains when characters, coherence, and arousal are removed? Only the lowly—a morass of bodies, of sludge, of humanity dissolving into a revolting cesspool of matter. Operating predominantly through a panoramic perspective, the novel is replete with extensive lists of waste, corporeal and otherwise: the reader moves “down through condoms and orange peels, mosaic of floating newspapers, down into the silent black ooze,” through “bedpans full of blood,” “dust and shit and litter of dead kittens, carrying bales of aborted fetuses, broken condoms, bloody kotex,” “dried excrement and sweat and genitals,” “cocks ejaculat[ing] in silent ‘yes,’” and the “reek of semen and cunts and sweat and the musty odor of penetrated rectums” (Burroughs, 5, 63-64, 90, 63, 124).

Synecdoche controls and unites these passages, which, conspicuously lacking whole bodies, amount only to parts. Excretion, which inevitably emerges from this or that body, appears independently of its makers; the narrative mode, zoomed-out, scans a wide, inhuman vista populated entirely by human waste, a “writhing, frenzied, heaving mass” of “human parts shaken around and poured out any way they fell” (Burroughs, 124, 112). Synecdoche functions to dissolve borders between individual bodies; instead, there is a collective pool of commingling discharge, impossible to organize, delineate, or contain.<sup>44</sup>

The result is a radical synecdochal sludge, parts so thoroughly mixed together such that they no longer signal back to the whole, pieces of bodies untethered to the sources of production, too chaotic to sort through and trace.

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<sup>44</sup> Synecdoche operates in a similar fashion in *Story of the Eye*. A teenage orgy that erupts early in the novella “rapidly degenerated into a debauché of tumbling bodies, lofty legs and asses, wet skirts and come,” a “brutal onslaught on cunts and cocks” (Bataille, 14-15). As in *Naked Lunch*, characters dissolve into undifferentiated limbs, liquids, and genitals. Indeed, synecdoche appears orgiastic in essence, or at least the ideal formal device for depicting orgies in literature—for what is an orgy but a proliferation of genitals and orifices whose bodies are lost in a mess of writhing limbs?

How is this mess best described? David Alworth suggestively argues that the novel “assumes the formal structure of a landfill, a site governed by the logic of putrefaction,” the end result of which “is to render everything as a single substance” (52-53). While an apt comparison, a landfill is too bureaucratic, orderly, and sanitary a space for the substances depicted. Perhaps *Naked Lunch* is instead the *leachate* found beneath: a term which, in the lexicon of waste management, refers to the “watery potage that drools to the bottom” of dumpsters and landfills (Rathje and Murphy, 88). While more disgusting, this too seems too static. “Writhing” and “frenzied,” the animated mass of waste always finds a way beyond any container. “An awful purulent discharge is subject to flow out,” we are told, “just wait till you see it” (Burroughs, 36). See it the reader does, *ad infinitum*. Because discharge is subject to flow out—because the novel is a case of many forms of discharge flowing out in every direction—it resists the containment of Alworth’s metaphor.

Rather, *Naked Lunch* should be seen as a cesspool, but one leaking from a critical puncture, a revolting, anarchic spray of unfiltered leachate. Municipal trash collection and sewer systems dematerialize; no longer responsible for emptying the household cesspool, consumers are severed from their excretions. *Naked Lunch* reverses this separation, returning them to cesspools, but refusing their containment, releasing the energy latent in waste to reveal a “frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork” (Burroughs, 199).

What lies at the end of every fork? As Acker argues in “William Burroughs's Realism” (1990), Burroughs's novels ultimately amount to “discontinuity and dissolution,” wherein “humans melt into cartoonlike characteristics and parts of bodies gone haywire” (2). Korsmeyer posits death and corporeal dissolution as the ultimate object of disgust: that, in the final analysis, the disgusted subject recoils from the idea that they will one day lack “bodily integrity—die,

decompose, and become the disgusting object itself” (35). What is seen on the end of the fork is ourselves, dissolved and rotten—humanity, naked without its systems of denial, forced to see itself at its most repulsive, complicit in that which it loathes, collapsed into the lowly biological components of reality it disdains.

#### 2.4. “*They Separate in Meaningless Mosaic*”: *Cut-Ups, Collage and Textual Inefficiency*

“Now I, William Seward, will unlock my word hoard . . .”

—William S. Burroughs, “Atrophied Preface” to *Naked Lunch* (1959)

To return again to the early critical response to *Naked Lunch*, this time with an eye for form: recall that in “UGH,” the 1963 *Times Literary Supplement* review by John Willet, the text is derided not only for its depiction of foul material, but for the “pure verbal masturbation” that ultimately dissolves into a mess of “grey porridge” (919). For Willet, it is not merely the repellent content of the novel that offends, but also the texture of the prose itself—tedious, self-indulgent, and poorly-structured, an uncontained excess that collapses into a single and unremarkable substance.

This stems not from an unaccountable idiosyncrasy of taste, but long-standing literary principles first established in Aristotle’s *Poetics* (335 B.C.) and retained largely to this day. In his analysis of economies of form and excess in *The Dyer’s Hand* (1962), W. H. Auden writes that most art of a “bourgeois nature” disapproves of “loose ends, irrelevance, and mess” (57). Acker, in “William Burroughs's Realism,” also links continuity and unity of form to the model established in Classical antiquity as well as bourgeois realism. “Well-measured language,”

including “novels which structurally depend on the Aristotelian continuities, or any formal continuities, cannot describe, much less criticize” any culture that also depends on them (Acker, 2). Because this literary mode exists as an extension of a normative paradigm, Acker argues that any artistic exercise situated in “educated bourgeois terms and modes” is ultimately a “spurious exercise” (1).

In “Writing as a General Economy” (1998), poet Steve McCaffery also criticizes unity and usefulness as unexamined assumptions underlying acts of literary production: as an “unquestionable value,” utility has historically exercised a “philosophical hold” over “the notion of writing” (202). Textual expenditure must have a secondary purpose, must respond to some need within a literary system of value and demand; so too must each of its separate components correspond to its overarching aims. Without this, it is merely linguistic masturbation, a wasteful discharge that fails to fertilize.

These postwar observations, by Auden, Acker, and McCaffery, are not new. They are, as we will see in the brief history of collage that follows, essentially reiterations and continuations of related criticisms found in several authors and agitators of the historical European avant-garde from which Burroughs and Acker derived their methods—and even these have predecessors in the libertine tradition. Within the Classical, and later, bourgeois rationalist model of writing, textual production must exhibit unity in order to have value (in narrative, this means a beginning, middle, and end); unity has value insofar as it permits a clear, direct transmission of information, a utilitarian form of expenditure. From the standpoint of the patriarchal and heteronormative nuclear family, the central social unit of the bourgeoisie decried by Burroughs and Acker, art and life must be efficient and productive. Consequently, for these authors, the Classical unities of setting, plot, and character pose a problem. What these paradigms do for culture they do for

literature as well: establish a model of conduct that, in limiting the parameters of value, creates and eschews waste.

Not content merely to depict waste, Burroughs and Acker create waste at the level of sign and structure. As in the previous chapter, wherein we shifted from the treatment of trash as subject matter to its formal manifestations in the complex arrangement of *Underworld*, we now focalize structural organization briefly with Burroughs before turning to Acker. We have already implicitly demonstrated as much in arguing that synecdoche drives the anti-structure of *Naked Lunch*: the “whole” to which the parts signal is anything but. This section first explores the aesthetics of inefficiency deployed by Burroughs before turning to its usage in Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School*. (Although similar in form, Acker differs importantly in content—a difference explored in the closing section on feminist pornography.)

*Naked Lunch* is a collage masquerading as a novel, and, given its dearth of novelistic elements, not very well. The technique, introduced to the visual arts in the early 1910s by cubists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, and brought into the literary realm by poets Tristan Tzara and André Breton later that decade and throughout the next, fundamentally fragments the organizational structure and conceptual underpinnings of art. By interpolating and juxtaposing heterogeneous elements from beyond the frame, collage introduces randomness and incoherence, as well as evocative new forms of signification, into what was previously a more rigid and contained system. As will be demonstrated throughout this section, such practices constitute waste or nonproductive expenditure at the formal level.

As we pivot from disgust to formal inefficiency, what appears like a major framework shift is in fact an extension of the preceding methods. This chapter’s pairing of corporeal and aesthetic waste is not incidental, for fragmentation does to the text what excretion does to the

body: like discharge, the elements interpolated into a collage violate the purported solidity or unity of the container. Just as the Judeo-Christian conception of purity manifests in “the wholeness of the body seen as perfect container” that does not visibly excrete, Classical accounts of art view the art-object as a self-contained, unified entity precisely crafted to contain the subject structurally (Douglas, 65). With regards to biological and formal waste alike, that which exceeds the medium, genre, or method becomes incorporated, revealing the fragility of its boundaries. Untethered from the sticky, morbid facets of biological reality that constitute excrement, however, textual excess does not prompt a physiological response; rather, as a violation of poetics and reason, textual inefficiency halts the reading process, throwing a wrench into the hermeneutic assembly line and generating frustration. A smooth and efficient interpretive mechanism becomes clunky and wrinkled—or, from the viewpoint of the historical avant-garde (and, later, Derridean poststructuralism), the supplementary excess reveals an always-already presence of wrinkles smoothed out by rational discourse.

Viewed this way, excretory fiction written in collage form extends its cacophonous deployment of excretory subject matter to its “framework” as a whole: the anarchic qualities of waste radiate outward to the level of the containment (anti-)structure.

Before returning to Burroughs and Acker, a condensed history of collage is called for. Collage and waste are united materially as they are conceptually: from the onset of the art form, ephemera provided much of the primary materials. As analytic cubism transitioned to synthetic cubism in 1912 with Braque’s *Fruit Dish and Glass* and Picasso’s *Still Life with Chair Caning*, avant-garde painters became multi-media artists, incorporating recycled newspapers and patterned papers in their *papier collés*. Trashy materials, in the form of informational and tangible detritus, had penetrated the visual arts.

Collage found its literary champions in European vanguardists Tzara and Breton, whose Dada and Surrealist manifestos, respectively, explained and encouraged its usage in poetry. In section VIII of the “Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love” (1920), Tzara instructs his audience: to make a Dada poem, simply cut up a newspaper article, place it in a bag, shake it up, let the pieces fall where they will, then disregard the criticism of “the vulgar herd” that is the audience (92). Breton would later give these instructions, almost verbatim, in his First Manifesto of Surrealism in 1924.<sup>45</sup> Burroughs, recall, would attempt the same with the body: “human parts shaken around and poured out any way they fell” seems to be the ethos, the compendium, and the anti-format of *Naked Lunch*, all at once.

What resulted from these experiments was nonlinear, nonsensical, and baffling to the average reader. This was precisely the point: for these writers, the perspective of the general public (which Tzara called, in the same manifesto, “the voracious mass” (78)), inculcated in a bourgeois rationalism fixated on instrumental utility, was inconsequential at best. At their “cores” (a notion Tzara and other Dada practitioners explicitly disdained, given its invocation of unity), Dada and Surrealism were vehemently anti-reason, and so too efficiency and productive expenditure. As Tzara’s first “Dada Manifesto” (1918) stated, the school (again a paradox, as an anti-institutional institution, one that “recognize[d] no theory” (138)), was born of a “distrust for unity” (141). It detested, in no uncertain terms, “objectivity, and harmony, the science that finds everything in order” (Tzara, 141).

As distinct but interrelated iterations of the historical avant-garde—a military metaphor aligning these artists with the vanguard of an army, positioned aggressively at the forefront of consciousness—Dada and Surrealism held that rationalism, an ideology born of the humanist

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<sup>45</sup> See “Manifesto of Surrealism,” pp. 41-44, in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, University of Michigan Press, 1972.

leanings of the West since the Renaissance, smoothed out what we may deem wrinkles in language. Such wrinkles or excesses contained a latent energy, something hidden in words by conventional, logical modes of thought and reading—by what Breton called, in his first Surrealist manifesto, an “imperative practical necessity” of “arbitrary utility” (4).

John Wilmot, the early figure of the libertine known as the Earl of Rochester, had, in fact, put forth similar criticisms of rationality in seventeenth-century England. In the poem “A Satire Against Reason and Mankind” (1676), the speaker states that, were he free to choose his form of embodiment, he’d be “a dog, a monkey or a bear, / Or any thing but that vain animal, / Who is so proud of being rational” (5-8).

The rationalist, acculturated to an economy of value wherein words, like everything else, pointed linearly to some secondary meaning that was to be culled and extracted, absorbed words only semicritically through a limited system of apperception “exhausted by discursive reason” (Artaud, 50). Consequently, the rationalist lost access to this latency, to entire zones of subjectivity and materiality obscured by instrumentalism. The result was entrapment within a limited sphere of logic, which Tzara called “the dance of those impotent to create” (81). Illogical, confounding, inefficient “hordes” of words, in the form of collage, digression, and circumlocution, could disrupt these readerly practices and thereby tease out that energy, making inert language dynamic, strange, and potent.

John Dos Passos was among the earliest practitioners of literary collage in American prose, employing the technique most thoroughly in the “Newsreel” sections of the *U.S.A. Trilogy* (1930-1936). These sections, comprised of newspaper collages that were actually cut and pasted before they were transcribed, did for prose what his European influences did for painting and poetry: they disrupted “sequence, hierarchy, causality,” and indeed “all the effects of the

basically linear organization of print” (North, 144). So too did the Joycean, multidiscursive modes of the novels—a blend of Newsreel collages, stream-of-consciousness “Camera Eye” sections, biographical interludes, and more conventionally “realist” narration—form a collage of a macrocosmic order, a structural device that Burroughs and Acker would take up in their later experiments.

It was to Tzara and the visual arts, however, that Burroughs ascribed the advent of the collage technique. An essay illuminating his method, “The Cut Up Method of Brion Gysin” (1963), opens by describing a Surrealist rally in the 1920s wherein Tzara “proposed to create a poem on the spot by pulling words out of a hat” (Burroughs, 29). It was thus, Burroughs argued, that “the cut-up method [brought] to writers the collage, which [had] been used by painters for fifty years” (29).

Burroughs was drawn to Tzara beyond his appreciation and application of cut-ups. In the same essay, he implicitly criticizes the infamous exclusionary practices of Breton, who frequently policed membership to avant-garde circles. As demonstrated in the preceding section of this chapter, there is a collectivist impulse in Burroughs’s work, emblemized in its aesthetic reconfiguration of discrete bodies as circulatory systems for waste and decomposition, open interfaces through which matter passes. So too is there an egalitarianism that mirrors his collectivist thought: “Poetry is for everyone,” Burroughs writes later in the essay, directly quoting Tzara. He goes on to state that “cut-ups are for everyone,” “anybody can make cut-ups,” and that “all writing is in fact cut-ups,” or “a collage of words read heard overheard” (31-32).<sup>46</sup> In a rhetorical device lifted from the modernist manifesto genre, he then enacts this assertion through instruction, providing the reader with a cut-up tutorial complete with examples.

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<sup>46</sup> The idea that *all* language is derivative of preexisting usages and structures is essential to the plagiaristic and revisionist tendencies in Acker’s body of work and is explored in the final section of this chapter.

A collage artist drawing upon modernist methods, Burroughs aligns himself with the egalitarian, rather than the elitist, strain of the movement. While *Naked Lunch* seems designed to (and, by all accounts of its initial reception, did) offend the “vulgar herd” in line with many provocative and antagonistic tendencies of the avant-garde, its use of the cut-up technique sought to reconfigure, and not merely assault, the rationalist sensibilities of its readership. Moreover, the collage form itself not only results from egalitarian notions seeking to universalize the reach of artistic production, but produces them structurally through parataxis. Composed of fragmented vignettes, placed side-by-side without context or explanation, collages lack proper succession, development, conjunction, or subordination. The ordering principles removed, nothing is thoroughly foregrounded or backgrounded: because no single element has a fixed or privileged role within the text, any element can potentially play any role. In this regard, there can be no stable textual hierarchy.

In her analysis of modernist collage, Marjorie Perloff explains this fundamentally paratactic function of collage, the discrete units of which exist “without overt connection or explanation, the ordering signs that would specify the causal or temporal relations among presented elements” are “wholly suppressed” (58). Paradoxically, the radical discontinuity and heterogeneity of the fragments renders them homogenous insofar as they are equally unmoored in the textual cesspool.

In *Naked Lunch* and *Blood and Guts In High School*, parataxis operates macrocosmically and microcosmically, at the broad (anti-)structural level and the local level of individual passages. Let us take three “sequential” sections from *Naked Lunch* as an example. In one, entitled “The Black Meat,” we briefly encounter three figures in a cafe: a “shoe shine boy,” “The Sailor,” and a man named “Fats’ Terminal” who runs the cafe (Burroughs, 43-44). After their

introduction, the narration shifts to the impersonal, panoramic viewpoint characteristic of much of the novel, depicting a wide view of “the City” (Burroughs, 45), then returns to The Sailor in the cafe again, before ending abruptly.

The next, entitled “Hospital,” focalizes “main” characters Lee and Benway: the former receives medical treatment for heroin addiction, while the latter callously performs failed, fatal surgeries on unnamed figures. In the proceeding section, “Lazarus Go Home,” Lee, no longer in the hospital, meets a fellow addict named Miguel in a place described only as “the room” (60).

While they may be inferred, the relationships between these sections are not specified in any way. Any structuring principle is absent: vignettes, they open and close cryptically in *medias res*, temporally and spatially adrift. In fact, as Burroughs informs the reader in the novel’s “Atrophied Preface” placed last in sequence, “You can cut into *Naked Lunch* at any intersection point” (187). Because they were cut, shaken, and pieced together again, the textual fragments “can be had in any order” (Burroughs, 191).

In *Naked Lunch*, then, it is not only that bodies that are interchangeable (in accordance with pornographic tradition), but that textual fragments are interchangeable (in accordance with collage tradition). Because they signal to one another in unpredictable, multidirectional fashion not reducible to a rational (or rationalized) system wherein input x begets output y, they operate anarchically and inefficiently. The reader, unable to defer to a linear and unified system of cause and effect, experiences each fragment as a wrinkle, a wrench. The result—what Tzara calls, in his first “Dada Manifesto,” “indomitable madness, decomposition,” is a chaotic mess “without design, without organization” (81). Unassimilable by a rational apparatus that endows them with value and thus failing to signify within its economy, the fragments become informational detritus.

“I try to focus the words,” says William Lee, narrating his failed attempt to decode the linguistic units of a newspaper (Burroughs, 58). He fails in his efforts: “they separate in meaningless mosaic” (Burroughs, 58). In this elusive moment, paradigmatic of the insolubility of the text, Lee functions as surrogate not only for the author but for the reader as well, futilely working to impose a container around the words as they disperse.

Nonlinear and paratactic, the cut-up method responsible for *Naked Lunch* allows it to be read as a collage—or, as we put it earlier, a collage masquerading as a novel. As a novel, however, a collage-novel exhibits limitations relative to the visual genre from which it derives its methods. In the original sense of the term, a collage must be cut and pasted together from various incongruous materials: “collage” is derived from the French “coller,” meaning to paste or stick (“Coller, v.” Cambridge French-English Dictionary). Synthetic cubism differed from analytic cubism in that the latter was not merely a fragmentation of the methods *within* the medium, but a fragmentation *of* the medium itself—not the painted depiction of a mandolin fragment arranged in violation of an orthogonal line, but an actual newspaper fragment interpolated in violation of the painterly mode of production.

To exist in the fullest sense of the “medium,” a collage must not only incorporate a variety of discourses but a variety of media. *Naked Lunch* incorporates other textual genres in the form of diary entries and dramatic interludes, mixes them with prose, chops them up and serves them without the ordering principles of the novel form, but still exists as a novel in prose. Though they obstruct the smooth order of rational efficiency, these wrinkles are figurative; they refuse assimilation into Classical systems of signification, but they are ultimately assimilated by the medium of the text. This is not the case with cubist collage and its successors in the visual

arts; there is a tangible variety in texture in Braque's *Fruit Dish and Glass*, a tactile friction between the pasted wallpaper and the canvas not present on the flat pages of *Naked Lunch*.

Qualifying the preceding analysis with this caveat in mind, it may be more accurate to classify *Naked Lunch* as a novel masquerading as a collage, while reserving the earlier designation (a collage masquerading as a novel) for *Blood and Guts in High School*. As another haphazardly-structured, yet ultimately smooth-paged novel, Acker's text appears to fall in the same category as Burroughs's. By incorporating several more forms of media from "beyond the frame," however, it comes closer to a full multimedia object; if Burroughs employs nonproductive expenditure by way of multidiscursive fragmentation, Acker does so in both multidiscursive and multimedia fashion, in some sense out-Burroughsing Burroughs.

An anti-pornographic anti-bildungsroman, *Blood and Guts In High School* follows a young girl named Janey Smith as she tries and fails to develop into an adult.<sup>47</sup> The narrative begins in Merida, Mexico, where her father, with whom she is engaged in an incestuous romantic relationship, leaves her for another woman. Janey is sent to New York where she intermittently attends high school, abuses drugs, gets abortions, joins gangs, and drops out. Afterwards, she is kidnapped by an Iranian-American slave trader, Mr. Linker, who trains her to be a child prostitute. In captivity, she rewrites portions of American novels, teaches herself Farsi from Iranian texts, and gets cancer. Once released, she accompanies a fictionalized Jean Genet to Morocco and Egypt, where she is jailed again and dies.

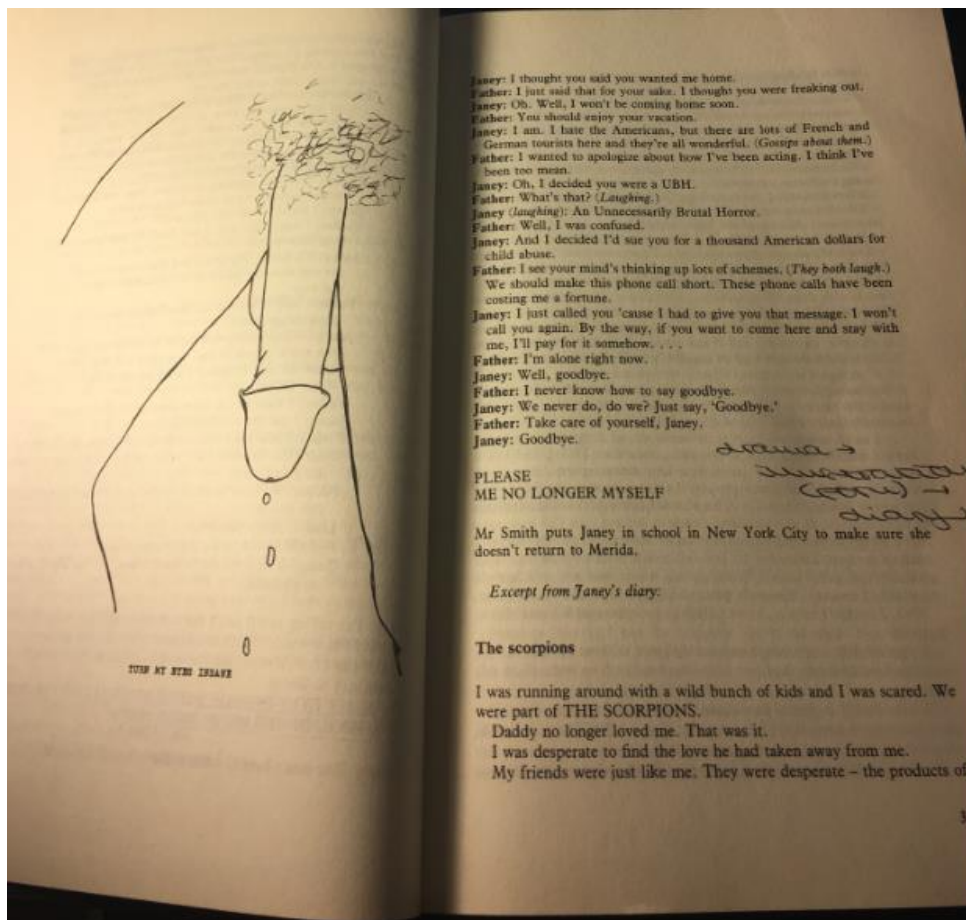
The concluding segment of this chapter examines Acker's use of toilets and menstrual blood as feminist revisions of pornography and disgust. Before that, we consider the textual inefficiency of her collage aesthetics. *Blood and Guts in High School* is a polyvocal,

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<sup>47</sup> A highly generic name that indicates her everywoman status in accordance with both pornographic and bildungsroman genre conventions—more on this in the following section on feminism and waste.

heteroglossic collage replete with diverse forms of excess that place considerable pressure on its textual container. Constantly shifting between linguistic, visual, and hybrid formats, it incorporates prose (including Janey's diary entries and a series of parables and fairy tales), poetry, drama, foreign language instruction, pornographic illustrations, maps, architectural schematics, and complex diagrams. Locally and structurally, discursively and pictorially, Acker's novel enacts a multidirectional expenditure which, more so than Burroughs, short-circuits the wiring of rationalism, containment, and linearity.

At the broadest structural level, the text places several formats side by side, as in the following:



(Acker, 30-31.)

In these two pages, indicative of the dominant mode of the text, the reader encounters at least two mediums (image and text) and four genres (pornography, dramatic fiction, prose fiction, diary). A fragment from the previous page (“TURN MY EYES INSANE, WHILE BEING CORRUPTS ITSELF, AS A POOL OF SHAME, IN THAT HOPE” (Acker, 29)) reappears, in truncated form, as a caption for a pornographic illustration of a leaking penis: “TURN MY EYES INSANE” (Acker, 30).<sup>48</sup> After this interpolated image, the text returns to dialogue in the form of dramatic prose, then is followed by a fragment in the same frantic, capitalized voice as the caption (“PLEASE / ME NO LONGER MYSELF” (Acker, 31)). Next, it shifts to third person prose narration for a sentence of exposition, then an interpolated excerpt from Janey’s diary. Insofar as these fragments signal to other genres and media “beyond the frame” of the text, they constitute excesses, extratextual supplements brought from without and forced within, placing pressure on their tenuously-intact container.

Textual appropriation, both generic and specific, works in similar fashion. Such is the case when Acker borrows both the subject matter and typography of the modernist manifesto:

**DEFIANCE** born  
not made by environmental poverty  
**DEFIANCE SCORN BLOOD** (Acker, 112)

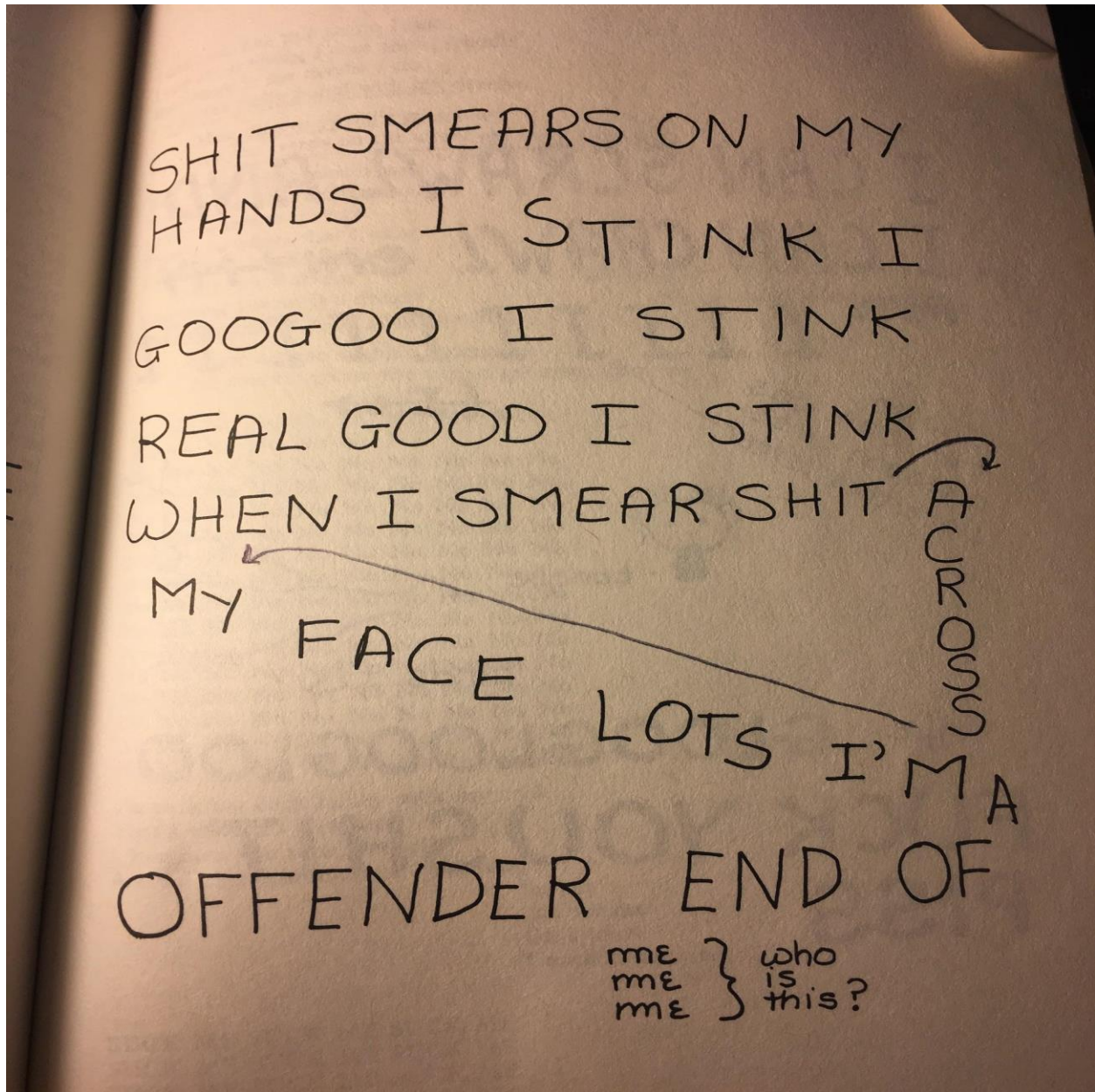
Typographical variance in size and capitalization, a common characteristic of the manifestos produced in the 1910s by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Mina Loy (and, later, Tzara and Salvador Dali) serves a number of functions. Like a poster, advertisement, or painting, the large

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<sup>48</sup> The caption ascribes the source of Janey’s insanity to the phallus, a blatant symbol of patriarchy. Leakage is important: in misogynistic discourse, explored in the final section of the chapter, femininity is often defined as containment or reception of male genital discharge.

font commands attention from afar. Similarly, the removal of syntax, resulting only in nouns arranged paratactically (what Marinetti called, in his 1913 manifesto, “imagination without strings” or “words-in-freedom”), moves writing closer to the visual arts, by relying on a similarly implicit and nonlinguistic adjacency. In appropriating the aesthetic of the manifesto, itself a hybrid genre, the text fissures further—its mosaic becomes less and less assimilable by a hermeneutic apparatus operating through unity. Consequently, the apparatus must adjust to a metric of heterogeneity and disunity.

There is, additionally, a pictorial quality at play in the novel’s many handwritten pages, as in that below:



(Acker, 107, arrows added.)

On these pages, the handwritten words move about in unexpected directions: letters slide sometimes only slightly (as in the subscript-like “HANDS I<sub>STINK</sub>”), or move vertically downwards instead of horizontally across (as in the vertically descending “ACROSS,” a form-content paradox reminiscent of René Magritte), or diagonally (“MY FACE LOTS”). Smaller words are located within, and then extracted from, larger ones (“END” and “OF” are both

derived from “OFFENDER,” nonsequentially, as “OF” occurs before “END”). On an even more minute scale, individual letters within words are modified, as when each “m” in the phrase “me me me” displays what appears to be a superfluous curve or hump. These instances of wordplay reward a slow, multidirectional hermeneutics and resist easy assimilation into a rational system that aims to transmit information clearly and effectively. The gargantuan size of the lettering, which only allows for seven lines on the entirety of the page, also may be considered a waste of textual space.

The device perhaps most emblematic of textual inefficiency, and where Acker enacts Burroughs’s professed nonlinearity more thoroughly than he, is the use of semilinear prose-poetry erratically inserted into Janey’s revisions of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). “Once upon a time there was a materialistic society,” a paragraph begins innocuously, before subtly changing its operating mechanism:

In this society there was a woman who  
 freedom and suddenly the black night opens up and  
fucked a lot and she got tied up with ropes and  
 on upward and it doesn’t stop  
beaten a lot and made to spread her legs too wide  
 the night is open space that goes on and on,  
this woman got so mentally and physically hurt  
 not opaque black, but a black that is extension  
she stopped fucking even though fucking is the thing to do.  
This woman was really tied up. One day a  
 and excitement and the possibilities of new  
man tried to fuck the woman. She loved him  
 consciousness, consciousness.  
desperately so she wouldn’t let him touch her  
open her find her all gooky and bloody and screaming (Acker, 99, underlining added)

In this passage, which does not contain typographical queuing in the form of the underlining provided above, prose becomes verse: the paragraph, which opens without line breaks, begins to

make use of them mid-sentence. More stylistically deviant, however, is that the breaks do not proceed in sequence; rather, as the words move down the page, they skip lines, the sentence continuing on alternating lines. Moreover, once the attentive reader acclimates to the organizing principle of alternating verse, the pattern breaks: sentences occasionally continue on the line directly proceeding, as would be, but is no longer, expected.

Such methods of composition and of reading are wildly inefficient, producing extra labor for author and reader alike. Language and linearity, as implicit or transparent systems operating in the background of perception, are here foregrounded. As tools aiding communication, they become clunky, burdensome. The signifying structure behind the linguistic product is made nontransparent; the product itself, its semantic content, becomes more difficult to receive, consume. It is thus that Acker, like (but unlike) Burroughs before her, and like their modernist predecessors, disrupt a discourse and a consciousness organized by rationality and efficiency. A primary goal of Dada, as stated in Tzara's first manifesto for the movement, was to "destroy the drawers of the brain and of social organization" (140). In making words—the discursive drawers that contain and structure brains and the societies derived from them—wasteful, these authors confer cultural significance to waste at the level of the sign, a nonproductive expenditure that is, paradoxically, profoundly transformative.

### 2.5. *Conclusion: Revising Femininity as Waste-Receptacle in Acker*

"And then I thought that, one day, maybe, there'd be a human society in a world which is beautiful, a society which wasn't just disgust."

—Kathy Acker, *Empire of the Senseless* (1988)

"I make nothing new, create nothing."

—Kathy Acker, "A Few Notes on Two of My Books" (1989)

In the preceding section, we noted textual appropriation as one of Acker's many collage methods. *Blood and Guts in High School* makes use of early avant-garde manifesto typography, and features extensive textual incorporations of *The Scarlet Letter*, wherein Janey positions herself as the disgraced Hester Prynne, as well as *The Screens* (1961) by Jean Genet (a similarly fragmented and antimimetic text), wherein Janey assumes the role of Leila, the hideous, veiled wife of the protagonist.

The early *Blood and Guts in High School*, written in 1978 and published in 1984, may be considered her most "original" novel (a problematic descriptor for an author who explicitly claims to "make nothing new"): while making liberal use of the aforementioned texts, it still presents itself as a quasi-autonomous object through its title and independent plot elements. Her next two novels, *Great Expectations* (1982) and *Don Quixote* (1986), would further foreground and employ this plagiaristic impulse that would importantly characterize the entirety of her *oeuvre*.

A collectivist undercurrent flows through the loose container of this chapter, which on the whole is about containment efforts exerted on bodies and texts. Insofar as they dissolve bounded entities or identities through the use of penetrative supplementary materials or interchangeable bodies and archetypes, pornography and collage are anti-individualistic enterprises. As we have demonstrated, both incorporate waste, whether in the form of inorganic detritus or organic discharge, as means of exerting pressure on these containers.

When Burroughs stated, in 1959, that "all writing is in fact cut-ups," "a collage of words read heard overheard," he was in some sense anticipating transformations in literature and academia that took place in the following decades, wherein structuralism and its predecessors

would revise basic conceptions of selfhood and originality within philosophy and the arts. Important works by Roland Barthes, Donald Barthelme, and Michel Foucault—"The Death of the Author" (1967), *Snow White* (1967), "What is an Author?" (1969)—picked up where early twentieth-century work in semiotics and Marxist linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure and Valentin Voloshinov left off, together recasting the notion of subjectivity as a fundamentally discursive and intertextual phenomenon.

We conclude our examination of excretory fiction with a focus on the relationship between femininity, the body, and waste in two decidedly unoriginal (by her own admittance) works by Acker: *Blood and Guts In High School* and *In Memoriam to Identity*. Acker, the provocateur whose ideas have haunted this chapter in the form of epigraphs, comes last not because she is least important or superfluous, but because of her role in literary history as a textual revisionist. An admirer of Burroughs and inheritor of postwar anti-individualist thought, Acker intervenes in the corpus of pornographic literature to challenge its patriarchal conceptions and depictions of women as waste, as disgusting and secondary supplements to men.

The fact that the authors of Acker's intertexts are male and that she modifies, inserts, and foregrounds femininity in her appropriations of them is crucial: if all (male) writing is (male) cut-ups, women can, quite literally, dissect and revise narratives in order to interpolate information and perspectives absent from them, or to reconsider the treatment of the narrative elements already present. In "A Few Notes on Two of My Books," Acker argues that, in the destructive political moment of the late twentieth century, the artist "doesn't need to find out the limits of his or her medium, to 'make it new'" in accordance to Pound's famous modernist dictum (11). Instead, "the artist, though politically and socially powerless, marginalized, must find the ways for all of our survival" (Acker, 11).

To that end, *Blood and Guts in High School* and *In Memoriam to Identity* function to recast misogynistic notions embedded in pornography, and patriarchal culture more broadly, of women as receptacles for and producers of abhorrent corporeal waste. This is achieved through two recurring waste-motifs—hygienic devices (such as toilets and washcloths) and menstrual blood—which patriarchal discourse directly and indirectly positions as symbolic for or constitutive of femininity. Acker’s texts, frequently aggressive and manifesto-like in accordance with their egalitarian political aims, hyperbolize more subtle and insidious iterations of these ideas in order to make their detrimental consequences plain.

Excretory fiction, as an almost exclusively male subgenre of pornography, is not simply tied to, but originates in, longstanding efforts to subjugate and devalue women’s bodies.<sup>49</sup> As second-wave feminist scholar and activist Andrea Dworkin argues in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981), the histories of pornography and gender are inextricable. The word “pornography,” from the Greek *porne* (“whore”) and *graphos* (“writing”) means “writing about whores” (Dworkin, 199).

The predominance of homosexual intercourse in *Naked Lunch* generally precludes the presence or involvement of women; when they do appear, however, they are depicted as disgusting, hysterical, or irksome. When William Lee is in the hospital for heroin detoxification, for instance, he describes a room occupied with “bedpans full of blood and Kotex and nameless female substances, enough to pollute a continent” (Burroughs, 53). The substances are not simply pollutants in line with Douglas; they are *nameless* in line with Kristeva’s conception of the abject as that which exceeds subject/object relationships and the disgust generated therein.

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<sup>49</sup> Throughout its history, its most prominent authors have been exclusively male (John Wilmot, the Marquis de Sade, Georges Bataille, William S. Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, Samuel Delany, and Dennis Cooper), with the notable exception of Kathy Acker.

While the novel reminds humanity of its inherent vileness through biological waste, this passage exhibits a particular distaste reserved for feminine waste that is absent in the novel's many neutral descriptions of male ejaculation.

As with the critical disdain for *Naked Lunch*, Lee's attitude towards menstrual blood is not an outlier case, but a standard and dominant response. Examining corporeality in Acker's texts reveals two prevalent cultural attitudes at the nexus of waste aversion and patriarchy: one, that women are simply containers *for* male waste, and thus inherently secondary; the other, that when women *are* seen as primary figures, the materials that define them—blood and related organic detritus—are unspeakably filthy.

That women are held materially and ideologically responsible for containing male excretions is made explicit across several of Acker's novels. Abhor, the female protagonist of *Empire of the Senseless* so named for her abhorrence, states plainly that “women are wet washcloths you can use to wash the grime off different parts of your body” (Acker, 209). In *Blood and Guts in High School*, Janey herself refers to her vagina as a “men's toilet” (36). A third-person narrator in a later passage echoes this demeaning sentiment, stating that “the smallest building on this street is Janey's cunt” (Acker, 87). Although Acker's warped bildungsroman discards some of the genre's central characteristics—instead of gradually maturing into adulthood, Janey is abruptly hurtled into a harsh world of abuse and dies at age fourteen—it retains the every(wo)man status of its protagonist. After Janey's death, the narrator informs us, “many other Janeys were born and these Janeys covered the earth” (Acker, 165). Like Burroughs's William Lee, Janey is an archetype. In Acker's bleak, deterministic landscape, Janey is universalized into an abject figure defined entirely by her gender, which is in turn defined by its utility—its capacity for containment.

If Janey's vagina is a toilet, then, so is every woman's. Acker depicts women as washcloths, toilets, and buildings: though distinct metaphors, they share passive and instrumental functions. They are objects and spaces defined by male usage, penetration, occupation, and possession—specifically, they contain excesses by absorbing, flushing, or holding them in place. The etymologically-attuned Dworkin helps corroborate this concept historically: in Latin, “vagina” literally means sheath or scabbard, the container around a sword or “gladius” (25). Within the framework of a culture that valorizes the phallus, the female is positioned *as* a framework, an enclosure, a negative space that is fundamentally secondary.

Like other organic materials, semen possesses or lacks value or valuelessness depending on where it travels, and how its passage is perceived. In *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (2004), an examination of the relationship between contemporary obscenity laws and the emotions from which they are derived, Martha Nussbaum notes the contaminant characteristics of semen. Because, in heterosexual intercourse, many men view semen as disgusting “after it leaves the male body,” and because “the woman receives the man's semen,” she ultimately “becomes the sticky mortal part of him from which he needs to distance himself” (Nussbaum, 111-112).

Nussbaum therefore echoes affect scholars who tie disgust to denial of the lowly components of biological existence, discharge and death. In Acker's novels, as in mammalian social practice, male excretion is a marker of possession. Much like a dog urinates to mark and communicate his territory, so too does the man inseminate. While the space that receives the material is not seen as wholly worthless, its value is only of a secondary order, the negative, passive space that allows for positive, active occupation. In the most extreme incarnation of this line of thinking—the ugliest, plainest iteration Dworkin and Acker are concerned with—women

are waste-receptacles, at best hollow, at worst contaminated whores with cunts. Disgust, as previously demonstrated, is an intrinsically hierarchical emotion. Pornography, by definition the mimesis of whores, harnesses misogynistic disgust to reproduce and transmit a gender hierarchy at the level of the body.

Recall that disgust often occurs asymmetrically with respect to self and other, as when one's own feces is deemed less disgusting than a stranger's. Patriarchal discourse retains this paradigm for men but inverts it with respect to women. As Arthur Redding writes in "Bruises, Roses: Masochism and the Writing of Kathy Acker" (1994), "Masochism in Acker emerges from the familiar and familial-cultural processes whereby the despised image of the self is internalized. That self remains abject, ugly" (285). Janey views her genitals as a toilet because she has internalized the male perception of vaginas as contaminated by semen absorption: she has learned to orient disgust *towards* herself rather than the other. When it comes to the lesser sex, patriarchal discourse redirects the default direction of disgust, makes it self-loathing.

Observing the application and transfer of disgust throughout a network in tandem with its primary antibiological function reveals a chain of deferral common in waste aversion. The antibiological facet of disgust, arguably its primary or underlying function, denies the primordial sludge within the human body that makes it appear filthy and vulnerable to death. If women are taught to hate themselves because men hate them, it is only because men hate themselves, too: misogynistic waste aversion amounts to a deferral of disgust, of the mortality and ooze it discloses. That which is deferred—the nadir in which the organism putrefies and becomes the waste it rejects—can only be deferred, not erased, as argued in the previous chapter.

In *In Memoriam to Identity*, Acker explores another node in the network of disgust and gender, this time not through the tools of waste management but through a uniquely female

category of waste: menstruation. Written in three parts, *In Memoriam to Identity* features three protagonists: R, a fictionalized version of nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud; Airplane, a stripper whose name aptly defines her in terms of use-value and occupation; and, most pertinent in what presently concerns us, Capitol, Acker's pastiche-hybrid of two Faulknerian female protagonists, Caddy Compson of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and Charlotte Rittenmeyer of *The Wild Palms* (1939).

It is a truth universally unacknowledged that women, in possession of fertile reproductive organs, menstruate. In *The Curse: Confronting the Last Unmentionable Taboo* (1999), Karen Houppert analyzes what she calls "menstrual etiquette," or the "elaborate machinations" men and women practice to avoid acknowledgment of the "simple biological facts" of female anatomy (4, 8). Houppert's text examines the cultural attitudes accompanying menstruation through probing the rhetoric found in advertisements in *Good Housekeeping* (1885-present), Sears catalogues (1888-1993), and trade publications by Kotex from the 1920s through the 1990s, all of which consistently emphasized stealth and secrecy as a means of averting embarrassment.<sup>50</sup>

Though it may appear hyperbolic, Houppert's title speaks directly to the sentiment accompanying female waste in *The Sound and the Fury* and its appropriation in *In Memoriam to Identity*. Faulkner's narrative centers on the tragic dissolution and decline of the Compson family, most of whom ascribe the source of their suffering directly or indirectly to the rebellious Caddy's violation of feminine purity. The materials that the Compson men associate with Caddy's loss of virginity are frequently pollutants and contaminants: her muddy drawers, or her

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<sup>50</sup> The methodology of *The Curse* aligns with *Waste and Want* by Susan Strasser, written in the same year. Albeit on a far less exhaustive and pervasive scale, by looking at dominant and enduring advertising tropes of major companies such as Tampax and Kotex, Houppert does for female sanitation products what Strasser does for American commodities as a whole, arguing that menstrual etiquette was fostered and amplified by these marketing efforts.

cursed and dirty blood. Nihilistic patriarch Jason Compson describes Caddy's menstruation as a "delicate equilibrium of periodical filth between two moons balanced ... liquid putrefaction like drowned things" (Faulkner, 128).

Acker's version of the story focalizes this symbolism more blatantly, replacing Faulknerian circumlocution with direct discussion in line with her reformist aims. In *In Memoriam to Identity*, the female uterus is unambiguously described as "THE FILTHY WOMB OF BLOOD" (Acker, 7). Moreover, menstrual blood is viewed both as a disease and a curse: "women are diseased," Acker's fictionalized version of Quentin tells the Caddy-surrogate Capitol, and "*their own flesh and blood curses them*" (Acker, 156, emphasis original). The bacteriological joins the supernatural in a strange rhetorical nexus: menstrual cycles are a curse bestowed upon all women that make them permanently contaminated from birth. The supernatural (in this context theological) component works to essentialize the relationship, erasing the important role socialization plays.

In this iteration of misogynistic waste aversion, women are not viewed simply as receptacles *for* external (male) waste, but as constituting waste-matter themselves. In other words, they are not neutral spaces that become contaminated, but are always-already contaminated from the start. Acker's central female waste-symbols—toilets and blood—work in complementary fashion. Already dirtied by blood, and in fact designed as such, the vagina-as-toilet exists as the designated site to deposit waste, enclosing it and ensuring the cleanliness of the remaining spaces.

As recurs across the history of waste, the material that discloses the underlying structure must not be seen or mentioned. Menstrual blood is, in Lee's terms, a "nameless female substance" that must be contained in accordance with menstrual etiquette (Burroughs, 53). In

leaking from the female body, it threatens a patriarchal conception of the female body as “perfect enclosure” for male fluids and genitals (Acker, 166). As with other organic discharge, it gestures towards the *other* side of fecundity, decomposition and death. This is why, Nussbaum argues, the female body is “the locus classicus of group-directed projective disgust” across geographical and temporal lines (111).

For Acker, revealing and identifying with the lowly provides the solution. Abhor in *Empire of the Senseless* dreams of a “world which is beautiful, a society which wasn’t just disgust” (227). The body does not lie: in “Critical Languages” (1980), Acker calls for a literary “return to the body,” through employing a language “of wonder, not of judgment” (82, 93). Airplane, the other female protagonist of *In Memoriam to Identity*, eventually does away with her self-oriented disgust and reclaims the waste that exists as a part of her: “I sense that blood is who I am” (117). Augmented by menstrual etiquette, disgust with female excretion forms part of the wider historical process of dematerialization wherein subjects fail to perceive both objects and themselves. In turn, Acker’s work rematerializes the substance in an attempt to reconcile the subject with the inescapable condition of her embodiment, however uncomfortable or taboo such a reconciliation may be.

Disgust, as an intrinsically hierarchical emotion, has been frequently invoked as a means of establishing social hierarchies to ends such as genocide and gender subordination. The potency of disgust—experienced emotionally, enabled infrastructurally, and enforced culturally—demands that bodily substances be hidden within their containers, that their circulation exist only privately in the waste-management enclosures of restrooms, bedrooms, drains, and pipes. Hierarchies and practices derived from disgust then act as discursive distractions from the ultimate object of disgust: the decomposition that is the fate of every human

body, and the realization that the most repulsive waste, supposedly separate and inferior, exists within.

While corporeal waste transmits disgust to humans neurologically, the default response is often too extreme and automatic to allow for extensive reflection. By contrast, disgusting fiction fissures bodily containers, exposing their contents in a semitransparent mode of transmission. Certain mimetic limitations of the literary medium, such as its inability to thoroughly encapsulating olfactory sensations, then act as linguistic containers for the revolting discharges that are its object of representation; consequently, they prove productive in conceptual and contemplative capacities. In transmitting a textually-insulated form of disgust to the reader—forceful but not overwhelming, foul but bearable—excretory fiction enables extensive consideration of the waste-object in question and illuminates its functions within biological and cultural systems of circulation. In so doing, it confers value to the unvalued, imbuing waste with a profound explanatory significance that is otherwise lost. In the final analysis, this process both undoes and rebuilds the containment structures that separate humans from the troublesome matter comprising organic life. In the face of an increasingly dematerialized culture, the alienation of which includes both the manufactured commodity and the biology-denying body, excretory fiction works to turn the body back towards itself.

Chapter Three: “Underbellies and Urban Spatial Logic in Post-Harlem Renaissance Fiction”

“A man ducks in and out of traffic shouting and throwing imaginary grenades that actually exploded during World War I; a boy participates in the rape-robbery of his mother; a man beating his wife in a park uses boxing ‘science’ and observes Marquess de Queensberry rules (no rabbit punching, no blows beneath the belt); two men hold a third while a lesbian slashes him to death with a razor blade...”

—Ralph Ellison, “Harlem is Nowhere” (1948)

“Panorama of ripped sights along the rows of ubiquitous loan shops, poolrooms, ‘bargain’ centers, billiard halls, cheap movie houses. Zombies in a ritualistic hungover imitation of life. Men staring dumbly at nothing. A body lies unnoticed in a heap by a doorway. An epileptic woman totters along the block... Mutilated harpies wobble along the street—past crippled bodies. A man beats a woman ruthlessly as the man’s two husky friends stand guard over the scene.”

—John Rechy, *City of Night* (1963)

*3.0. Introduction: Space, Race, and Waste*

So read two disturbing descriptions of urban life in postwar America: the first of Chicago’s South Side, the second of Harlem in the northern region of Manhattan. The sources differ—John Rechy’s *City of Night* is a wide-reaching, semi-autobiographical portrait of the nether regions of several major U.S. cities from the perspective of a male prostitute and committed chronicler of the sex trade, while “Harlem is Nowhere” Ralph Ellison’s nonfictional essay on the sordid state of the neighborhood at midcentury—but the sights are startlingly similar. It would not be an exaggeration to term these scenes hellish: indeed, their anarchic and sadistic qualities recall Judeo-Christian depictions of hell, replete with scenes of unchecked, widespread torment.

These are not isolated phenomena, but belong to a wider set of tropes associated with

what is sometimes called underworld fiction: poverty, alcoholism, violence, and lawlessness abound; the venues are dingy bars, hidden back rooms, urine-soaked alleyways, public toilets, all-night movie houses; the clientele are homeless, drug dealers, drag queens, gangsters, and sex workers (Heise, 149; Pike, 1; Bakhtin, 30; Duffield, 26; Herring, 3; Vogel, 134; Shanks, Platt, Rathje, 53). In twentieth-century American fiction, such illicit underbellies appear in the queer geographies mapped by Rechy and Djuna Barnes, in the noisy and lurid depictions of cabaret life in Jazz Age Harlem Renaissance novels by Carl Van Vechten, Claude McKay, and Nella Larsen, and in the organized criminal cabals and conspiratory networks of the noir and anti-detective fiction of Raymond Chandler, Thomas Pynchon, and Paul Auster. As we will see, the underworld may or may not literally operate below ground level—Rechy plunges into the subways, Richard Wright and Ellison into sewers and cellars—what is required for the association is that they are considered, in some way or other, lowly, dangerous, or unclean.

Having examined bodily waste in the last chapter, this chapter shifts in focus and scale to spatial waste, reading the urban underworld as embodiment of this phenomenon, particularly as depicted in two instances of midcentury African-American fiction and the advent of urban planning that structures the social and material spaces the literature explores. As used here, spatial waste denotes a geophysical area, usually urban or peri-urban,<sup>51</sup> that receives, holds, and reproduces waste matter, either by design or neglect. While the most salient and literal example of a cultural dumping ground is the landfill (discussed in the reading of Don DeLillo's *Underworld* [1997] in Chapter One), this chapter turns to the racialized low-income neighborhood perceived as underworld by city planners and middle-class citizens, a district discursively associated with uncleanliness, vice, and undesirable populations, most thoroughly

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<sup>51</sup> In "Sustainable Planning of Peri-Urban Areas," Alexander Wandl and Marcelo Magoni define "peri-urban" spaces as "transition spaces with some degree of intermingling of urban and rural uses" (1).

explored in literary criticism by Scott Herring, Shane Vogel, and Thomas Heise.<sup>52</sup>

While these built environment studies of twentieth-century underworld literature have explored the intersections of race and space, this chapter situates the conversation within a wider system of waste aversion, uniting analyses of midcentury urban planning practices and contamination rhetoric with the notion of a surplus population in critical race theory in particular, and waste studies more broadly. Although most literary studies of waste discuss trash, excretion, and dehumanized populations (the topics of the other chapters of this dissertation), few include or focalize space; while studies on industrial space examine the role of the underworld in the urban imaginary, that is usually their exclusive focus.<sup>53</sup> Here, these discussions are placed side by side in order that, in true congruence with Mary Douglas's conception of dirt as matter out of place, space be considered not as only the framework by which the category of waste is measured, but that space be conceived as a form of waste itself. In other words, space is not a neutral set of parameters that imbues objects with waste-status; as a local zone inscribed within a broader space, space can itself be out of place, yielding the resultant metric of spatial waste. The concept of spatial waste allows waste scholars to turn attention not only to objects that are wastes of space but spaces that are deemed wasteful in the aggregate. Because space is a precondition for waste, conceiving of spatial waste is an exercise in self-reflexivity, a hermeneutic circle wherein the zone inscribes the object and the object in turn defines the zone. As opposed to previous accounts wherein space is positioned as a metric for the subjects and objects within its radius, this chapter calls for a more thoroughly dialectical analysis of waste wherein environment

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<sup>52</sup> See Scott Herring, *Queering the Underworld: Slumming, Literature, and the Undoing of Lesbian and Gay History* (2007); Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (2009); Thomas Heise, *Urban Underworlds: A Geography of Twentieth-Century American Literature and Culture* (2011).

<sup>53</sup> See Kevin Trumpeter, "Furnishing Modernist Fiction: The Aesthetics of Refuse" in *Modernism/modernity* vol. 20 no. 2 (2013); William Viney, *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (2014); Susan Morrison, *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (2015); Rachele Dini, *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction: Legacies of the Avant-Garde* (2016).

and object co-constitute one another. The question of how this phenomenon intersects with racializing and urbanist discourses of the underworld in midcentury Harlem, of how the neighborhood and its occupants have been depicted as disposable excess, is paramount to the present line of inquiry.

Wright's atmospheric depiction of the sewer in "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1943), the centerpiece of this chapter, best illustrates the process by which subterranean waste is spatialized into a dense membrane of fluids and bodies, an all-encompassing waste ambience. A principle upshot of the spatial waste approach is the multi-discursive process wherein space, subject, and object permeate each other—as will be made clear, the urban underworld is not merely a repository for devalued bodies, nor simply the spatial manifestation of a verticalized hierarchy of class and race, but a material and psychological space engineered in order to perpetually reinscribe and reproduce its inhabitants' status *as* social waste. On the other hand, privileging space runs the risk of extending the neglect and erasure of its inhabitants. For this reason, the readings of Wright and Ellison that follow scrutinize, at the level of sense-experience and psychology, underworld subjectivities as impinged by space and vice-versa.

Sequentially, the chapter opens with a history of the Western underworld, from pre-modern, classical literary accounts of Hades to the development of lower-income neighborhoods, vice districts, and their attendant reformist literature in the United States. Alongside this history we look at dominant and recurring categories associated with metaphorical and literal underground spaces, including waste, darkness, and deviance, in order to eventually detail the methods through which these ideas are retained, employed, and updated in post-Harlem Renaissance fiction. As the discussion nears twentieth-century Harlem, our history of the underworld becomes one of urban planning: of zoning ordinances, restrictive rental agreements,

and national interstate construction, which arise, in tandem with waste-oriented notions of surplus populations manifesting in racialized rhetoric of contamination and containment, primarily as tools of racial and class segregation and subordination along a vertical axis. A detailed history of urban planning in the early decades of the century reveals a transition (though by no means exhaustive or totalizing) from Harlem as site of Jazz Age splendor and spatial conduit for collective racial and artistic histories to a post-Harlem Renaissance Harlem of squalor, decay, and alienation.

The discussion that follows then scrutinizes two midcentury works of black underworld fiction, Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground" (1943) and Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), both of which spatially and psychologically submerge their readers into the nether regions of the city replete with filth and corpses. These texts demonstrate the consequences of an asymmetrical and verticalized development of space as experienced by lowly subjects treated as disposable waste matter; in so doing, they serve as a critique of a master narrative that omits or downplays the role the organization of space has played in the urban history of American racial oppression.

Because underworld literature is bound up in a fraught history wherein reformist exposure yields sensationalist and ahistorical effects, Wright and Ellison are careful to produce their slum cartographies from a racially and spatially situated standpoint. Rather than refuse the genre's inherited purpose of exposure as critics have supposed, they invert the top-down paradigm of these earlier narratives: you have placed us below, they intimate, so we will speak from below.

The latter half of the chapter explores the surreal and inverted techniques through which Wright and Ellison approach urban cartography and experience; viewed from below, the

underground is not merely imprisoning but revelatory, not simple enclosure but transformative ambience. In closing, the chapter considers the importance of the lowly as privileged epistemological and narratorial site in excavating hidden geographies and elisions in African-American historiography. In so doing, these spatially-sensitive narratives serve as models for an alternative racial history.

### 3.1. *From Hades to Harlem: An Underworld History*

The history of the underworld is nearly as old as the history of Western literature itself. Found in a vast panoply of spaces and contexts from antiquity to modernity, the trope of the underworld shifts from metaphysical repository for the dead to metaphorical repository for deviant, usually criminalized and racialized, populations. Despite many transformations, certain salient characteristics—death, darkness, absence, inversion—recur across iterations.

The epic poetry of Homer and Virgil provides some of the earliest iterations of the underworld. In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (circa 765-750 BCE), the underworld is a morally-neutral holding-cell located within the earth that houses all dead spirits, benevolent or otherwise. In the *Nekya*, the eleventh book of the *Odyssey*, Hades is called “Erebus,” translating to “world of darkness” (Albinus, 68). From the outset, then, the underworld is associated with shadows and obscurity, a motif that pervades the subterranean fiction of Wright and Ellison. According to theological scholar Lars Albinus, Ancient Greek epics represent the underworld “primarily in terms of negation (i.e., by stating what existence in Hades *is not*, rather than what *it is*)” (67, emphasizes original). It may therefore be more accurate to describe the underworld as *the shadow* of the world above, its negative double. As our readings of Wright and Ellison will illustrate,

these mythological motifs are translated into racial and economic realities: the black urban underworld of the mid-twentieth century is characterized by its absence of light, sustenance, and other basic necessities.

For the living, accustomed to life above, traversing the underworld constitutes an enormous feat with no guarantee of escape. In this vein, the Ancient Greek conception of the underworld is essentially heroic: Odysseus must descend to Hades and ascend once more, overcoming displacement in distant, foreign lands to return to the familiarity of home (Bremmer, 2). Virgil's *Aeneid* (19 BCE), wherein the hero Aeneas descends into the underworld accompanied by the prophetic Sibyl, subdivides the underworld into distinct realms segregated by ethical abstractions. In the *Aeneid*, Hades is but one of many underworld zones, including the pit of Tartarus, which houses the wicked, and Elysium, the resting place of the virtuous and heroic. While Albinus notes that the division between Hades and Elysium "is clearly present in Homer," it is not "explicitly accompanied by a moral distinction" as it is in later Ancient Greco-Roman texts, such as those of Pindar or Virgil. It is noteworthy that these nether regions are situated in adjacent fashion and are therefore organized along a horizontal axis: as Hades and Elysium exist side-by-side beneath the earth, the language of high and low that figures prominently in Christian theology and urban planning alike is not yet in use. (We will return to the horizontal component of the underworld in our reading of degeneration in Wright.)

In the Virgilian iteration of Greco-Roman underworld literature, then, the dead are rewarded or punished according to their actions while living. This moralizing valence is then transmitted to Judeo-Christian theology and famously and meticulously taxonomized in Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (1320), wherein the poet, under the guidance of Virgil, traverses the three realms of the dead. Whereas, for the Greeks and Romans of classical antiquity, the

underworld contains the spirits of all the dead, righteous and sinful, in Judeo-Christian theology a vertical segregation occurs: those who adhere to its principles of morality are transported to an ethereal domain above the earth, while the underworld transforms into an exclusively sinful realm, a division largely resonant today. In tracing the development of this spatial hierarchy, medievalist Paul Binski observes that a central tenet of Western religion—the redemption of the fall of man—“reflected even in its elementary metaphors a spatialization of thought,” namely that, along a vertical axis, “the material was *beneath* the spiritual” and thus an “object of contempt” (166, emphasis added).

Over the course of the next several centuries, the underworld rose. In thirteenth through eighteenth-century Paris there existed urban conglomerates known as *cours des miracles* (“courts of miracles”), historical antecedents to modern slums. Luc Sante defines a *cour des miracles* as “a cluster of houses that by some mix of tradition, common accord, and benign neglect was deemed off-limits to the law,” a zone wherein a “permanent feast of misrule persisted” (97). Victor Hugo dramatized these areas in *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831). In the novel, which takes place in late-fifteenth century Paris, a *cour des miracles* is likened to:

A sewer from which flowed out every morning and to which flowed back every night that stream of vice, beggary, and vagrancy that always floods the streets of the capital; a monstrous beehive to which all the hornets of the social order returned in the evening with their plunder... an immense changing room for all the players in that eternal comedy which theft, prostitution, and murder enact on the streets of Paris. (Hugo, 268)

Several recurrent underworld tropes are at play in this dense passage. The slum is compared to a sewer, a subterranean tunnel containing a torrent of liquid waste, here standing in for the behaviors and actions (“vice, beggary, and vagrancy”) of the slum residents. Spatially and, as is intimated, morally beneath the city, this stream of sewage exceeds its confines, spilling upward

and plaguing the city aboveground. Hugo's prose also utilizes the language of degeneration and infiltration that will come to define urban planning discourse in the United States a century later. Plagued and defined by vice, the slum occupants cease to be, or perhaps never were, fully human; they are instead "hornets of the social order," penetrating and disrupting the civilized zones of the city before retreating to their impenetrable and chaotic hive. At the same time, underworld denizens are cast not as thoroughly *inhuman*, but *subhuman*, possessing enough similarity to clothe themselves in disguises and thereby commit crimes while evading the law.

In verticalized moral systems, the rhetoric of high and low is used to distinguish between clean and unclean, vice and virtue, civilization and anarchy: those placed in the former categories exist aboveground, while those placed in the latter are consigned to the underground. As a concept, civilization implies a cultural contrast based on a negation: the term "barbarian" derives from the "Greek contrast between those who spoke intelligibly and those beyond the pale of civil life" (Stocking, 10). In the 1850s, Victorian ethnographers and anthropologists employed the language of high and low to differentiate between Western and non-Western cultures, much as Anglo-American slum literature distinguished between lawful and unlawful neighborhoods in the same decade. In observing cannibalism, patricide, and polygamy among the natives of Fiji, for example, Thomas Williams deemed these "monster expressions of moral corruption," the behavior of those who had "reached the most appalling *depths* of abomination (145, 154, emphasis added). Charles Darwin similarly found the Fuegians of South America so repulsive that he expressed disbelief at their being "inhabitants of the same world" (213). Here, the practices of non-English cultures deviate so dramatically that the observers struggle or fail to assimilate the behavior into their corpus of knowledge without positioning it as the negation of civilized existence. Underworld rhetoric functions as psychic repository for this unassimilable

data.

The middle decades of the nineteenth century, particularly the 1840s through 1850s, oversaw a massive concentration of urban ethnography accompanying anthropological field work abroad. In London, journalist Henry Mayhew, whom critic John L. Bradley hailed as “the supreme recorder of mid-century urban squalor” conducted extensive research on the city’s lower classes (viii). First published in 1849 as individual pieces in the *Morning Chronicle* and collected in 1851 as the multivolume *London Labour and the London Poor*, Mayhew’s study exposed its middle and upper-class readership to the realities of the peep-shows, smoke-filled flophouses, prostitutes, and thieves that populated the city. Composed of statistics, descriptions, and interviews, Mayhew’s text yields a highly-detailed taxonomy of the lower classes: he separates street merchants into over a dozen variants based on wares, and scavengers into the subcategories of dung collectors, rag-pickers, dredgermen, and mud-larks, according to their primary methods and sites of collection.

In Paris, Eugene Sue’s *Mysteries of Paris*, published in installments beginning in 1842, served a similar function. Disguising himself in the attire of the lower classes, Sue frequented and gathered information from dive bars and other underworld locales in the *Cité*, a poor neighborhood that would be destroyed by the urban renewal efforts of Georges-Eugène Haussmann a decade later. *Mysteries of Paris*, “a sprawling tableau of lower-class Parisian life,” became immensely popular upon its English translation, spurring a series of Anglo-American investigative journalists to engage in slum tours of their respective cities. Following Sue and Mayhew, Ned Bluntine’s *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (1849), George Foster’s *New York by Gas-Light* (1850), and George Lippard’s *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million* (1854) popularized literary slum tourism by providing detailed first-hand accounts of the city’s

various urban underworlds and dramatizing social hierarchy.

In framing their studies as revealing narratives into deviant and distinct zones of the world, most of these texts relied on the language of high and low present in earlier underworld literature, and, more recently, Victorian anthropology. Travel literature critic Justin Edwards notes that George Foster's *New York by Gas-Light* "uses the language of exoticism" to describe his journey into the hidden depths of the city, much as travel writers would employ to describe cultures abroad (9). Likewise, anthropology scholar George Stocking, Jr. argues that, in the eyes of mid-nineteenth century middle-class observers, "the primitivism at the bottom of the social scale now had a dual character," i.e. rural and urban, abroad and in the city (213). In this sense, slumming literature adapted and localized anxieties concerning degeneration and "lowly" behavior from foreign to intraurban contexts.

Increasingly taking on a series of urban, secular, and metaphorical connotations over the course of the nineteenth century, the now-risen underworld more frequently referred to an illicit network or neighborhood tied to crime, vice, or other behavior perceived as aberrant or immoral, usually by theological or legal discourses. In contrast to its classical iteration, the modern underworld need not be beneath the city, and may operate in plain view. Indeed, it is this seemingly contradictory designation that befuddles the Haitian intellectual Ray in Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928):

It was what they called in print and polite conversation 'the underworld.' ... Why *underworld* he could never understand. It was very much upon the surface as were the other divisions of human life. Having its heights and middles and depths and secret places even as they. And the people of this world, waiters, cooks, chauffeurs, sailors, porters, guides, ushers, hod-carriers, factory hands—all touched in a thousand ways the people of the other divisions. They worked over there and slept over here, divided by a street. (McKay, 224-225)

Ray's ruminations on the subject situate the term. It comes from print and polite conversation, from the "regular" world above ground, though both in fact exist, as he points out, above ground. Ray's list of underworld denizens, comprised entirely of working class African-Americans, suggests a hierarchical meaning of the term—those who work under, or for, the citizens of the other world, divided by raced and classed boundaries manifested in the gridlines of the city itself. An underworld must be perceptually foreign in this way; when Ray arrives in New York's Harlem from Haiti, he finds himself in "the quivering heart of a naked world whose reality was hitherto unimaginable" (McKay, 224). Here, Harlem is so shocking and bare-faced—W. E. B. Du Bois famously stated that reading the novel's uncensored displays of drinking, violence, and sexuality made him feel "like taking a bath"—so as to defy the limits of the civilized imagination (202). The urban underworld therefore possesses an otherworldly quality, an air of unreality partly retained from its mythical origins; once exposed to sights usually hidden from view, the middle- or upper- class citizen struggles to immediately assimilate them into his or her corpus of experiences.

Thus transposed from below to above, the term also proliferates from one broadly mythical space into subdivisions associated with urban categories, often ethnic, sexual, bohemian, or criminal in nature. Shane Vogel argues that the twentieth-century underworld is imagined as an "unproductive sphere," inhabited by "criminals, prostitutes, gamblers, queers," populations that face explicit or implicit moral disapprobation, and who threaten to contaminate honest, productive citizens (134). In this way the urban underworld may be considered the body of literal and symbolic sites that facilitate a shadow economy, the illicit and unofficial exchanges of which operate in the darkness beneath the official economy above ground.

As a space of deviance, the underworld is necessarily tethered to the modern production

of deviance as social and analytic category, one solidified by the emerging discourses of sensationalist journalism, reformist literature, sexology, and criminology in the late-nineteenth century (Vogel, 9). The conclusions of such fields worked to “medicalize and codify individuals as ‘deviant’ or ‘degenerate,’” and were cited as evidence by “reformists, vice squads, and sociologists in the service of managing urban spaces and bodies” (Vogel, 9). By transforming “difference into deviance,” twentieth-century urban planning mechanisms, drawing upon these earlier Progressive Era models, deemed underworld citizens “unfit for full participation in the upper stratum’s institutions of public life” (Heise, 8).

Of these various forces, late-nineteenth century slum tourism and slumming literature are of particular importance to post-Harlem Renaissance fiction. By providing physical and literary “tours” into less affluent neighborhoods and highlighting difference, these practices and texts played a crucial role in entrenching these binaristic, segregationist concepts in the American cultural imaginary. While late-nineteenth-century American reformist texts such as Charles Loring Brace’s *The Dangerous Classes of New York* (1872), James W. Buel’s *Metropolitan Life Unveiled* (1883), and Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (1890) foregrounded income and racial inequalities in an effort to thereafter mitigate their harrowing effects, they also sensationalized and essentialized their objects of inquiry, at times turning difference into lurid, pitiable spectacle.

Riis, for instance, promises his readership exposure into the “netherside of New York,” replete with the “queer conglomerate mass of heterogeneous elements” of the impoverished ethnic groups he documents (63, 73). While Riis’s book both brought the slums into public consciousness and directly spurred considerable tenement reform in New York City, the rhetoric through which this was presented sometimes reinscribed hierarchies that subjugated the classes

he sought to assist. The slum dwellers are depicted as “an army of ten thousand tramps with all that that implies,” the presence of which threatens to “touch the family life with deadly moral contagion” (Riis, 6). Elsewhere in *How the Other Half Lives*, he describes a neighborhood as a “vast human pig-sty” needing “moral and physical regeneration” (Riis, 146-147). In deploying the language of contamination and degeneration that would pervade urban planning discourse over the course of the next century, these loaded statements present the urban poor as a bacteriological (“contagion”) and militaristic (“army”) threat to the wholesome middle-class nuclear family within a verticalized class hierarchy. Moreover, by foregrounding the ethical integrity (or lack thereof) of those in poverty, such descriptors run the risk of ascribing the source of filth and squalor to the individuals and spaces in question, an ascription which, as our history of New York urban development will reveal, ahistorically reverses cause and effect.

While considerably less moralizing, Riis’s predecessor Mayhew also occasionally frames his topic with rhetoric that blurs the line between journalism and entertainment. In a description preceding an interview with a prostitute, he warns that the proceeding transcription contains facts “gross enough to make us all blush for the land in which such scenes can be daily perpetrated” (62). He goes on to write that there are several details “which it is impossible to publish” (Mayhew, 62). Mayhew’s and Riis’s studies, which both make reformist calls to action to their middle- and upper- class readerships and which had tangible legislative and infrastructural effects, simultaneously frame their subjects with dramatic flourishes and narrative devices that excite as much as they educate. These studies both responded to, and helped produce, widespread anxiety over the lasting industrial and social effects of industrialization.

Furthermore, by utilizing the “hero’s descent” trope—wherein an above-ground outside figure journeys beneath the surface and narrates his experiences to the reader—slumming

narratives drew from and unified ancient and modern iterations of the underworld, wherein the author served as Virgilian guide into strange and dangerous territories for a privileged and curious readership, one situated above the underworld and thereby insulated from its immoral and contaminating conditions. As will be explored in our later discussion of Wright and Ellison, slumming literature's imperative to expose the subterranean secrets of the urban underworld only to commodify them will considerably complicate the manner and perspective in which Harlem and post-Harlem Renaissance writers of the underworld approach issues of visibility and invisibility. Wright's and Ellison's texts depict slums without sensationalizing them: to this end, their characters inhabit the lowest regions of vertical hierarchies and transmit the qualitative experiences of the lowly. By capturing the sensory details of underworld subjectivity, they invite their readers to identify with, rather than distance themselves from, the underground. In writing from this vantage point, their urban cartographies also work to rewrite the contours of spaces that had previously been written for them.

### *3.2. The Rise of Urban Planning: Harlem and Real Estate, 1909—1956*

It is against the backdrop of nineteenth-century slumming literature and urban planning that Harlem as underworld trope develops in the first half of the twentieth century. This period may be divided roughly into two phases: Jazz Age or the New Negro Renaissance Harlem and post-Harlem Renaissance Harlem, corresponding to Harlem as extravagant spectacle, vice district, and artistic renaissance and Harlem as abject, segregated lower-income urban enclave, respectively. While Jazz Age Harlem was known for the "illicit alcohol consumption, social dancing, potential for interracial contact, public displays of sexuality, and underworld

connotations” associated with cabarets and nightclubs, this association declined sharply during and after the Great Depression (Vogel, 2). The metonymic images of “smoke-filled dives and basement speakeasies” home to blues and jazz experimentation that attracted white, middle-class slum tourists in the 1920s thereafter gave way to a decidedly less romanticized iteration of underworld life, as segregationist urban planning practices solidified and gained federal and municipal support (Vogel, 6). Harlem the exotic nocturnal playground and rich literary and musical sphere of production became Harlem the impoverished, neglected, state-sanctioned ghetto.

The spatial and racial development of waste-averse culture on an urban scale, stripped of its prior allure, manifests in the frequently macabre tone and contents of the later literature. As Ellison makes plain in the 1948 essay that opens this chapter, Harlem’s “crimes, its casual violence, its crumbling buildings with littered areaways, ill-smelling halls, and vermin-invaded rooms... are indistinguishable from the distorted images that appear in dreams” (242). By midcentury, what was once an artistic haven had become a nightmare.

In their depictions of the literal and figurative underbellies of Harlem, Richard Wright’s “The Man Who Lived Underground” (1942) and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) chart uneven urban development and the racial and class inequalities wrought by the asymmetrical construction of space itself. In lieu of viewing fictional setting as a static and “fixed container”—to borrow David Alworth’s phrase—subordinated to the privileging of plot, character, or theme, this chapter’s methodological approach reads the process by which these texts deploy the trope of the black underworld in order to render it a dynamic and formative constituent of lived urban experience, and to critique an always-already selective and partial historiography that obscures the ways in which bodies and garbage alike are relegated to undesirable zones of the city (2). By

foregrounding what is often backgrounded, a focus on setting does not prioritize individual subjects but works instead to “materialize the climates of history,” in this case the climates of a racialized urban ecology (Taylor, 15). The built environment approach employed here strategically emphasizes location over subject and urbanism over urbanite while simultaneously considering their interrelations.

The built environment precedes and proceeds the urban subject it partially embeds, and attempts to exert control through both architectural and discursive development. In “The Anthropology of Lower Income Urban Enclaves” (1995), Delmos Jones defines the built environment in terms of both “physical structures” and “conceptual principles” (193). These principles begin with the regulatory and organizational tactics of urban design and development seen previously in the analyses of de Certeau, Heise, and Pike in the introduction of this dissertation, including zoning ordinances, health and housing codes, and their manipulations and violations, which are the focus of the present section. Though this is by no means thoroughly exhaustive or pervasive—urban regulation efforts, frequently met with resistance, are less totalizing in practice than in theory—these pessimistic works of fiction do partly exhibit a racial, economic, and spatial determinism.

Rather than employing a simple model of structural determinism and segregation, the chapter moves to the complex relationship these low-income spaces exhibit with the rest of their urban surroundings. Far from being rigidly contained, these underworlds permeate and intersect with the occupants of more prosperous neighborhoods, an intersection facilitated primarily through literary narrative. As will be detailed in subsequent sections, this body of texts demonstrates an effort to reabsorb social spaces back into the history which ejects them, to write the city from below.

Having explored the broader histories of the underworld and of slum tourism, the history that follows details the development of Harlem as a specifically African-American community in the first half of the twentieth century leading to Wright's and Ellison's texts. The general trajectory this history takes is of economically-instigated racial consolidation followed by the development of urban planning systems designed to contain African-American populations targeted as dangerous or extraneous.

A dramatic rise in real estate speculation converged with labor shortages wrought by World War I to produce the first major Northern migration in the 1910s and 1920s. The interwar years that followed oversaw exploitative and segregationist practices in real estate, urban development, and zoning legislation, compounded with the Great Depression, which aided in Harlem's transition from artistic hub to ghetto. This transformation would be compounded further in the 1940s through the 1950s as a result of another dramatic African-American migration alongside the development of suburbia and resultant white flight. While tracing this material genealogy, this chapter explores the attendant racialized rhetoric of contamination and containment, one that would eventually manifest in the mid-twentieth-century trope of the black underworld as deployed by post-Harlem Renaissance writers Wright and Ellison. The general movement of this narrative moves from urban concentration to public anxiety to resultant containment strategies, culminating in the literature of waste approaching the issue "from below."

The genealogy of Harlem as an African-American community begins at the turn of the twentieth century, when black New Yorkers began to settle there in small groups.<sup>54</sup> Prior to Dutch settlement in the seventeenth century, the geographical region in northern Manhattan now

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<sup>54</sup> See Luc Sante, *Low Life: Lures and Snares of Old New York* (1991), 19.

known as Harlem (formerly Haarlem) was originally occupied by the Weckquasgesk tribe, though by the end of the nineteenth century it was home to Irish, German, Italian, and Puerto Rican immigrants (Freidenberg, 5). As John Jackson, Jr.'s history of the neighborhood in *Harlemworld* (2001) notes, nineteenth-century Harlem functioned as a reprieve from the "overflowing and diseased downtown areas," an area that provided leisure for the middle and upper classes (24). While its relative distance from central Manhattan initially prevented widespread migration uptown, this would eventually change with the advent of the railway and subway lines towards the end of the century, in the 1870s through the 1890s (Jackson Jr., 24).<sup>55</sup> These transformations in the technologies of urban transportation led to real-estate speculation and development of Harlem targeted towards middle-class white families in what was, by the turn of the twentieth century, a predominantly German-American neighborhood with occasional pockets of African-Americans.

A housing boom, based on an overestimation of the consumer demand new transportation uptown would yield, led to an overdeveloped and largely vacant Harlem by the 1910s (Smethurst, 9). The later years of this decade were witness to the first "Great Migration" of 1.5 million African-Americans moving to northern cities during and after World War I, due in part to Northern wartime labor shortages, in tandem with increased Jim Crow-era racial animosity and violence in the South (Thomas and Ritzdorf, 5). As Patricia Fernandez-Kelly notes, in 1910, "almost 90 percent of blacks were living in the South, but sixty years later, little more than half remained there" (224). In response to this massive Northern influx of black migrants, white panic led to the founding of several community protest groups, such as the Harlem Property Owners' Improvement Corporation, who demanded in 1913: "Drive them [African-Americans] out... and

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<sup>55</sup> Chapter Four revisits the advent of these technologies during this period, which also reconfigured the migration patterns of homeless Americans.

send them to the slums where they belong.”<sup>56</sup> Local white resistance to the presence of African-Americans in the neighborhood ultimately failed: faced with a surplus of unwanted and empty properties, realtors and landlords began to proposition and lease to African-American tenants. White flight soon followed: between 1920 and 1930, 118,792 white residents left Harlem while 87,417 black residents arrived (Osofsky, 130). The ethnic makeup of the local population thus shifted rapidly and dramatically.

A vacant Harlem soon became an overpopulated one, and an overpopulated Harlem became trashy. Overcrowding, price gouging, and property neglect quickly became rampant. Homes designed initially for single families became occupied by a plethora of newly urban tenants paying exorbitant fees for shared rooms; landlords, not held accountable by tenants or the state, allowed properties to deteriorate below minimal housing and health codes. As Jackson Jr. puts it, “Particular class-based and racial concerns... had built Harlem architecturally, and a different set of class-based and racial issues (the inability of poorer blacks to afford the opulent homes initially built for wealthier whites, along with the realtors’ need to turn a profit) overcrowded it” (26). Gilbert Osofsky meticulously details this transition from utopia to slum, wherein “high rents and poor salaries necessarily led to congested and unsanitary conditions,” with occupants renting out rooms, beds, floors, and even bathtubs (136). In 1925, the average population in an already congested New York was 223 people per acre; in Harlem, it was 336 (Osofsky, 140). The mortality and disease rate in Harlem soon greatly exceeded that of the rest of the city, as tenants crowded together in “vermin-infested” homes (Osofsky, 141).

When increased demand for industrial labor and national migration patterns led to urban concentration in Harlem, the advent and mutual cooperation of urban planning and

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<sup>56</sup> “Harlem Property Owners Discuss Negro Problem,” *Harlem Home News*, 28 Aug. 1913, 3.

contamination rhetoric worked in tandem to contain the surplus. As de Certeau writes, urban development centers on the “question of managing a growth of human agglomeration or accumulation” (93). Municipal zoning legislation arises concurrently in the 1910s through the 1930s in part as a response to the problem of urban concentration. Zoning, the specification and restriction of land use along an urban grid, developed as an urban manifestation of rationalization—the management of space, traffic, and populations in the name of city-wide controlled efficiency. While it was in 1908 that Los Angeles adopted the first city-wide zoning use ordinance, 1909 would prove a watershed year for the fledgling discipline of urban planning and city-wide rationalization more broadly: the year oversaw Harvard’s first course on urban planning, the first textbook on city planning, Daniel Burnham’s *Plan of Chicago*, the introduction of Ford’s assembly line production, and the country’s first national conference on city planning “which called for the reorganization of urban space around the values of economy, regularity, and efficiency” (Heise, 84).

As Christopher Silver demonstrates, American histories of space and race are inextricably wedded in a double helix structure. By the mid-1910s, zoning, the dominant tactic of the urban planning discipline’s early years, was a widespread municipal practice in both Southern and Northern cities (Silver, 27). While zoning pioneers in the first decades of the 1900s believed that “zoning offered a way not only to exclude incompatible uses from residential areas” but also to “combat urban congestion and thereby improve the quality of working-class neighborhoods,” these aims soon “gave way to political pressures from those less inclined toward broad civic improvement” (Silver, 24). The real estate development and banking industries instead prioritized the protection of property values by excluding undesirable populations perceived to depreciate that value. Through the first several decades of the century, real estate developers

placed no-minorities clauses (known as “restrictive covenants”)<sup>57</sup> into property deeds, prohibiting entrance to unwanted members of nationalities whose occupancy would “clearly be detrimental to property values” (Wiese and Nicolaidis, 225). Municipal government followed with zoning ordinances and building codes, while mortgage lenders complied by refusing loans to African-Americans.

Before turning to the contamination rhetoric utilized to target racialized surplus populations in zoning and other urban planning practices, mid-century developments in Harlem, which both exacerbated the slum conditions surrounding the Great Migration and diversified the strategies used to contain them, must be attended to briefly. In the 1930s, when Ralph Ellison first arrived to the neighborhood, the Great Depression “hit Harlem quite hard, leading to massive unemployment, evictions, and heightened racial discrimination” (Sundquist, 9). James de Jongh details the rampant squalor and disease of Depression-era Harlem, including untreated outbreaks of tuberculosis that thrived “in the crowded, unsanitary conditions of the tenements,” as well as the “neglect of delinquent or homeless Negro children by municipal authorities” (75). World War II compounded this sordid state of affairs, triggering a second northbound migration of African-Americans, this time greatly exceeding the previous influx and overcrowding an already excessively populated neighborhood (Thomas and Ritzdorf, 5). By the mid-1940s, Harlem “was just the best known of the emerging ghettos of America’s large urban centers at midcentury,” the Harlem Renaissance’s “glossy Jazz Age veneer” giving way to a wasteland devastated “by the stress of economic depression and the impact of a global war” (de Jongh, 80).

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<sup>57</sup> See Introduction to *Urban Planning and the African-American Community: In the Shadows* (1997), eds. June Manning Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf: 4, 6.

Zoning, which by this time had faced repeated legal challenges,<sup>58</sup> was supplanted by a variety of newer urban planning methods under the broad aegis of postwar suburbanization, including urban renewal, federal initiatives in public housing, highway construction, and slum clearance. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 established a nationwide interstate system, and euphemistically named urban renewal projects “worked in conjunction with clearance for highway construction,” targeting slums and displacing “racial minorities from prime locations for redevelopment and highway construction” which would allow middle- and upper-class mobility to newly developed suburban territories and away from the socially contaminated inner-city (Thomas and Ritzdorf, 8). The creation of the Cross-Bronx Expressway, constructed from 1956 to 1963 and funded through federal subsidies, displaced approximately 60,000 Bronx residents across its seven mile pathway (Berman, 293).<sup>59</sup>

Because, as James Baldwin made plain, “urban renewal means negro removal,”<sup>60</sup> these postwar policies and practices together “shaped and defined the Black ghetto” while also radically transforming the model of the American metropolis to which it was incorporated (Thomas and Ritzdorf, 8). Heise deems this a paradigm shift from the “competitive-industrial city” under Fordism to the post-Fordist “corporate-monopoly city,” characterized by the “dislocation of industrial production from the urban center to emerging satellite cities” and the migration “of a new class of managers, supervisors, and other professionals out to the suburbs” (67). June Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf concur with this paradigm shift, noting that postwar

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<sup>58</sup> In 1917, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the verdict of Louisville, Kentucky case *Buchanan v. Warley*, which had upheld a racial zoning ordinance, as unconstitutional (Silver, 24). Nevertheless, racial zoning persisted in other forms over the next several decades: despite its “short legal life,” segregationist zoning “continued to shadow public initiatives in community development as late as the 1960s” (Silver, 26).

<sup>59</sup> Don DeLillo, who, like *Underworld's* Nick Shay, was born in the Bronx, charts the lingering effects of slum renewal on this neighborhood through the narrative threads that take place in “The Wall,” an impoverished neighborhood populated by disease and crime. In *Tropic of Orange*, Karen Tei Yamashita similarly targets the damage of urban renewal to the neighborhood of Compton in Los Angeles.

<sup>60</sup> Baldwin, James. “Interview with Kenneth Clark.” *WNDT-TV*. May 28, 1963.

white exodus to the suburbs “established decentralization as the dominant urban pattern for the following decades,” leaving lower-class African-Americans in the inner city with limited economic mobility (7).<sup>61</sup>

Aside from overdevelopment, tenant exploitation, white flight, and suburbanization, a number of other racialized urban planning practices and phenomena continued to plague Harlem throughout the middle of the century. In her ethnography of Harlem, sociologist Patricia Fernandez-Kelly details many of these procedures.<sup>62</sup> In addition to the practice of “blockbusting” (the reselling of homes at exorbitant sums to a rising black middle class, Harlem developers from the 1930s through the 1960s made frequent use of “redlining,” or “designating certain areas within which real estate loans would not be made” (Fernandez-Kelly, 225). The 1934 creation of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), for instance, “discouraged integration by refusing to guarantee loans for homes that were not in racially homogenous areas” (Fernandez-Kelly, 225). Carl Nightingale notes that both the FHA and the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation established in the interwar period instituted “highly discriminatory housing policies,” which “not only solidified the boundaries of ghettos but also pushed them outward from downtown” (265).

Though such policies were challenged and revoked in the 1960s, their effects on racial segregation in urban development persist to this day. The coalescing of these practices—racialized zoning grids, federal and local withholding of loans, inadequate funding for schools—inevitably leads to the production of ghettos, the spatial manifestations of urban environments

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<sup>61</sup> Postwar freeway construction and suburbanization, a central concern in Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and a dominant motif in the fiction of American homelessness, will be examined at length in the next chapter.

<sup>62</sup> See Fernandez-Kelly, Patricia. “Slums, Ghettos, and Other Conundrums in the Anthropology of Lower Income Urban Enclaves” in *The Anthropology of Lower Income Urban Enclaves: The Case of East Harlem*. Ed. Judith Freidenberg. New York Academy of Sciences: Vol. 749, 1995.

dedicated to maximum profit at the expense of those at the bottom of hierarchies of class and race.

### *3.3. Infiltration Theory, Surplus Populations, and the Lowly*

The foregoing history of real estate made use of, conceptually reproduced, and physically spatialized earlier notions of immigrants, racial minorities, and the lower classes as deviant, degenerate, and unclean populations threatening morally upright and racially homogenous communities. As recurs across the history and rhetoric of waste, these anxieties became interfused with other forms of modern waste aversion, such as an increasingly disposal-oriented and germ-conscious consumer culture whose default response was expulsion and containment. This section unpacks the conceptual underpinnings operating in the foregoing history, particularly the notion of a surplus population and the recurring metaphor of that population “spilling” beyond its designated area.

Scrutinizing similar rhetoric in real estate documents and neighborhood covenants more thoroughly illustrates the intersection of these discourses and reveals the ideological underpinnings that legitimized segregationist urban planning practices in mid-century America. Examining contamination rhetoric in real estate appraisal manuals, Raymond Mohl writes that “the dominant belief in the nation’s real estate industry” in the 1940s was that “neighborhoods change, but never for the better” (64). In a section entitled “Racial Infiltration” in the *Review of the Society of Residential Appraisers* (1948), for instance, author George A. Philips warns readers of the depreciation of market value spurred by the “infiltration of unharmonious racial groups” into otherwise profitable neighborhoods (7-9). Fear of this “infiltration process” is

pervasive in the official real estate literature of the time: Arthur Weimer and Homer Hoyt's *Principles of Urban Real Estate* (1948) similarly details the process by which real estate value is "threatened by the infiltration of people of another racial or national type" into a racially homogenous district (123). Mohl's history traces the lexicon of infiltration theory, which utilizes euphemistic diction to pathologize populations of color in increasingly indirect terms, variously deemed "inharmonious," "incompatible," "contentious," "blights" upon the neighborhood resulting in a "blighted area" (65-66, 69). Not limited to real estate or urban planning documents, mid-century infiltration theory was upheld and implemented by mortgage bankers, appraisers, and financial analysts (Mohl, 71). At the new suburban periphery, neighborhood associations and restrictive covenants expanded the reach of this mechanism beyond the confines of the city proper (Nicolaidis and Wiese, 4).

Here we observe, on the macro-industrial level, the fear of what Douglas might have termed "bodies out of place," and the rationalizing impulse to restructure places themselves in order to confer order onto what is perceived as wide-scale urban entropy—this, despite the fact that the source of the squalor deemed dangerous and unhygienic arises, as our history has demonstrated, from historically specific urban planning practices that engineer and quarantine poverty on a grand scale, rather than essential qualities inherent in the racial group in question. By vilifying conditions of life which it itself engenders, and disavowing the necessity of this process to its own functioning, twentieth-century urban spatial logic is, in this sense, illogical.

Undergirding this discourse and practice is the pathologizing of populations of color, presented as contagions defiling an otherwise pristine and harmonious urban community. This midcentury practice draws upon and extends older nationalist notions of immigrants as "social contaminants," carrying "disease, ignorance, and dubious morality," which are then transposed

onto older theological divisions of above and below (Fernandez-Kelly, 222). Locally, the concept of color as urban contagion arises concurrently with patterns of increased urban concentration in New York, Chicago, and other congested metropolitan areas previously described. What Kirsch, Mohl, and Nightingale consider “the second-ghetto era” of the midcentury American city from the 1940s through the 1960s occurs when African-American and other undesirable populations are perceived to be “spilling” out of ghettos and into neighborhoods already abandoned by white flight, expanding the reach of quite literally devalued spaces beyond control of urban planning mechanisms (Kirsch, xvii, Mohl, 59-60, Nightingale, 261).

In order to avoid casting urban contamination rhetoric as a solely white phenomenon, it must be acknowledged that the notion of a racial underworld was upheld by white and black middle-class reformers in the early twentieth century. Vogel’s history of Harlem nightlife in *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret* reveals that, in an extension of the infiltration rhetoric deployed by white middle-class America, an elite branch of racial uplift ideology espoused by some New Negro Renaissance theorists and leaders relied upon a “moral differentiation and hierarchization” which yielded both “an economic norm—and black middle class—and a moral norm that figured the black ‘underworld’ as a morally deficient sphere” (11). In part, racial uplift ideology arose in response to white perceptions of black criminality and deviance; it functioned as a call to increase “the ranks of a visible and respectable middle class,” to “combat the perceived threat to the race as urban pathology” (Vogel, 7). In an 1899 publication, for instance, W. E. B. Du Bois championed the rise of a “talented tenth” of the race, which he contrasted with the “submerged tenth,” defined as “the lowest class of criminals, prostitutes, and loafers” (311). Accordingly, several pioneering black intellectuals and artists of the New Negro Renaissance, including Du

Bois and Alain Locke, “viewed nightclubs and the music performed within them as the apotheosis of ‘low’ culture and approached them with ambivalence, embarrassment, or disapprobation” (Vogel, 9). Adopting the language of high and low, these communities of color sought to migrate a segment of the underworld population above ground, disassociating from the majority thought to be contaminated by hedonism and crime.

Ellison’s novel, to which we soon turn, criticizes the intraracial divisions of racial uplift ideology through the all-black college that the narrator attends early in the novel, a fictionalized version of Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee University in Alabama. In an early chapter of *Invisible Man*, Ellison’s narrator is tasked with providing a tour of the college to Mr. Norton, a white trustee. When the narrator unintentionally brings him to the Golden Day, a black veteran hospital and bar on the outskirts of the college, Norton is disgruntled by the unfiltered manner in which the veterans address him. As a result, Dr. Bledsoe, the president of the college expels him. “Instead of uplifting the race,” Bledsoe admonishes the narrator, “you’ve torn it down... dragged the entire race into the slime” (Ellison, 140-141). Tellingly, Bledsoe utilizes the diction of the lowly and the disgusting associated with waste. Mortified, the narrator, internalizing the association between blackness and deviant, underworld pseudo-citizen, wishes to distance himself from the “poor, ignorant people” steeped in “mire and darkness,” so that he may be aligned instead with “decent, upright citizens” who inhabit the upper strata of civilized, educated, affluent white society (Ellison, 99).

Crucially, this broader discourse of pathology and degeneration manifests in the particular metaphor of spilling—of human beings, coded as waste matter, *exceeding* their spatial demarcations and threatening to contaminate the entirety of the body politic, whether, in urban contamination rhetoric, of African-American communities spilling across interracial boundaries,

out of ghettos and into respectable neighborhoods, or, in the rhetoric of racial uplift, across intraracial divisions between modest and immodest, pristine and slimy bodies (Vogel, 9). Such a figurative device gains its rhetorical, spatial, and political force through the concept of a surplus population.

A central notion in contemporary critical race theory and originally coined by Karl Marx, a surplus population is comprised of human bodies which exceed the parameters of value within an urban, suburban, or national economy. For Marx, members of the surplus population were those who could not, or would not, labor on behalf of the ruling classes, including “vagabonds, discharged soldiers, discharged jailbirds” (257). Contemporary accounts of surplus populations often take as their departure Michel Foucault’s conception of race as “the precondition that makes killing acceptable” in his discussion of biopower in the collection of 1975-1976 lectures, “Society Must be Defended” (254). In his history of blackness as global economic concept deployed rhetorically and materially, Achille Mbembe’s *Critique of Black Reason* (2017) extends Foucault, defining race as “one of the raw materials from which difference and *surplus*—a kind of life that can be wasted and spent without limit—are produced” (34). It is on the grounds of this surplus-status that one’s “belonging is contested” within the body politic (Mbembe, 34). Mbembe deems race the preconditional “instrumentality that makes it possible to name the surplus and to commit it to waste” (34-35). In other words, because racially-subordinated bodies are already equated with waste matter, they are expendable in the maintenance of other networks imbued with value; already ejected from a network of social value, it is not wasteful to dispose of them.

For our current purpose of examining the spatial logic of midcentury American urbanism, it is important that disposability is not always meant literally within this discourse. It must be

borne in mind that such accounts of race, following Foucault, use “killing” and “disposal” in a capacious rather than a narrow sense, including not only “every form of direct murder,” but also indirectly “exposing someone to death,” “increasing the risk of death for some people,” “political death, expulsion, rejection,” or, as applied here in the case of midcentury Harlem, rhetorical vilification and legislative containment within disease-ridden slums operating below acceptable living standards (Foucault, 256).

A surplus must exceed a boundary; a boundary is, or is imagined to be, spatial. Much as we have been tracing the relationship between the fledgling institution of urban planning in the U.S. and the rhetoric of contaminant populations, contemporary accounts of race tether race and space in this way. As Mbembe notes, racial hierarchies operate through “a logic of enclosure” wherein groups are defined, divided, and bound in terms of their capacities as carriers of contaminants (35). Transposing the micro-corporeal language of the individual biological body to the macrocosmic industrial scale of the collective urban body, contaminant populations are seen as pathogens that must be enclosed within the infected zones they occupy, lest that infection spread.

Space is not only deployed as a means of segregation and subordination; its material persistence continues to plague and reproduce the purported inferiority of its occupants. Lisa Marie Cacho argues that unevenly-developed space “does not only explain and naturalize human beings’ subordination; it was and continues to be central to engineering some of the most violent forms of exploitation” (73). In other words, it is not only, as Mike Davis writes, that a slum is a “dumping ground for a surplus population” (145), but that the adverse conditions of the slum continue to plague its inhabitants long after the dumping is complete. The urban underworld is not a random anarchic phenomenon but the engineered product of urban design, not passive

background but active agent. As Mbembe writes, “to endure, a form of domination must not only inscribe itself on the bodies of its subjects but also leave its imprint on the spaces that they inhabit as indelible traces on the imaginary” (127). A multi-tiered waste-averse culture thereby deploys systematic containment and maintenance of contaminating populations across spatial, bodily, and psychic registers.

It is within this environment that Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison—members of what Ross Posnock deems the “post-Harlem Renaissance generation”—utilize the underworld as both literal site and metaphor for the spatial subordination of African-Americans, racialized part of a wider mechanism of urban waste aversion and management (28). Writing of Wright and Ellison’s predecessors, James de Jongh argues that “the impulse of the first literary generations employing the motif [of Harlem] was to regard black Harlem as a trope” (15). For the Harlem Renaissance writers, this trope encapsulated and invoked the dreamscape of jazz and blues experimentation, cabaret and nightlife activities, and Alaine Locke’s New Negro sensibilities calling for novel and multifaceted forms of black identity. Increasingly, as our history of post-Renaissance Harlem has shown, black Harlem as trope later came to symbolize a disenfranchised population trapped in squalid conditions, complete with the attendant “traces of despair associated with the presence of an urban *underclass*” (Fernandez-Kelly, 230).

If, in other words, Jazz Age Harlem stood visibly as triumphant celebration of African-American literary and musical artistic production, by midcentury, Harlem had gone underground, the realities of the underclass manifesting in the subterranean tropes of sewers and basements. As will be demonstrated, midcentury African-American writers who deploy the trope of the black urban underworld do so as a counterweight to and exploration of the material and cultural processes manufacturing their environments. In presenting local cases that problematize selective

historiographies and narratives of omission, they work to illuminate the previously obscured role urban development plays in the production of low-income urban enclaves.

“The Man Who Lived Underground” and *Invisible Man* employ similar tactics. Both feature black protagonists whose names are either undisclosed or forgotten and whose oppressive narrative arcs lead them, in the final instance, to subterranean depths beneath the metropolis, to sewers, cellars, and underground clinics. Both narratives implicitly and explicitly consider how hierarchies of race and class manifest in the symbolic processes of naming and mapping, how these processes produce blind spots in the cultural imagination, and, ultimately, how they impinge both upon individual subject formation and the spatial production and transmission of collective histories. Moreover, these texts are narrated from below, from the perspective of the lowly—a racial and spatial positioning mirroring contamination anxiety and inverting the slum tourist’s view from above. The view from below, unpacked at length in what follows, is emblematic of the harsh and waste-filled realities of East Coast black urban experience while simultaneously presenting such experiences as surreal and otherworldly, a world operating on inverted and altered systems of perception.

Most importantly, both texts literalize and trouble discursive associations between the lower classes, the lowly, and corporeal waste matter. They shift registers between the lowly as urban underground, the lowly as subhuman, and the lowly as excretion of the body’s lower half. Such substitutions reveal the processes through which distinct sites stand in for one another to strengthen mechanisms of spatial oppression. When Ellison writes, in “Harlem is Nowhere,” that “to live in Harlem is to dwell in the very bowels of the city,” he is drawing upon the language of the lowly in the corporeal sense—bowels exist below the stomach, they are the *underbelly* associated with dirt and disease (242). As Susan S. Morrison writes in *The Literature of Waste*

(2015), systems of class hierarchy often rest upon an association of the lower classes with a proximity to dirt itself: in one sense, the lower classes “are literally lower—closer to the ground with its dirt they wallow in” (47). Sarah Ahmed observes a related set of associations spatially perceived, between vertically-situated bodies, spaces, and waste matter: “Lower regions of the body—that which is below—are clearly associated both with sexuality and with “the waste” that is literally expelled by the body... Lowness becomes associated with lower regions of the body as it becomes associated with other bodies and other spaces” (89).

The next section demonstrates that, in the distinct and interrelated meanings of the term, “The Man Who Lived Underground” is a paradigmatic story of the “lowly.” Just as Ahmed and Morrison analyze waste matter on a vertical axis with regards to the micro-biological and macro-social bodies, David Pike’s *Subterranean Cities* (2005) interrogates the historical and technological processes by which subterranean spaces become the literal and figurative repositories for surplus materials and bodies on the macro-industrial scale. It is through the innovations of the nineteenth-century city, “with its complex drainage systems, underground railways, utility tunnels, and storage vaults,” that “the urban landscape superseded the countryside of caverns and mines as the primary location of actual subterranean spaces” (Pike, 1). This importation of the underground to the city indelibly transformed the urban landscape, giving rise to a “way of experiencing and conceptualizing the city as a vertical space” (Pike, 1). Verticality, the axis along which technocratic ideals of a city without residue are imagined and regulated, thus arises as an effective metric for literary explorations of transformations in urban development, racial hierarchies, and anxieties tied to filth, degeneration, and disease. As Heise puts it, “unequally divided geographies” with corresponding values of “rationality versus madness, cleanliness versus filth, law versus disorder” are “made strikingly visible by Wright’s

sewer” (142).

Finally, it should be reiterated that the lowly is not only a state of abjection or a position of narration along a vertical spectrum, but also a literal space inhabited by the characters of post-Harlem Renaissance writers and nonfictional, historical citizens alike. Heise, writing of 1950s Harlem, notes that its residents were literally going underground in response to poverty: 39% of the neighborhood’s cellars were used as homes, significantly higher than other region in the city (133). Sewers and cellars thus figure in these narratives not only as tropes for containment and zones of contact with contagions, but lived forms of black urban experience.

The lowly therefore operates, as we have seen, in a variety of interrelated registers—on the material plane, the lowly designates that which is anatomically lower on the individual body and nearest to the ground on the social body, to the sexual organs, fluids, and dirt which are frequently associated with excess, filth, and degeneracy. On the discursive plane, the lowly refers to the substances and behaviors construed as disgusting or debased, the wretched and impoverished populations at the bottom of class hierarchy, the squalid regions they inhabit, and the dubious moralities they purportedly embody. The coalescing and cross-pollination of these associations forms the multi-discursive body of material, affective, and regulatory mechanisms this dissertation has been deeming waste-averse culture. In Wright’s sewer, the mingling and co-constitution of these materials and bodies forms a dense ambience of waste.

### *3.4. Submersion, Inversion, and Waste-Ambience in Wright’s Underground*

In “The Man Who Lived Underground,” Fred Daniels flees to the sewers after a false criminal accusation. Removing a manhole cover from the street, he descends into a world of

slime, putrefaction, and death. In its defamiliarization of the senses, inversion of values and paradigms pertaining to light and warmth, dense cultivation of a surreal atmosphere of waste, exploration of its protagonist's degeneration, dislocation, and ultimate namelessness and unintelligibility, Wright's novella renders in detail the subjective experience of racial and spatial subordination. By foregrounding underground spaces and the material and perceptual effect they exert on the subjects cast as waste, "The Man Who Lived Underground" details, on a kinesthetic level, consignment to an underworld without the necessities of light, basic hygiene, and sustenance. What does it feel like, Wright's story asks, to be thrown away?

Focalized through Daniels, Wright's narrator devotes the majority of the text to describing his sensory experiences, particularly the gradual inversion of his senses as he accommodates to life beneath the city. In a frequently recurring device, the narrator first presents an unidentified light source, shape, or sound, then follows Daniels' thought processes as he comes to identify it. This inverted approach enacts, at the level of subjectivity, the means and order through which the discarded waste-subject experiences the city from below. In an early passage, for instance, the protagonist hears "faint sounds" through a wall, sounds that are "strange but familiar" (Wright, 23). "Was it a motor?" he asks, "A baby crying? Music? A siren?" (Wright, 23). Eventually, he realizes the sounds are those of churchgoers singing a hymn. Later, he becomes "aware of a soft, continuous tapping" (Wright, 35). Again, he attempts to infer the source. Initially he suspects a clock, before rejecting that hypothesis since "it was louder than a clock and more irregular" (Wright, 35). Several moments later he recognizes the sound is of a typewriter. A pattern controls these passages: the sound or shape always precedes the source, and Daniels employs guesswork and attentiveness to determine the identity of the object or phenomenon. The character does not behold the object and then consider it as is often done

above ground, but must perform sensory work to behold it in the first place.

Wright employs this bottom-up trajectory at the level of plot development as well. From the main avenue of the sewer into which he initially descends, Daniels uses makeshift tools and eventually a stolen crowbar to dig his way into a series of linked basements and furnaces. The remainder of the narrative arc is episodic: Daniels observes the items stored in these underground rooms, hypothesizes as to what kind of building he is beneath, then makes brief ventures aboveground to steal resources and return to his sewer. A tightly focalized mode of free indirect discourse makes Daniels' momentary blind spots the reader's, too, submerging them far beneath the panoramic, top-down view Michel de Certeau describes.

The absence or negation of light and the inverted site from which objects and spaces are accessed precipitates Wright's textual approach. Recall that the Greco-Roman underworld was defined by negation: Hades is characterized primarily in terms of what it lacks, not what it contains. As the opening of this chapter also argued, associations with death, darkness, absence, and inversion permeate the majority of cultural iterations of the underworld across regional and temporal axes. Wright's text defamiliarizes the senses by depriving both protagonist and audience of light, then re-approaching the contours of everyday objects and phenomena from below. The nether region is defined by darkness, and in the absence of the full range of sensory input, the narrative inverts a common ordering of descriptors and access to spaces alike. In repositioning the site of subjectivity to the lowly, texts that scrutinize urban zones designated as waste—that spatialize and perceptualize the phenomenon of waste—therefore contribute to a recurring approach in the literature of waste, and of much twentieth-century art, which reconsiders the quotidian through displacement.

The manner in which this is achieved, however, exhibits important distinctions from that

employed by DeLillo, for instance. Trash in *Underworld* is transformed through circulation and collection—it travels through industrial networks to peri-urban landfills or international destinations, and shifts its significance accordingly: a magazine page, free-falling in the wind, moves from commodity to discarded ephemera to art and back to trash again, or a conglomeration of waste condensed in a landfill contains within it the side-by-side temporalities and geographies of distinct epochs and regions, moving from heterogeneous *disjecta* to surreal, compacted mass. Wright focuses less on the matter that becomes waste or not-waste, but the site from which those evaluations emanate; moreover, the remoteness of the site bars intersubjective exchange. Thus Daniels resuscitates objects from disuse (such as the abandoned metal pole he finds against a dirt wall and uses to dig his way into cellars) not through their circulation through space but his own displacement and alienation. Beneath the city and perceived by the sewer-dweller, objects take on new signification, but for the sewer-dweller alone. We observe this in the shrine Daniels erects with the valuables plundered from basements: after stealing cash and jewelry, he glues the stolen bills onto the walls of the sewer as a “mocking symbol,” a repudiation of the economy aboveground (Wright, 54). This mocking gesture, however, is undercut by its limited reach: while he delightfully claims he “had triumphed over the world aboveground,” the thought that immediately succeeds it—“if only people could see this”—laments its limitations (Wright, 54).

As with other texts in our study, Wright’s narrative dislocates objects so as to reconfigure ascriptions of value bound by spatial economy. Unlike others, however, Wright does not place them into a shared economy of value. Buried underground, Daniels’ shrine exists for him alone. Once valuable items no longer have exchange value as there is no one present with which to exchange them. Divorced as radically as he is from aboveground life, Daniels’ reconfiguration of

value operates only in a quasi-solipsistic state that in its stagnation cannot be considered an economy. In Wright's novella, then, objects are so dislodged and inaccessible so as to obstruct intersubjective mediation. As we will soon consider, *Invisible Man* poses a potential, if attenuated, means beyond this problem by way of narrative.

As this chapter has frequently claimed, and as waste scholarship since Mary Douglas has considered but not yet fully explored, it is not merely subjective perspective or objective existence that assigns and revokes waste-status, but the space that envelops and shapes these elements. In order for a text to thoroughly spatialize the phenomenon of waste and thereby belong to the body of literature concerned with spatial waste, it must not take setting as a static backdrop but as an active and reactive participant in this process. As explained at the opening of this chapter, while the effects of space on territorially-embedded subject and object have been analyzed by scholars working on urban design and trash, the multi-directional fashion in which waste-status is then conferred back upon the space itself has been neglected. Defining and scrutinizing the literary ambience of waste generated in "The Man Who Lived Underground" will help elucidate this notion more thoroughly.

In his influential definition of the music genre he helped pioneer, English composer Brian Eno wrote that ambient music "must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting."<sup>63</sup> Ambience therefore involves the interplay between foreground and background; it encapsulates the dynamic of interest and ignorability within adjacent regions of a space. Waste lends itself particularly well to the notion of ambience. At the categorical level, as we have seen, waste is defined in terms of what is foregrounded and backgrounded, what is and is not valued, looked at,

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<sup>63</sup> From the liner notes of Brian Eno's *Music for Airports / Ambient 1*, Polydor Records, 1978.

or thought about. In an industrial landscape, particularly a lower-income urban enclave, waste is usually littered throughout, affecting the atmosphere of that setting. The level to which it is scrutinized and pulled out of the ambient mass, if at all, varies greatly. As an ambience, at turns homogenous and distinguished, waste accommodates diverse levels of attention among pedestrians. Waste-averse culture makes waste ignorable; waste literature makes it interesting.

“The Man Who Lived Underground” explores this interplay in several ways, most notably by playing with foreground and background, presence and absence. When Wright’s protagonist first descends into the sewer, he is struck by the filth and odor all around. Olfactory waste matter is present to consciousness. Soon afterward, however, “the odor of rot had become so general that he no longer smelled it” (Wright, 21). If waste is matter out of place, it ceases to be so when it occupies the entirety of that place: it cannot be a systemic outlier when it dominates and defines the local system. Daniels acclimates to the airborne waste particles because they are ubiquitous; in this sense, the environment is merely a spatial extension of waste matter in all directions, a homogenous middleground. Put simply, nothing in the sewer is waste because everything is. Foreground and background have mutated.

More directly, Wright cultivates this waste-ambience through populating the underground entirely with wasted subjects and objects, exploring their mutual constitution, and allowing them to dominate the content and mood of his prose itself. What Daniels encounters is consistently morbid: he breaks his way into the basement of a butcher’s shop spattered in blood, as well as an undertaker’s basement housing cadavers. In the sewer conjoining these encounters Daniels brushes against a “tiny nude body of a baby snagged by debris and half-submerged in water,” its “mouth gaped black in a soundless cry” (Wright, 26). Taken together, the novella’s unrelentingly despondent tone and cast of discarded bodies cultivates a dense aura of morbidity and

hellishness. Wright's prose mimics and extends this omnipresence by constantly detailing the olfactory, auditory, and tactile imprints of waste upon its protagonist: Daniels breathes in a "hot stench of yeasty rot," ceaselessly slides against "masses of debris," sloshes through the "slimy bottom" of the waste-stream, is surrounded by "slate-colored water" and sinks into its "spongy slop," while occasionally hearing faint "whispers of scurrying life" in the form of disease-carrying rodents (Wright, 21-22). As Daniels acclimates, these descriptors recede in frequency and intensity; the sensory and emotional impact lessens as the protagonist joins the homogenized field of sludge, stench, and death. It is important to note that, congruent with the methodology of this chapter, the effect of waste-ambience is not simply that the sewer neutrally or statically contains waste, but that the conglomeration of omnipresent waste-forms comprise an all-encompassing waste-status that is then conferred back onto the entirety of the surrounding space. The underworld is not mere repository *for* but spatial extension *of* waste—both at the textual level of Wright's narrative and the expelled and discarded region it depicts.

The effect of extensive time in this zone is not solely transformative in the homogenizing sense just considered, but in a related, degenerative sense as well. The putrid air becomes less offensive not only because it pervades the space, but because, as subject and environment interact, the latter pervades the former. As the protagonist's underworld-exposure continues and these elements commingle, the text employs a series of animal similes that intimate an increasingly beastlike consciousness: in feeling his way along the walls, his "fingers toyed in the space, like the antennae of an insect" (Wright, 27). His vision becomes interfused with the kinesthetic, "like those sightless worms that inch along underground" (Wright, 32). In sliding through the tight channels of the sewer, the narrator describes his motions as "eel-like" (Wright, 45). In such passages, Daniels slips further and further down a vertical species hierarchy in a

series of reverse-evolutions. Such a hierarchy is not only organized vertically; verticality itself appears to define the upper (bipedal) ranks, whereas Daniels the eel slides horizontally through the sewage.

The particular animals chosen are telling and mirror the way Wright conjoins the literal and figurative throughout the text. Such creatures are not only lowly through association and discourse, but in direct spatial terms: worms grub in the dirt beneath the ground, and as bottom dwellers, eels occupy some of the lowest inhabitable regions of the earth. These regions, along with the direction of motion, in turn shape their modes of perception. Moreover, without vertical distance from the ground, they are in constant contact with dirt, unclean. Indeed, Mary Douglas considers these examples in her reading of *The Book of Leviticus*, which states that “whatever goes on its belly” is “an abomination” (Leviticus 11:42). Thus, anything that “creeps, crawls, or swarms upon the earth,” including “eels and worms,” is considered unclean (Douglas, 70). In the case of “The Man Who Lived Underground,” such cultural abstractions are literalized because they have tangible consequences: dehumanization yields deprivation, which ends with abjection and decay.

Alongside the use of degenerative metaphors, a sense of anarchic animality pervades the theft spree that occupies much of the latter half of the text. Breaking into various buildings from below, Daniels pilfers a lunch pail, a tool kit, a pack of cigarettes, meat, fruit, diamonds, watches, and cash from a safe. Daniels’ subterranean position benefits him insofar as it enables him to bypass the aboveground security of these locations and evade what de Certeau calls the radar of city administration, beneath their horizon of vision and thus “impossible to administer” (de Certeau, 95).<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> The nameless narrator of *Invisible Man*, who lives in a basement, similarly uses his subterranean position to steal electricity. He is able to evade reprimand because the electric company employees “suspect that power is being

Existing beneath the purview of civilization also invites the possibility of existing without its codes. Wright enacts his protagonist's degeneration not simply through presenting his actions or atmospheric conditions, but through another telling absence or negation of the world aboveground: none of these acts of theft are accompanied by hesitation or ethical consideration. Invisible and amoral, Daniels simply forages for materials, procures them, and returns to the sewer. At both the level of behavior and consciousness, then, the rules of culture no longer seem to apply.

Neither the process of degeneration nor the cultural evasion it affords is so simple, however. Contradictions in biology, space, and perception coalesce to make this transformation a multi-directional, vexed process, rather than a linear decline. Human beings, who are not bottom dwellers, require light and air to subsist in good health for extended periods of time, and Daniels' perceptual apparatus is wired differently as a matter of course. While he may momentarily adjust to his mud-crusted, lightless home, it is an unnatural and unsustainable habitat for him. Though he learns to grub like a worm through necessity, Fred Daniels is not a worm. Barring a subset of the species from humanity through rhetorically depicting them as contagions and restricting their existence within or beneath unsustainable neighborhoods is a result of a particular history of race, space, cities, and waste that runs counter to biological conditions.

As a member of an aboveground species consigned to the underground, then, Daniels experiences alienation, liminality, and degradation at the most rudimentary levels of existence. As the narrator notes, Daniels never fully acclimates to the sewers, emotionally hovering in a purgatory "between the world aboveground and the world underground" (Wright, 40). Thus, for every site and object he encounters, and the aggregate of these that is the waste-ambience we

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drained off, but they don't know where" (Ellison, 5). As these clandestine tactics illustrate, "it is sometimes advantageous to be unseen" (Ellison, 3).

have enumerated, he experiences both the worm's eye view as measured against, and in tension with, the biped's view. When Daniels hears a car driving "along the wet pavement overhead, its heavy rumble soon dying out," it sounds instead like "the hum of a plane speeding through a dense cloud" (Wright, 21). Possessing a dual subjectivity that perceives both the distorted subterranean sound and the aboveground source, he concludes that "everything seemed *strange and unreal down here*" (Wright, 21, emphasis added). The juxtaposition and ineffable magnetism between two forms of reality—what André Breton calls "a kind of absolute reality"—generates the phenomenon of surreality, in this case an aural waste-ambience surreality (14). In Wright's sewer, the unreality of underground experience conjoins the reality of prior aboveground experience. Wright's text enacts, at the level of sense-data, the hybrid subjectivity that ensues from historically dislocating forces, themselves a hybridity of infiltration theory applied to and carried out by urban planning mechanisms.

Wright therefore defines and depicts the underworld not merely in its classical sense of negation, but through a surrealistic, purgatorial rendering of absence and presence intertwined: the deprivation of light, sight, and sustenance is accompanied and infused with the subject's illuminated memories and perceptions. These forces shoot through one another just as the degenerating sewer dweller, socially and spatially discarded like so many forms of waste, comes to define the abject sewer that in turn defines him.

For all its surrealistic flourishes and intimations, "The Man Who Lived Underground" closes with a violent act of police brutality that serves as a harsh reminder of reality. Spurred by an inclination to share his experiences, Daniels emerges from the sewer. in a state of extreme social unintelligibility. Blinded by the sun and covered in feces, he walks aimlessly through traffic, then irrationally returns to the police station where he was falsely accused. Despite his

desire to narrate his story, he finds he has lost most communicative abilities, including knowledge of his own name. He manages to state most of the details of the narrative, but at great effort, and in fragmented, nonlinear fashion; there is no guiding principle, context, or coherence. While “the images stood out sharply in his mind,” he “could not make them have the meaning for others that they had for him” (Wright, 79). Eventually, he realizes that the sewer itself can disclose what he cannot: “if he could show them what he had seen, then they would feel what he had felt” (Wright, 81). Space arises as a direct means of transmitting experience, and so he leads them to his sewer entrance. As soon as he opens the manhole cover, however, they refuse to follow, shooting him instead. Intratextually, his story is lost, his revelation, vague even to the reader, silenced. Socially unintelligible, he is ejected from a linear time and history produced above ground. Murdered and discarded, he becomes a “whirling object rushing alone,” relegated permanently to the underground, the sewer lid sealed shut (Wright, 71).

### 3.5. *“Not All Sickness is Unto Death”*: *Survival in Ellison’s Underground*

Ten years after Wright, Ellison considers the relationship of underworlds and their nameless denizens to the writing of history in 1950s Harlem. In turning to Ellison from Wright, we see similar concerns, even as the authors produce subterranean cartographies at odds with one another: Wright’s novella is a micro-geography of a single sewer over the course of a few days, while Ellison’s novel charts several decades and multiple settings, urban and rural. Additionally, while both texts present a dismal picture of social determinism—both terminate below ground and suggest that the matrix of oppressive forces characterizing midcentury urban America does not allow any sustained possibility of ascent—Ellison’s exhibits minute forms of agency and

gestures towards productive means of dealing with these concerns through narrative.

As the title and its corresponding motifs indicate, *Invisible Man* explores the axis of visibility and invisibility as it intersects with spatial and racial hierarchies. The underground appears repeatedly in the novel as setting and structural device: the novel notably begins and ends in the narrator's makeshift home "in a section of the basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century" that he has occupied for seventeen years (Ellison, 6). When the narrator moves to Harlem, he works in the lowest region of a paint factory in yet another "deep basement" three levels underground (Ellison, 207). He is later lobotomized and undergoes electroconvulsive therapy in an underground clinic, which, in an echo of Wright's Fred Daniels, causes him to forget his name. In these texts, prolonged exposure to the underworld enacts a transformative effect on its inhabitants, at turns degenerative and revelatory.

Thus transformed, the narrator both resists and accedes to his invisible outsider status through narrating his life below ground and disavowing the culture above. As with Wright, this manifests through the narrator's namelessness and eventual subterranean position—for Ellison, however, the underworld figures not as mere prison but also as site of revelation.

As the Harlem Renaissance illustrated, space can and did function to transmit personal and collective histories previously obstructed. In marked contrast to 1920s Harlem with its prolific artistic production and subcultural exploration of alternative lifestyles and sexualities, Wright (and, to a lesser degree, Ellison) presents the underground as solipsistic wasteland. But not all underground spaces are equally contaminating, and as Ellison's nameless narrator reminds us from his basement, "all sickness is not unto death" (14). In Wright's novella, the protagonist's subterranean experiences result in an undisclosed epiphany: living in the sewer and enshrining stolen items causes Daniels to realize something, and when he fails to communicate

that something linguistically, he attempts to bring the policemen into the sewer so they can see for themselves. Whatever his insight, it is lost: the men dispose of him on the threshold of the sewer. For Ellison's invisible man, the underground also induces an epiphany: "This is the way it's always been," he remarks at his new home, "only now I know it" (Ellison, 566). Insofar as this space identifies and concretizes the more intangible and unidentifiable forms of oppression engineered into and obscured by the city, it provides reprieve and insight. He can no longer gaze at the industrial horizon in hopes of achieving upward mobility and recognition; he resigns himself to life in a hole.

Rather than having to consume the empty, abstract platitudes of American equality promised to aboveground citizens while simultaneously experiencing the harsh limits of that rhetoric, the invisible man retreats to the underground, which makes no such promises. The stagnation and decay of his container accords with his position as a member of a disenfranchised underclass. There is a stark nakedness to the underground that, while clearly hazardous and unsustainable, illuminates and bypasses the contradictions of civil life, the illogical arguments of urban spatial logic. It is limitation laid bare.

Nevertheless, Ellison's underground exhibits a moderate level of habitability that allows for the possibility of transmitting this revelation through narrative. A basement is not a sewer; the invisible man is not Fred Daniels, entirely discarded and forgotten. Daniels only survives in the sewer for a few days; while Ellison never discloses the exact duration of the invisible man's quarantine, critic Patrick W. Shaw places it at roughly seventeen years (119). The narrator, who frequently corrects anticipated assumptions on behalf of the reader, is sure to clarify that his hole "is warm and full of light" (Ellison, 6). Ellison's narrator counteracts the absence of light by populating his basement with thousands of stolen light bulbs powered by energy clandestinely

siphoned from an electric company. When detailing this setting, the invisible man explains: “I say all this to assure you that it is incorrect to assume that, because I’m invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation. Call me Jack-the-Bear, for I am in a state of hibernation” (Ellison, 6). In what appear as direct rejoinders to Wright’s underground, Ellison’s appears not as a place of death and darkness but of warmth and life; in this vein, animal metaphors are employed not to signify degeneration but strength. Bears are powerful warm-blooded mammals high on the food chain, and hibernation is not necessarily stagnation, but can be, as the narrator notes, “a covert preparation for a more overt action” (Ellison, 13).

As discussed in our analysis of Wright, however, human habitation underground can only last so long. Psychologically and nutritionally, a lightbulb and a sun are not interchangeable; we must employ some skepticism in the degree of long-term habitability afforded by a hole in the ground, well-lit or not. Taking the narrator’s claims at face-value, Adrienne Brown reductively reads the narrator’s basement as a comforting, quasi-suburban retreat from Harlem.

Championing resistance and escape, Brown argues that the invisible man’s basement reflects a commitment to domesticity exhibited in Ellison’s life. Ellison, who refused to move abroad alongside his compatriots Wright and Baldwin, remained for forty years in his apartment outside Harlem. Brown claims that this manifests in the invisible man’s subterranean escape from the city, which mirrors midcentury white flight into the suburbs: the hole is not a painful, last-ditch effort a la Wright’s sewer, but instead a home to which the narrator is loyal: “a place of fixity, habit, and inertia” (Brown, 183). Moreover, the invisible man’s basement allows him “to *make* his own space after being *treated* as one by so many” (Brown, 183, emphasis original). In other words, whereas the sewer molds Fred Daniel’s hybrid worm-biped consciousness, and whereas

the invisible man, aboveground, is treated as empty space or negation of properly embodied subject, the basement, as bounded subterranean space, empowers him to create an autonomous habitat and subjectivity.

Brown is correct to assert that Ellison's underground exhibits a brightness Wright's lacks, but overstates her case by overlooking the ambiguity of the setting and the narrator's psychological state. Like Wright's sewer, Ellison's basement is limiting, liminal, and purgatorial. The invisible man fares much better than Fred Daniels, but despite his adaptation and survival, his hibernation is insufficient for at least one crucial reason. As he laments, exasperated after his years underground: "damn it, there's the mind, the *mind*" (Ellison, 573). While immobile physically, his consciousness remains active. Left generally unstimulated, the invisible man's thoughts begin to exhibit neurosis and delusion: he tells us that "there are exactly 1,369 lights" in the basement and that he is unsure whether or not he "exist[s] in the real world" (Ellison, 7, 4). These statements should give us some pause; at the very least, the reader is expected to exhibit skepticism towards the narrator's claims, including how pleasant he finds life in his hole underground.

The persistence of consciousness, however, enables discourse between the two worlds, between above and below. The material hardships and surreal tensions constitutive of the black urban experience, made strikingly clear in the underworld, can be recorded, sent upward, and exposed. In allowing the invisible man to survive and narrate his predicament, Ellison's underground allows for a transmission of underworld revelation not afforded to Daniels. While the basement permits the invisible man to gain ownership of his story, he does not find autonomy and emancipation in a thorough spatial sense; there remains a fundamental incongruity between man and habitat. The invisible man's basement is brighter and more sanitary than a sewer, but it

is a far cry from the suburban home of Brown's comparisons, even if both function as forms of escapism. On a material level, the invisible man remains subjugated without basic necessities; any ownership of space he achieves is not within the physical confines of the city but in the abstract, textual spaces of history and storytelling.

Although he does not thrive in this space, he is able to survive, think, and write: he can tell the story of the underground. In the closing section that follows, this chapter argues instead that the invisible man's underground functions not as protective and comforting insulation but as ideal site for a racially and spatially situated narrative enterprise—the “view from below.”

### *3.6. Conclusion: Historiographical Elisions and the View from Below*

“Why did he choose to plunge into nothingness, into the void of faceless faces, of soundless voices, lying outside history?” the narrator asks after his close friend, Tod Clifton, is murdered by policemen near the end of the novel (Ellison, 439). Clifton lies outside of history because history is told by historians whose practice is frequently tethered to economies of value permeated by racial and economic convictions; the telling of history is mediated by its prioritization of “the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important,” making the cop who murders Clifton “his historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner” (Ellison, 439).

When the invisible man speaks of history, he refers to the racially particular history of urban development, displacement, state-sanctioned subjugation we have traced in this chapter. In closing we now consider the possibility of an African-American intervention into an urban historiography that has largely excluded their own materials and perspectives, a historiography which, in so doing, reverses or omits entirely the processes that engender urban poverty and

lowliness. More concretely, given the limitations placed on a people whose access to the written word was heavily regulated and repressed for centuries, African-American historiography faces a material challenge at the level of the historian's primary materials: the archive. Black historiographers must therefore grapple with the fact that, as John Ernest writes in *Emancipation Historiography* (2004), "much of their history was excluded from or deformed in the official records that served as historical evidence," just as Clifton's death causes Ellison's narrator to realize (6).

Eric Sundquist suggests that *Invisible Man* be read as "a reconstruction of African-American history," a text situated in a wider black critique of American historiography emphasizing exclusion, omissions, and methodological limitations of the archive (27). As Maghan Keita writes in *Race and the Writing of History* (2000), the practice of Western historiography became compromised as soon as it operated on and reproduced a "scientific and specifically biological nexus," including "degeneracy theory, phrenology, craniology, eugenics, and social Darwinism," as a racially oppressive episteme in the nineteenth century (18). James Carson's *The Columbian Covenant: Race and the Writing of American History* (2014) similarly implicates American historiography in ideology, tracing its reliance on "covenantal thinking," an exclusionary set of colonial and theological principles wherein the racialized Other lives "outside of the covenant God had made for His chosen children" (11). American covenantal thinking therefore aligns with Keita's notion of an "epistemology of blackness," wherein blackness is defined only as negation, as that which is excluded from a positive definition of salvation—a definition which, thus narrowly defined, serves to filter which narratives surface historically and how they surface (10). Indeed, blackness as negation arises as one definition of invisibility in *Invisible Man*; as one of the veterans from the Golden Day states, the African-American subject

is “invisible, a walking personification of the Negative” (Ellison, 94). Here, black invisibility is the negation of white visibility, a default state of which the underworld subject is deprived, and which his deprivation defines by contradistinction. The reader will recall from the beginning of this chapter that the Greco-Roman underworld was also primarily conceived “in terms of negation” (Albinus, 67).

In this vein, Achille Mbembe therefore raises a question central to this field: “How could one write history in the absence of the kinds of traces that serve as sources for historiographical fact?” (28). Given the general agreement among African-American historians that such a history faces a number of serious ideological and methodological difficulties due to its situated and repressed past, and that the primary goal of African-American history is to offer a reparative reading, corrective, or intervention, from what site must this counternarrative emerge?<sup>65</sup> In light of these forces, how may the black urbanite best position him or herself to avoid being swept away, like so many bits of detritus, by “the backwash of history” (Ellison, 375)?

Here we arrive at a crossroads between African-American historiography, slumming literature, urban planning, and underworld fiction. As previously noted, the operative principle in slumming literature is exposure: the guide leads his readers, safely insulated by barriers of language, space, and class, into the nether regions of the industrial landscape, exposing them to debased and sordid realities whose very appeal is their perceived unreality. The disparity between this “other” reality and the tourist’s imbues the slum with an otherworldly quality; this perceived foreignness then allows the slum to transform into a form of entertainment,

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<sup>65</sup> In *African-American History Reconsidered* (2010), Pero Gaglo Dagbovie deems black history a “corrective supplement to mainstream U.S. history” (18). Similarly, Manning Marable’s *Living Black History* (2011) considers its primary function a corrective to or intervention in “the master narrative of American history” (14). In *Liberation Historiography* (2004), John Ernest goes as far as to say that this “intervention itself is African-American history” (9).

nonfictional yet nevertheless divorced from reality—while the slum tourist eventually returns to his or her above ground abode, the slum dweller does not. Since the slum tour, in making the unknown known, excavates submerged knowledge that may be put to disciplinary use, underworld scholars have argued that this exposes the district to shallow voyeurism and exploitation in lieu of historical understanding. In *Queering the Underworld* (2007), Scott Herring writes that such exposure “enables readers to become participant-observers in a disciplinary genre,” that slum tourism ultimately codifies and regulates the underworld specifically “through the act of closely reading it” and making it knowable (Herring, 7).

By divulging the details of hidden geographies, then, slumming literature allowed them to be contained conceptually. Exposure is therefore not inherently benevolent but, depending on the form that encases it, may be ambiguous or even counterproductive. By depicting impoverished neighborhoods as surreal and otherworldly, slumming literature afforded visibility to slums but often turned degradation into spectacle. It allowed engagement across barriers of class and race, but on uneven terms, as the slum tourist had luxuries the slum dweller did not: namely, the social mobility in electing to enter (and depart from) the slum, as well as the free time to pursue such an activity in the first place. At its best, slumming countered what Michael Thompson calls a “conspiracy of blindness” towards waste, applied to stigmatized bodies and spaces in the wider cultural nexus of waste aversion (4). At its worst, its effects on the public imaginary existed at odds with its ostensible aims. While authors of slumming literature redirected the collectively averted gazes of a city towards its neglected back alleys, the manner in which they were redirected was frequently not neutral but ideologically loaded. By describing the sordid yet alluring practices of prostitution, gambling, drug use, but encouraging resistance to temptation,

slumming literature often reinforced white middle-class Christian values along a verticalized axis of morality.

Recall too the irrationality of urban spatial logic previously enumerated—namely, that cities are zoned to contain surplus populations in sectors that reinscribe their spatial and material subjugation, while simultaneously presenting them as neutral containers, effectively shifting the opprobrium from urban planning systems to individual sites and occupants. Given this knowledge, perhaps the most troubling disciplinary facet of slumming literature is the use of essentializing language that represents the behavioral traits and practices of the lower classes as intrinsic rather than contingent and erasing their histories as a result. When Jacob Riis calls the other half “tramps,” infested with “moral contagion,” for instance, he ahistorically naturalizes the conditions of their squalor even as he calls for its civic reform (6, 166).

As we have seen, urban planning develops in the decades in subsequent decades as a rationalized discipline drawing upon the spatial hierarchies resulting from slumming literature and other fledgling urban genres and practices. Its ultimate goals—to manage problems of urban concentration and property devaluation—rest upon and work towards a utopian ideal of a knowable, organized, efficient, and lucrative city. The murkier areas of the city must be exposed, classified, and re-structured around a grid that best allows for the appraisal and circulation of citizens and commodities. As with the broader corpus of waste-excavating fiction to which it belongs, underworld fiction also appears to operate through a logic of exposure, presenting the reader with the full life-cycle of objects, subjects, or places, such as the state of the commodity after its market value is extricated, or the state of the slum between the acts—after one tour is complete, and before another has begun.

Given the overlap of narrative purposes entwined in the nexus of these histories, underworld fiction must grapple to some degree with the question of legibility—how does the chronicler of a submerged space expose the history of those lived experiences without folding them into a colonialist narrative of sensationalist exploitation? Additionally, can underworld fiction avoid unwittingly participating in a Foucauldian form of discipline, wherein obscured spaces and bodies are made legible in order to comport to a regulatory taxonomy?

Exposure is necessary for historiographical intervention, but we have seen that exposure has also historically reproduced facets of the history it seeks to counter. The fates of Wright's and Ellison's protagonists also demonstrate that the recognition and understanding that visibility potentially affords may also result in vulnerability and misuse. When Fred Daniels emerges from the sewer in "The Man Who Lived Underground," his exposure to the policemen leads directly to his subsequent murder and disposal. When the narrator of *Invisible Man* becomes the orator and chief spokesman of the Harlem district of the Marxist organization the Brotherhood, he becomes a public figure who is, for the first time, strikingly visible, but whose visibility allows him to be co-opted and manipulated by their political agenda.

It is therefore highly tempting to contend, as both Herring and Heise do in their studies, that Wright's and Ellison's texts *refuse* the genre's inherited purpose of exposure, luring the slum tourist reader with a promise of legibility that is ultimately frustrated. The cartographic exercises of the text, on this reading, prove self-defeating; in the final analysis, the author provides the reader with a nonfunctioning or incorrectly functioning map.

We observe the impulse to avoid rather than confront history in the narrator's mixed ruminations on historical visibility in *Invisible Man*, which *re-orient*s rather than intentionally *disorganizes* the map. The narrator considers Clifton's anonymous, resigned death as an

alternative response to the forces which have concealed, and will continue to conceal, the realities of Harlem. Perhaps, he thinks, “sometimes a man *has* to plunge outside history”—that, if to exist within history is to be co-opted by the stratagems of its more self-serving practitioners, “running and dodging the forces of history” is tactically preferable to “making a dominating stand” (Ellison, 377, 441). Here, evasion and intervention are both posited as potential countermeasures. The tension between these tactics manifests in the ambiguity of the unnamed narrator’s ultimate subterranean position—at the close of the text, he remains in his cellar, yet undecided as to whether or not he will eventually emerge. Trepidatious about both evasion and intervention, the narrator takes a hybrid approach—secluding himself underground, he literalizes his subordination and achieves a grimly epiphanic state, while simultaneously telling both his and Clifton’s story through the narrative that comprises the text.

Rather than create anti-cartographic maps that ultimately mystify what they promise to expose, Wright and Ellison invert the narrative trajectory and site that slum tourism employs, drawing the map from and not to the underground. This map, like the writing of history, takes the form of a narrative; in this vein, Brown contends that *Invisible Man* demonstrates that “narrative was as crucial a terrain for thinking through the spatial upheavals of the 1950s as Federal Housing Administration handbooks or racial covenants,” the fictional but equally necessary corollary to these primary documents (179). The perspective of *Invisible Man* is Ellison’s response to the troubled notion of a counterhistory—of how to best channel the “voice of invisibility issued from deep within our complex American underground” (Ellison, xviii). Direction and perspective are paramount; it is from and not into the underground that such a voice must originate. “The counterhistory that is born of the story of race struggle will of course speak *from* the side that is in darkness, from *within* the shadows” writes Foucault (70, emphases

added). Such a counterhistory must be taken on its own terms, divulged from its particular standpoint “within the shadows,” to evade co-optation by the dominant history’s methods, assumptions, or voyeuristic side effects.

If the official version at the top of the vertical axis is distorted, manipulated, or absent entirely, it is thus to the unofficial versions, along the lower strata of the axis, which African-American historians must turn. In “A New Interpretation for Negro History” (1937), historian Lawrence D. Reddick called for just such a history: “In observing the black men themselves, the historian may become more penetrating if he turns away a little more from the articulate professional classes to the welfare, feelings and thoughts of the common folk—the domestic servants, the tenant farmers, the dark men on the city streets” (27). In keeping with Reddick’s 1937 essay, Robin D. G. Kelley’s *Race Rebels* (1994) explicitly calls for a “black history from way, way below” (13). To Sundquist’s suggestion that Ellison’s novel be read as a “reconstruction of African-American history,” then, it must be added that it is a *history from below*—one attending to, and produced by, the “dark men” on, and beneath, the city streets.

Aside from the spatialization of racial and socioeconomic hierarchy along a vertical axis, what else does the view from below imply and allow? Part of the answer may be found in the primary and primal materials of the poetic cartographies charted by this literature: namely, the stinking sewage and offal beneath the city as inescapable facet of midcentury black urban experience. Wright and Ellison are not slum tourists. Their narratives do not journey from privileged neighborhoods into downtrodden slums insulated by the promise of imminent escape; as has been noted, they open and close in underworlds of discarded subjects, objects, and spaces. Any tourism that takes place is of the rest of the city, not the slum. Both stories are divulged from representatives of the black underclass, and only depart from slums as momentary

reprieves. This inverts the slum-tourist paradigm, wherein the underworld is experienced as brief recreational sojourn bookended by privileged aboveground existence. The subterranean view, manifested in these structural devices and atmospheric effects, not only emerges from, but is speckled with, the waste matter of lowly spaces, replete with feces and corpses.

In his discussion of subjugated knowledges, Foucault names a variety of “knowledges from below,” both in terms of “historical contents that have been buried” as well as “hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity,” including the knowledges of psychiatric patients and delinquents (7). For Foucault, then, the lowly comes to mean deviant systems of thought not tethered to dominant or rational models; crucially, such systems are locally, historically, and spatially situated, responsive to the amorphous positioning of general, commonsensical, ahistorical platitudes. In this way, the view from below speaks to a racially and spatially positioned standpoint epistemology. As noted in our analysis of Wright, such a view does not simply represent a dirt-filled realism, but a purgatorial hybridity of above and below that is otherworldly. In its dislocation, liminality, and surreality, this perspective constitutes a hallucinatory site of commingling and contradictory modes of perception as historically produced facets of black subjectivity.

The narratives of descent in post-Harlem Renaissance underworld fiction therefore paradoxically conceal the black body in order to reveal an always-already-existent subordination and record and exhume that subordination in language. When jettisoned from the narrative above ground, the invisible man irreverently tells his story from below, a story that also lies within: “I’d make invisibility felt if not seen, and they’d learn that it could be as polluting as a decaying body, or a piece of bad meat in a stew” (Ellison, 509). The narrator imagines his narrative itself as a form of material pollution, one that contaminates the hygienic body politic, making its

inhabitants “gag on what they refused to see” as its nauseating scent drifts upward (Ellison, 508). When waste-averse culture myopically averts its gaze from unpleasant truths, a visceral and disturbing form of waste, material and linguistic, arises as an aesthetically and politically viable countermeasure. Outside the established parameters of historiographical selection, this unrecorded excess, squeezed out of a system of purported unity, returns to pollute, occupy, and haunt its borders.

The novel’s ultimate position may be encapsulated by the invisible man’s statement that, although “you curse and you swear to make them recognize you... alas, it’s seldom successful” (Ellison, 4). Seldom is preferable to never, and the contents of the novel constitute a form of discourse between the two worlds. The spatial determinism exhibited in much of this body of literature, then, is qualified somewhat by the return of the racially repressed in narrative form. In the final analysis, Wright and Ellison’s texts serve as historical supplements that puncture the wholesome plenum of mid-century containment culture, the spatial manifestations and truncated history of which have been the focus of this chapter (Ghosn, 22; Alworth, 54). In this way, the underworld “is not the space of the irredeemable Other,” but instead a “contested terrain where citizen-subjects try to take possession of their own history and spaces, and ownership of their representations in the wider cultural arena” (Heise, 11). To that end, these African-American narratives of descent serve as interventions in selective historiographies and attempt to bring subjugated knowledges to the light of day. In Ellison’s words, “a slum like Harlem isn’t just a place of decay. It is also a form of historical and social memory.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ellison, Ralph. “Interview with John Corry.” *The New York Times*. Nov. 20, 1966.

## Chapter Four: “Disposable Bodies”

### *4.0. Introduction: Invisibility and the Setting/Character Boundary*

“I have come to New York because it is the most forlorn of places, the most abject. The brokenness is everywhere, the disarray is universal. You have only to open your eyes to see it. The broken people, the broken things, the broken thoughts. The whole city is a junk heap.”

— Paul Auster, *City of Glass* (1985)

In this passage from *City of Glass*, Peter Stillman Sr. explains his motivations to writer-turned-detective Daniel Quinn. Quinn has been hired by Stillman’s daughter-in-law to follow and observe Stillman Sr., whom they believe poses a threat to his son. For many weeks, Quinn follows the elderly man as he perambulates through the city, collecting trash and debris in a bag. So that “things might not get out of control,” Quinn meticulously records every detail of Stillman’s behavior in his notebook (Auster, 63). The scrutiny with which he commits to his task cannot be overstated:

Not only did he take note of Stillman’s gestures, describe each object he selected or rejected for his bag, and keep an accurate timetable for all events, but he also set down with meticulous care an exact itinerary of Stillman’s divagations, noting each street he followed, each turn he made, and each pause that occurred. (Auster, 99)

Despite his fastidiousness, Quinn’s observations prove uninformative. Quinn’s notebook fails him, and things do indeed get out of control. When he reviews his notes in the evenings, they seem “utterly worthless to him”—detail after detail signifying nothing (Auster, 104). Confronting Stillman directly yields some information regarding his purpose, but before Quinn can press it further, Stillman suddenly vanishes from the city. The object of inquiry is lost; the case and the narrative are permanently disrupted.

Only when Stillman disappears does Quinn undergo an epiphany, albeit not the one he anticipated. His first day navigating the city without Stillman-as-object reveals a series of new perceptions. Since, “for the first time since he had bought the red notebook, what he wrote that day had nothing to do with the Stillman case,” Quinn observes “many things that day he had never noticed before” (Auster, 165, 162).

Notably, what Quinn begins to see is the homeless population of New York City:

Today, as never before: the tramps, the down-and-outs, the shopping-bag ladies, the drifters and drunks. They range from the merely destitute to the wretchedly broken. Wherever you turn, there they are, in good neighborhoods and bad... Many are drunks—but that term does not do justice to the devastation they embody. Hulks of despair, clothed in rags... Asleep in doorways, staggering insanely through traffic, collapsing on sidewalks—*they seem to be everywhere the moment you look for them.* (Auster, 165-167, emphasis added)

A number of elements are at play in this sudden, jarring twist. The first has to do with genre: *City of Glass* is generally considered an anti-detective novel in the “post-*nouveau roman*” tradition of French authors Alain Robbe-Grillet and Michel Butor, whose works undermined and subverted the paradigms of nineteenth-century detective fiction established by Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle.<sup>67</sup> Quinn fails to solve the mystery, as he becomes interested in the homeless instead, and winds up homeless himself before finally disappearing from the city and the narrative entirely. Within the framework of the mystery novel, the anti-detective teleological thrust of these developments is clear: the job of the detective is to discover, through reason, deduction, and attention to detail, the unifying narrative principle that will filter the confounding

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<sup>67</sup> In *The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination* (1972), William V. Spanos coins the term “anti-detective story” to describe narratives that “evoke the impulse to detect” only to “violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime” (154). Conversely, such texts have been deemed “post-*nouveau roman*” (Sirvent, 157) or “metaphysical detective stories” (Holquist, 171; Merivale and Sweeney, 2).

“morass of objects” in order to “make sense of them” (Auster, 15). Despite his best efforts, Quinn unambiguously fails in this regard. So does the novel.

The stakes here greatly exceed genre conventions, however, and even literary concerns as a whole. Quinn’s dilemma problematizes a crucial characteristic of detective fiction, which is also a characteristic pertinent to literary realism, investigative journalism, and human perception: what if the foundational principles underpinning the investigation are limited, flawed, or altogether incorrect? Given that the detective—like the writer, like the urbanite—must narrow his or her focus in the face of an overwhelming array of data in order to delineate something coherent, there will always be, as a corollary, a large range of data excluded from the analysis.

Who is foregrounded and backgrounded? What is central and what is peripheral? As preconditions for the parameters of information present, these broad questions determine, at bottom, the contours of any narrative, fictional or otherwise. The relationship between foreground and background, examined in our analyses of ephemera, bodily fluids, and waste ambiances in DeLillo, Burroughs, and Wright in the last three chapters respectively, now comes to the fore once more.<sup>68</sup> In *City of Glass*, the homeless shift from background to foreground, or, in a framework derived from David Alworth, from setting to character. In *Site Reading* (2016), Alworth analyzes the unstable boundary between character and setting in his readings of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” (1840) and James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922); the conventional distinction between these narrative components, Alworth argues,

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<sup>68</sup> Chapter One examined the operations by which trash moved from local (domestic and urban) to remote (peri-urban landfill) sites, as well as more complex processes wherein newspaper and magazine ephemera moved in and out of waste-states as they moved between foreground and background positions. Chapter Two analyzed how excretory fiction foregrounds the repellant behaviors and substances backgrounded by wartime propaganda, biological denial, and infrastructural developments in sanitation. Chapter Three considered the aesthetic tactics Wright employs to mutate foreground and background entirely into a dense ambience of waste wherein both categories interpenetrate.

runs into trouble not only because nonhuman objects can assume the role of characters.... and because setting can span both human interiority and the external object world (as in *Ulysses*) but also because human figures (walk-ons, extras, crowds, masses) can be elements of setting—too minor, relative to the plot and its protagonist, to even warrant the designation *minor character*. (Alworth, 17, emphasis original)

What ultimately distinguishes between the two, he continues, is “the sustained attention of a narrator” (Alworth, 18). It is the narrator’s process of selection that “produces an antagonist... for our protagonist,” and “distinguishes them both from the urban mass” (Alworth, 18).<sup>69</sup>

Without sustained attention, the overwhelming data of a crowd—like a landfill, a cesspool, or a slum—dissolves into a homogenous, undifferentiated conglomeration.

*City of Glass* plays with this phenomenon in order to underscore the fluidity of storytelling components and their relationship to value systems that in turn determine the assignment of roles within a narrative economy. At the onset, Quinn is the protagonist, Stillman the antagonist, the homeless the urban backdrop. When the antagonist is removed later in the story, the protagonist’s perceptual filtration system is removed as well. Consequently, the sustained attention of the protagonist now focalizes what was formerly a semi-visible backdrop—and, with that, the mimetic, thematic, and epistemological boundaries of the story shift. The focus moves from what Quinn is attempting to detect to what he has systematically ignored in order to hold his apparatus of detection intact, and what this indicates about the role that priorities and preconceptions serve in mediating perceptions.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> In *The Other Paris* (2015), Luc Sante similarly describes a “few from the crowd from an appropriate distance” that makes “the population a single pulsating mass” (72).

<sup>70</sup> Another major shift occurs when Quinn, like Stillman before him, also disappears, “melt[ing] into the walls of the city” (Auster, 178). In an inversion of the homeless population which shifted previously from background to foreground, Quinn, now homeless, moves in the opposite direction as he loses his privileged status as an object worthy of attention.

What is excluded from such lines of inquiry, which are always informed by cultural systems of value regarding what is and is not worthy of sustained attention, is nothing other than waste—in this case, social waste in the form of unsheltered New Yorkers. By fixating so resolutely on the individual node of the mystery, Quinn fails to see the operations of the larger social network exceeding his scope. Quinn does not stand alone in this regard; the homeless population, as an underclass, have always struggled for visibility against the urban apathy that effectively backgrounds them. As we will see, assumptions embedded into the monolithic archetype of “the homeless”—an archetype Yamashita and Kennedy challenge—play a fundamental role in this process.

Auster’s novel helpfully encapsulates several themes found in the fiction of homelessness into which this chapter inquires: wasted subjects and objects, permeable and co-constitutive, bound together in urban entropy (“the broken people, the broken things”); the tension and violence enacted by individualist versus collectivist conceptions of American culture (can one see the plural when so resolutely focused on the singular?); the simultaneous vulnerability and invisibility of the homeless, their literal and figurative proximity to waste, and the question of the mode and site of their media representation. *City of Glass* therefore serves as an important intertext for this chapter’s primary texts, *Tropic of Orange* (1997) and *Ironweed* (1983), both of which foreground unsheltered subjects cast as social trash, albeit in largely dissimilar fashions.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The present question of attention and invisibility forms the basis of the first section, wherein we establish the rhetorical and ideological associations between economically vulnerable populations, failed capitalists, background noise, and waste. This section revisits the problem of underworld exposure explored in Chapter Three, equally

applicable here, and continues the overarching question posed throughout the dissertation: what roles does twentieth-century American fiction play in recuperating waste?

The second section details the history of homelessness in the United States, providing an overview of its earlier iterations and developments before concentrating on the economic conditions of the two eras wherein homelessness statistically peaked over the last century: the Great Depression (in which *Ironweed* takes place) and the late twentieth-century age of neoliberalism (in which *Tropic of Orange* takes place, and in which both novels were written). The third section analyzes the depiction of homelessness in Yamashita's novel, focusing on the question of their representation in mainstream media and their relationship to the Interstate Highway System that physically dispossesses them and culturally exacerbates urban alienation and apathy. In contrast to the top-down perspective of accounts like "Seattle is Dying," *Tropic of Orange* allows its unsheltered characters to occupy radio and television broadcasts and define the contours of their own narratives.

The fourth and final section of the chapter explores *Ironweed*'s complex treatment of the subject matter, including its prevalent themes of namelessness, precariousness, camaraderie, and finally non-instrumental or apolitical approaches to homelessness. Whereas *Tropic of Orange* engages with the historical and political causes of homelessness, *Ironweed* undertakes a different approach, opting instead to capture the abstract and qualitative experience of homelessness as a kind of purgatory, a living death; it surveys various modes through which the unsheltered can accede to or resist this degraded form of existence through the escapism of death or the formation of a community and history. The chapter closes with an analysis of Kennedy's efforts to recast the concept of homelessness entirely, to read its characters in primary rather than

secondary terms, and to acknowledge the limits of narration in foregrounding and recuperating the lowly.

#### *4.1. Homelessness as “Rot and Filth,” or, Social Waste*

“For many of us, the homeless are shit, and our policies toward them, disgust and horror, our wish to be rid of them—all of this has hidden in it, close to its heart, our feelings about excrement.”

—Peter Marin, “Helping and Hating the Homeless: The Struggle at the Margins in America” (*Harper’s Magazine*, 1987)

The city of Seattle in 2019 is, according to a major local television network, a “beautiful jewel that has been violated” (Johnson). The homeless, with their various brands of “rot and filth,” have been left unchecked and thus “allowed to fester,” “pollut[ing] our parks and neighborhoods” by making them dangerous, diseased, and unusable (Johnson). Such is the rhetorical thrust of “Seattle is Dying,” a one-hour news report aired by KOMO-TV on March 16th, 2019. The special report, hosted by anchor Eric Johnson, laments the increased presence of the homeless in the city. For Johnson and his team, the homeless are visible—visibly threatening to the public, and, specifically, the middle-class nuclear family. “We’ve turned over our city to those who would steal from us and addict our children,” says Johnson; as such, parents “can no longer take their children into the public parks they pay for.” The program ends with a call to action: in order to protect tax-paying families, Seattle’s unsheltered residents should be relocated to a correctional facility on nearby McNeil Island, alongside sex offenders and others deemed unsuitable for civic life.

This report pertains to the present chapter in several ways: historical, etymological, thematic. The conditions of economic inequality addressed in our primary texts, written in the 1980s and 1990s, have worsened dramatically in the years bridging the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>71</sup> As with actual trash, the problem of “social trash” continues to grow in size and severity. Responses to the issue, such as “Seattle is Dying,” have taken on an increasingly panicked, apocalyptic tone.

Seattle also plays an important role in the development of the terminology surrounding itinerants and homeless urbanites, an etymological history explored further in the next section of this chapter. The term “skid row”—most commonly associated with the eponymous neighborhood in Downtown Los Angeles notorious for its sizable homeless population, but which more broadly refers to the major homeless region of any city—originated in Seattle in the late nineteenth century:

The name derives from the street in Seattle that paralleled the log chute, or “skid,” that the lumberjacks used to slide their cuttings down to the sawmill below on the waterfront of the Puget Sound. In time the area around the “skid” became characterized by its shanties, cheap rooming houses, and saloons. Somehow, in the cant of homeless men, the “road” became a “row,” and skid row became a synonym for the bottom rung of the urban social ladder. (Miller, 80)

“Seattle is Dying” also employs, quite classically, the contamination rhetoric we’ve seen mobilized for regulatory and discriminatory ends throughout this dissertation, most notably against the menstrual functions of women (Chapter Two), as well as African-Americans and other financially vulnerable populations in Harlem (Chapter Three). Then and now, underprivileged populations have been and are pathologized and scapegoated: by placing

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<sup>71</sup> In 1980, the top fifth, or twenty percent, of Americans made 40.6% of the nation’s wealth (Brouwer, 4). As of 2016, the top one percentile owns 40% of the nation’s wealth; economists agree that the trend is unambiguously linear over the last forty years (Zucman, 2).

opprobrium on individuals that have purportedly allowed themselves to devolve into the status of waste due to their own deficiencies, difficult, historical questions of structural socioeconomic inequity that engender poverty can be avoided or dismissed. Within the narrative frameworks of social and urban contamination, economic underclasses are, at best, a largely homogenous urban backdrop akin to Alworth's definition of setting; if brought into the status of character, they are positioned as antagonists, reserving the designation of protagonist for the more productive and affluent.

The report's emphasis on procreation and the familial is, similarly, an enduring tactic for denigrating the social value of the lower classes. Recall that, in *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (1999), Samuel Delany criticizes the language of the "unsafe" utilized to spur urban redevelopment, arguing that what underlies and motivates this perceived threat is the presence of deviant urban subjects who fail "to conform to the ideal bourgeois marriage" (122).

Elsewhere in queer theory, Lee Edelman supplements Delany in elucidating the psychological and cultural structures underpinning discussions over safety and danger, purity and filth. In *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004), Edelman claims that the dominant socioeconomic group (the heteronormative bourgeoisie) invokes the abstract figure of "the Child" to enforce reproductive, natalist standards, and regulate those who do not meet them. Because, in the discourse of "family values" and "fighting for the children," the innocence of the Child is privileged over and above other concepts and social groups, these concepts are constituted in such a manner so as to regulate a subjectivity dedicated to what Edelman deems "reproductive futurity."

Given that the cult of the Child "serves to regulate political discourse—to prescribe what will count as political discourse," and because living subjects must sacrifice endeavors situated

in the present for the sake of the future, the result is that “the rights ‘real’ citizens are allowed” are prohibited (Edelman, 11). Thus, the logic of futurity precludes or at minimum renders culturally illegible personal and social formations that do not cohere to its hierarchy—i.e. anything and anyone that is not reproduction-oriented in the long term. Seen in this way, it follows naturally that public parks belong to those who make money, make children, and pay taxes. The parallels between reproductive futurity and industrial rationalization—anti-waste systems generating waste, organic and inorganic—are clear.

Hierarchies of value and the inquiries they mediate are not homogenous across a nation, however, and here we encounter an issue distinct from the one Daniel Quinn faces in *City of Glass*. “Seattle is Dying” does not fall into the same trap as Auster’s protagonist, for whom the homeless are literally and figuratively invisible. For reporter Eric Johnson and his production team, the homeless are highly and irksomely visible, focalized as the object of study. While they are foregrounded, however, they are far from the protagonists of the narrative. That designation is reserved for the producers of (re)productive citizens who are employed, fertile, and clean. The purity of Seattle—once a “beautiful jewel,” now an unsightly wasteland—is troubled by its unproductive underclass, who have amassed in such quantities so as to emerge intrusively from the background.

As Edelman suggests in another context, this amounts to a conflict of rights, itself predicated on conflicting conceptions of citizenship and belonging. Middle-class Seattleites are frustrated that their right to enjoy public infrastructure is violated. The homeless, who, in some cases, do not contribute to the funds that generate and maintain public spaces—and worse, literally and figuratively dirty them—seemingly have, from this standpoint, less of a right to those spaces.

Herein lies again the dangers of visibility and exposure enumerated in the preceding chapter on post-Harlem Renaissance underworld fiction. When members of vulnerable populations gain visibility, they also risk increased vulnerability: in this case, the danger of being co-opted into the narrative of a ruling, competing class, with the conceptual and material consequences that entails. Recall that such visibility entails, for critical race theorists Lisa Marie Cacho and Achille Mbembe, subjugation into a regulatory taxonomy that, in illuminating the underworld and identifying its citizens, can rescind value at the level of life and death. Wright and Ellison respond with what we termed the “view from below,” a subterranean, dualistic perspective interfused with dirt and residual perceptions of the world aboveground.

How do Yamashita and Kennedy, the authors this chapter considers, respond? The question of representation figures prominently in our forthcoming analyses of *Tropic of Orange* and *Ironweed*, both of which explicitly and implicitly consider the viewpoints from which their narratives of homelessness emerge. In what (albeit anachronistically) appears as a direct rebuttal to the KOMO-TV special, Yamashita’s homeless characters report their own stories on local television networks, seizing the means of narration and attaining the status of characters by forcing sustained attention. In *Ironweed*, Kennedy’s narrator and protagonist detail the underhistories of the novel’s many unsheltered characters, widening the parameters of the reader’s comprehension of their lives, circumstances, and identity, while also explicitly disallowing easy categorizations and assumptions that tether or place them in or from any single viewpoint.

Before we turn to our primary texts, however, we must further unpack the concept of social waste itself, of which homeless populations form one subcategory. At the broadest level, “social waste” refers to any individual subject or group of subjects consigned to the status of

waste. As with trash and bodily fluids, the boundaries are fluid and porous; as such, the account that follows does not seek to isolate social waste conceptually or ontologically but to winnow its parameters such that it may be clearly employed throughout the chapter.

The tropes commonly associated with social waste, and which play important roles in our primary texts, include a lack of sanctioned economic productivity, proximity to and association with trash and dirt, and a vexing, superfluous public presence.

Drawing heavily from and building upon definitions and accounts of waste from preceding chapters, while highlighting their extension to social networks, the framework in this chapter revisits: the rationalization of the workplace and the worker to maximize production and minimize waste; the American waste-averse ideal wherein trash, in all its incarnations, should be banished from sight, site, and consciousness; the relationship between waste and space, including the latter's production of the former as an outlier, and the former's permeability into the latter as an ambience; as well as the hierarchical and regulatory facets and usage of disgust to deny biological realities, delineate public and private spaces, and dehumanize undesirable populations.

As stated in the introduction, the dissertation is separated into two halves: those dealing with literal trash and excretion (Chapters One and Two), and those dealing with the figurative and rhetorical application of waste aversion onto spaces and people (Chapters Three and Four). We see now that this dichotomy is false in an important sense. As we have observed, the literal applied to the figurative returns to the literal in a hermeneutic circle: spaces and subjects categorized as waste subsequently become physically exposed to and associated with waste, transforming into underworlds and the dirty, impoverished residents they enclose. Despite focalizing different texts and time periods, Chapters Three and Four are largely complementary, dialectical approaches to similar issues within the context of twentieth-century American

underworlds. Although the former privileges space and the latter the subjects of that space, we have established that the two intertwine in a double helix wherein space and subject co-constitute one another within intertwined value systems that designate high and low.

As with other iterations of waste, “social waste,” as an essentially performative and enunciative category, can refer to anyone who has been deemed wasteful or waste-like in any epoch by any speaker. In *The Poetics of Waste* (2014), Christopher Schmidt notes the “metaphorically capacious” parameters of waste, which includes “garbage, shit, sexual excess, economic surplus, unproductive labor, idleness, and aesthetic imbalance” (16). Moreover, as is the case with any social designation, the utterance discloses information regarding the speaker as much as the object of speech. One such example has been enumerated thus far: the view of the homeless as dirty, lazy obstructions to the middle-class family emerges from productivist and natalist perspectives that valorize production of commodities and bodies.

Indeed, unemployment or an otherwise perceived lack of productivity is frequently cited as emblemizing social refuse. In *The Ethics of Waste* (2005), Gay Hawkins examines the application of productivist rhetoric to laborers, noting that “to be unproductive or to excessively expend is a sign of poor discipline and irresponsible conduct” that often leads to disapprobation in the form of waste-averse terminology (xviii). In an 1878 article from the nineteenth-century American periodical *The Century*, one writer makes the case plain: he who counts himself “permanently out of the productive and self-supporting forces of society” also “counts himself out of his rights.”<sup>72</sup> From the productivist viewpoint, wasting one’s capacity as a laborer amounts to wasting one’s social and even existential value as a human agent, and so too the rights and protections afforded therein.

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<sup>72</sup> “Once More the Tramp.” *The Century: A Popular Quarterly*, Vol. 15: 883. Scribner & Company, 1878.

Seen through the lens of rationalized labor, it follows that the economically destitute are the prime targets of such pejoratives—the homeless, as the most visible and vulnerable manifestations of poverty, especially so. Homelessness and unemployment, frequently although not necessarily entwined,<sup>73</sup> prove doubly problematic for both capitalist production *and* consumption: not only do the unemployed fail to perform the labor through which commodities are produced, they also lack the capital through which to purchase them. In *Consumerism, Waste, and Re-Use in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (2016), Rachel Dini articulates the dually adverse effects of the unemployed for both ends of capitalism. Their lack of employment makes them “flawed producers,” while their lack of income also makes them “flawed consumers,” unable to purchase goods and contribute to the economic ecosystem (Dini, 11).

Largely unassimilable into a system dictated by “marketplace triumphalism,” the lower classes in general, and the homeless in particular, thus comprise an unabsorbable remainder, a surplus population (Blau, 27). In *Gold By The Inch* (1998), Lawrence Chua defines waste in precisely these terms: “a new understanding of waste: what cannot be consumed. What cannot contribute to consumption” (82). In *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (2003), Zygmunt Bauman focalizes this category, which he terms “human waste” or “wasted humans” (and which this dissertation terms “social waste” and “disposable bodies”) in the age of neoliberalism (5). In Bauman’s account, the phenomenon of social waste arises when segments of the population are considered “excessive” or “redundant,” inessential to the neoliberal project of “economic

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<sup>73</sup> That the homeless are necessarily unemployed is a common misconception predicated on the assumption that employment guarantees shelter. As homelessness historian Kenneth Kusmer writes in *Down and Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History* (2002), and as *Ironweed* demonstrates, homeless individuals “have usually been intermittently employed, often at low-paying ‘odd jobs’” (10). The trouble is that, for underpaid and exploited laborers, “obtaining employment does not prevent them from becoming homeless” (Aviles, 208). As Anna Lou Dehavenon reports, ethnographic studies since the 1970s have cited that the wide disparity between costs of living and income rates remain “the primary cause of hunger conditions and homelessness throughout the United States” (142).

progress” for the elite few (5). Dini similarly defines social waste as a surplus population, employing the term “remaindered humans” to describe those who are “cast out of the job market, or who actively resist being put to use” (2). In this context, whoever cannot or will not participate in the cycle of production and consumption forfeits their usefulness and so too their value to others.

The homeless—as a population whose surplus-status renders them unable to escape the public gaze, and who, unlike trash and excrement, have not been successfully incorporated into a comprehensive waste-management system—command attention. Because literal waste, in most cases, eludes attention, the case of homelessness serves as an outlier in this study. Homelessness as a *public* phenomenon is of particular interest here, as it speaks to themes taken up by Yamashita and Kennedy: the divestment from public spaces characterizing postwar urban renewal, the precariousness of existing almost completely in public space, and the association of public spaces with trashiness and danger. Stripped of the insulation of private property, the unsheltered residents are therefore emblematic of what homelessness scholar Joel Blau calls “public poverty” (15). This facet of their plight—the vulnerability of perpetual public scrutiny—led Mina Loy, in her unfinished novel *Insel* (1937), to refer to them as the “economically nude” (23).

The emphasis on viewpoint and visibility placed in this chapter aims to: firstly, highlight the vulnerability unsheltered individuals experience due to their visibly incongruous positions in public space; secondly, continue analyses of visuality in preceding chapters (wherein trash is banished from the home to landfills and exported to developing countries so that it is out of sight and site; wherein secretions within the body are not disgusting but excretions visibly moving beyond or between bodies are; wherein visibility conferred to the black underclass is both

necessary and dangerous), and, thirdly, reiterate the importance of perspective to the form and content of the literature of waste: each text considers the specific forms of archaeological knowledge that the temporal and spatial axes of the novel form can generate regarding waste and history, character and setting.

What historical developments inform the foregoing conceptions? In the next section, we identify the defining events and trends in the history of American homelessness over the last few centuries that culminate in the contemporary moment of late capitalism.

#### 4.2. *A Condensed History of American Homelessness*

As with each of the preceding chapters, our primary task is to uncover the literary-historical significance of American waste in a specific moment of the twentieth century while tracing the evolutions and iterations that inform that moment. After a brief summary of earlier manifestations of homelessness, unemployment, and vagrancy, our concentration shifts to the Great Depression (in which *Ironweed* is set) and finally to the development of advanced or late capitalism in the 1980s and 1990s (during which time Yamashita and Kennedy write their novels). Tracing these developments reveals the presence of a consistent cultural association between homelessness, criminality, and social death, major patterns of vagrant migration in and out of urban areas and public consciousness, transformations in divisions of public and private space in postwar infrastructure, and a pronounced intensification of the adverse economic conditions engendering homelessness in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

A methodological note before proceeding: there exist several competing definitions of homelessness within scholarship on the subject, most of which pertain to the parameters of who

does and does not qualify as homeless (Barak, 3; Kusmer, 4). One reason for this is that homelessness, much like waste, is not a static phenomenon: excepting the cases of chronic homelessness, individuals move in and out of homelessness over time, even over the course of a day or two. In *Ironweed*, for instance, Francis and Helen briefly find shelter in churches, hotels, flophouses, and the homes of friends before returning to the streets. Another difficulty is empirical: because U.S. census surveys are usually sent to household mailing addresses, there are major limitations regarding data collection for those who lack residences (Cunningham and Henry, 3).

Although we will make some use of statistics culled from these studies, the following definition, employed by sociologist Nels Anderson in the first U.S. census of the homeless in 1933, suits our predominantly qualitative methods: “a destitute man, woman or youth, either a resident in the community, who is without domicile at the time of enumeration. Such a person may have a home in another community, or relatives in the local community, but is for the time detached and will not or cannot return” (1). In order to deal with the fluidity and transience of the homeless condition, to this we interpolate: “who is without *steady* domicile at the time of enumeration.” With this amendment, Anderson’s definition proves particularly fruitful due to its emphasis on will: the central homeless figures in both *Tropic of Orange* and *Ironweed* are voluntarily homeless. Their families live in the same cities they occupy (Los Angeles and Albany, respectively), but although they *can* return, they *will* not.

Although the history of American homelessness begins in the seventeenth century, it was fourteenth-century England that instituted the first vagrancy laws that would serve as the earliest precursor for later United States policies (Barak, 5). Attending to this antecedent despite its historical differences demonstrates that homelessness, waste, and productivity were intertwined

far before the rationalization of industrial labor and the advent of hygienic discourse in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Following the onset of the Black Death that began the previous year, The Ordinance of Labourers 1349 sought to increase the English workforce by making “idleness” or unemployment illegal for those under sixty years old (Chambliss, 67). In an early echo of “Seattle is Dying,” this law, and those like it, operated on the “fear that peace, order, or public safety are threatened” by the unemployed, who were frequently homeless (Leisser, 123). Insofar as it transposes biological contagions onto the social body, this post-plague concern also mirrors the contamination anxiety that would arise in Harlem centuries later.

Another major English vagrancy policy is noteworthy, particularly with regards to the lasting relationship between *flânerie*, public space, and industrialization to which it responded. The Vagrancy Act of 1824, entitled “An Act for the Punishment of Idle and Disorderly Persons, and Rogues and Vagabonds,” criminalized begging, excessive loitering, and sleeping in public.<sup>74</sup> As Philip Joseph writes in “Homelessness and Criminality” (1996), this act responded to a “dramatic increase in vagrancy” as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, the onset of industrialization, and a swiftly rising population (79). As discussed in Chapter Three, similar developments in the U.S., particularly in New York City and other major metropolitan hubs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, would lead to the rise of urban planning in the early 1900s. As urban scholar Michel de Certeau writes, at its core, urban development responds to the

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<sup>74</sup> Between these five centuries in English history, at least two details are worth a curt gloss as legal and literary antecedents: Elizabethan England provided early examples of containment efforts against the wayward and destitute, and fictional depictions of the homeless, respectively. The first Houses of Correction, reformist institutions that enforced the principles of labor on the unemployed, were established under the Tudors and Elizabeth I in response to concerns for civic security (Timms, 12). In the realm of fiction, Elizabethan playwrights William Shakespeare and Thomas Dekker employed the trope of the “wandering lunatic,” an archetypal figure known as “Tom of Bedlam” (Cross, 27). Notably, *King Lear* (1605) features a minor vagrant character whom Cross considers an “emblem of suffering, poverty, displacement” (28). In response to his condition, Lear contemplates the other “poor naked wretches” of his kingdom, lamenting their “houseless heads and unfed sides” (*Lear* 3.4.28-30).

“question of managing a growth of human agglomeration”—a process not unlike waste management (93).

In colonial America, burgeoning settlements responded to itinerants by classifying them, assessing their value to the community, and incorporating or ejecting them accordingly.

Homelessness scholars Robert McNamara and Carrie Whitney write that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, support systems for the homeless separated them into “deserving” and “undeserving” categories: the former were deemed “respectable individuals falling on hard times,” while the latter were composed of “paupers, vagrants, and runaway slaves” (78). The undeserving were denied relief and placed in workhouses, almshouses, or family homes to work as indentured servants. The alternative, known as “warning out,” involved banishing the individuals from the settlement in question, as well as warning other settlements to do the same (Hopper and Baumohl, 43). Thus placed in “geopolitical limbo,” the banished existed in a state of permanent transience—human disjecta endlessly out of place (McNamara and Whitney, 78). We will return to the concept of homelessness as purgatory in our examination of *Ironweed*, whose protagonist appears permanently stuck “nowhere” (Kennedy, 178).

While homelessness in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was characterized primarily by transience, the nineteenth century became characterized instead by urban concentration. Technological advancement and economic hardship in nineteenth-century America increased the number and mobility of the country’s unsheltered population, as well as their place in the cultural imaginary. In his account of American homelessness, urban historian Kenneth Kusmer details these transformations at length. As in England, the onset of urbanization and industrial development in the 1820s greatly increased the number of homeless individuals in the United States. Due to the ascendance of mills and factories, the U.S. experienced both

substantial economic growth and downturns between the 1820s and the 1860s (Kusmer, 23). Two major recessions in 1817-1823 and 1837-1843 both resulted in increased homelessness (McNamara and Whitney, 79). Moreover, as factory systems implemented reduced wages for their laborers, periods of economic growth exacerbated, rather than relieved, poverty (Kusmer, 23).

Statistically, infrastructurally, spatially, and conceptually, the 1870s would prove the most significant decade in nineteenth-century American homelessness. Largely as a result of a depression that began in 1873, reported counts of vagrants tripled in major cities such as Boston, while vagrancy arrests grew by fifty percent in New York City (Kusmer, 38-39). Halted by the Civil War, railroad construction burgeoned during Reconstruction: between 1865 and 1880, trains increased in both length and variety, making it “easier for a man to stow himself away undetected” (Kusmer, 39). In tandem with adverse economic conditions, increased mobility allowed vagrants to conglomerate in urban centers to which they now had access.

As noted in each of the preceding chapters, the 1870s also brought the fields of bacteriology and criminology into cultural practice, which were quickly taken up by hygienic discourses and reformist efforts responding to increased poverty. During this time, poverty was frequently “connected with criminality, insanity, and other moral defects,” rather than socioeconomic conditions (McNamara and Whitney, 79). Religious charities, among the only groups to provide relief at the time, continued to employ the deserving/undeserving distinctions established in Colonial America: children, the elderly, and the sick received support, while unmarried mothers and abandoned wives, due to their violation of familial and gender duties, did not (Golden, 122).

Most pertinent to our analyses of waste, space, and urbanism, the 1870s also instantiated a spatial paradigm shift in national and industrial organization. Although the discipline of urban planning would not form until 1909, the 1870s generated an increased concentration of unsheltered urbanites in slums that diverged from the colonial paradigm. In *On the Fringe: The Dispossessed in America* (1991), social welfare scholar Henry Miller describes this transition: while “the early part of the century saw large numbers of transient individuals who were ignored and offered little assistance, the late nineteenth century homeless were gathered together to live in skid row areas” (61). The bodies ejected from communities in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early-nineteenth centuries therefore found a place, of sorts, in the skid rows of the late 1800s. No longer wholly in “geopolitical limbo,” the subjects of purgatory had made their passage into the underworld.

Thus clustered in the city in unprecedented numbers, homeless Americans of the late nineteenth-century became a visible presence in public space and consciousness. Due to the foregoing developments, as well as the emergence of the “tramp,” a “new, more aggressive type of homeless” that appeared at this time, homelessness “emerged as a national issue” (Kusmer, 3).

At the same time, a new body of terminology arose. In the colloquialisms of late nineteenth-century America, transients fell into a tripartite classification of hobos, bums, and tramps. While closely related and often used interchangeably, these terms exhibit distinct characteristics that spoke to and reinforced systems of value during this period. Although its origin remains unknown, “hobo” was the first to appear historically; the term referred to “early nineteenth-century itinerant workers who traveled to find labor as railroad builders, canal diggers, lumberjacks, and farm hands” (McNamara and Whitney, 80). Relative to the other two

major categories, the word “hobo” retained a largely positive connotation, given its association with hard work, wanderlust, and the excitement of life on the road.

Lower on the lexical hierarchy were “bums,” a term that emerged during the Civil War and gained more traction in the twentieth century. “Bum,” from “bummer,” was first used as a “term of derision against foraging soldiers” by English soldier James Burn in *Three Years Among the Working-Classes in the United States During the War* (1865). Unlike a hobo, a bum was primarily a scavenger rather than a laborer, and consequently commanded less respect. Shortly thereafter, Charles Loring Brace employed the term “bumming” to refer to the practice of sleeping outside in *The Dangerous Classes of New York* (1872). The term abounds in *Ironweed*, wherein characters frequently describe the process of procuring the material necessities for survival as being “on the bum.” As we will demonstrate, to be “on the bum” is to exist precariously and uncertainly in a state not unlike purgatory.

Worse still were “tramps,” who occupied the lowest rung on the latter of the lower classes. Originally derived in the seventeenth century from the Middle English equivalent of “trample,” it entered the American lexicon shortly after the Civil War (Barnhart). In his memoir *Hard Tack and Coffee: The Unwritten Story of Army Life* (1867), union soldier John Billings writes of small groups of soldiers separating from the main unit, going “off on a tramp” (237). While initially associated with vagabondism, the term increasingly became a pejorative referring to morally bankrupt and aggressive homeless individuals. After the spike in homelessness following the 1873 depression, the term “tramp” began to refer to those considered “lazy, dishonest, and menacing to ordered society” (Golden, 134). A newspaper article published in 1877 called tramps “leeches,” who, “in fastening themselves on the vitals of society” drained “its

life blood.”<sup>75</sup> Unlike the admirably productive hobo or neutrally scavenging bum, the tramp was an active, aggressive threat to the public—a pathological entity compromising and contaminating the healthy body politic, a malicious presence that threatened to trample upon them. Within the taxonomy of vagrants, the tramp most readily mapped onto the historically coterminous discourses of bacteriology and criminology that sidestepped socioeconomic questions in favor of essentializing moral deficiencies, a tactic which, as “Seattle is Dying” attests to, has proven enduring.

While urban concentration in skid row communities continued to grow in the 1910s and 1920s as a result of mechanized factory systems supplanting laborers and soldiers returning from the First World War, the Great Depression would greatly compound the issue. The infamous stock market crash of 1929 left one fourth of the country unemployed and caused a steep rise in homelessness; the 1933 U.S. Census cited 1.5 million homeless individuals at the time (Miller, 63; Rossi, 171). In 1933, the federal government acted in order to assist charities and local governments, who were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem: consequently, the Federal Emergency Relief Act housed 125,000 homeless citizens in its camps that year (Rossi, 176). As Peter Rossi notes in *Down and Out in America: The Origins of Homelessness* (1989), these homeless encampments were generally placed outside of towns so that the “unsightly conditions would not bother citizens” (177). In another through line of hygienic discourse and waste aversion, the deserving/undeserving distinction established in Colonial America was again retained in assessing individual need (McNamara and Whitney, 83).

In the 1930s, the sheer scope of the homelessness crisis briefly yielded national attention and infrastructural support, both of which diminished shortly thereafter. The Federal Transient

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<sup>75</sup> Servey, Roberta A. “Tramps.” *Democrat*. Nov. 15, 1877: 1.

Service of 1933, which helped connect the homeless to employment opportunities, was the first and last federal program of its kind (Kusmer, 193). After the U.S. entered World War II in 1941, homelessness and unemployment declined considerably (McNamara and Whitney, 85). Thus, Kusmer writes that, “as both social fact and cultural icon, the homeless receded from public consciousness after World War II,” and would “remain largely forgotten until the late 1970s” (12).

Indeed, a series of major transformations in the underlying causes of homelessness occurred in postwar America, particularly during and after the late 1970s. As in the 1870s and 1930s, the recessions of 1973-1975 and 1981-1982 once again increased the rates of homelessness and their media attention in the United States (Ralston, 181). Scholars of homelessness, following economists and social historians, draw a distinction between the state of homelessness before and after World War II, one that corresponds directly to the paradigm shift between industrial and postindustrial capitalism, also known as late capitalism, global capitalism, and neoliberalism. Exceeding the more localized and cyclical phenomena of economic growth and recessions, this broader shift in postwar economic conditions and policies underpins the development of municipal, national, and global economies alike.

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), David Harvey defines neoliberalism as the resurgence of *laissez-faire* principles of “private property rights, free markets, and free trade” implemented on a global scale, wherein the ostensibly public sector of government increasingly operates as the “institutional framework appropriate to such practices” (2). Although the concepts behind free market capitalism are not new, the technologies and practices of the last four decades used to implement them—including “unaccountable central banks” and “one-dollar-one vote international credit organizations” such as the International Monetary Fund

(IMF)—are (Nightingale, 265). Such decentralized forces have “achieved enormous powers over national governments, forcing them above all to cut back on spending, taxation, and regulation” (Nightingale, 266).

A significant factor in the neoliberal reconsolidation of financial resources can be traced back to Reagan-era tax reforms and the subsequent decrease in federal funds used for social services. Between 1960 and 1986, the rate of corporate taxation fell from 46 to 21 percent, while the maximum rate of taxation on upper-class Americans was cut from 70 to 28 percent (Barak, 65). In order to recuperate this tax deficit, the federal government made sizable cuts in education and social welfare, including food stamps and subsidized housing. Consequently, between 1981 and 1989, federal expenditure for affordable housing “declined by four-fifths,” from \$32 billion to \$6 billion, or from 183,000 low-income housing projects in 1980 to 20,000 in 1989 (Appelbaum, 4). At the same time that affordable housing production was halted, previously-existing structures were also destroyed in massive quantities for redevelopment. Between 1973 and 1983, real estate development projects demolished 4.5 million low-income housing units across the country (McNamara and Whitney, 88). This represented a “major factor in the growth of homelessness and the surging demand for emergency shelter” during the inaugural decades of neoliberal policy (Donley and Wright, 45).

The subsequent affordable housing crisis in tandem with stagnating wages and the reduction of social welfare during and since the 1980s joined to sharply widen the gaps of income inequality and, as a corollary, increase rates of homelessness (Barak, 64; Blau, 25). As a result of the “defacto disinvestment” in the public sector and consolidation of “fiscal resources to corporate-defined redevelopment priorities,” the lower classes increasingly lost access to the basic material necessities of existence (Davis, 227). Consequently, Carl Nightingale argues,

neoliberal capitalism reversed “most of the relatively positive economic trends that materialized during the middle third of the twentieth century,” by barring the urban poor access from the “three most important economic pipelines that distribute income and wealth within advanced societies”: wage-work, government benefits, and homeownership (267).

The redistribution of financial resources under postindustrial capitalism manifests, importantly, in the reorganization of urban areas and the resources afforded their citizens. In what serves as our central line of inquiry in *Tropic of Orange*, midcentury urban renewal efforts would have lasting consequences on the conditions of, and perceptions towards, the urban poor and unsheltered. Whereas homelessness before the Civil War was characterized by interurban vagrancy, and homelessness from the 1870s through the 1950s was characterized by urban concentration in skid row areas, postwar homelessness became, as with the form of capitalism in which it was embedded, a more decentralized and elusive phenomenon.

The preceding chapter on urban planning and its manifestations in post-Harlem Renaissance fiction halted in the 1950s, just before urban renewal and highway construction began. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 initiated the development of a nationwide interstate system made possible by demolishing slums and other low-income areas. As such, the efforts to quarantine urban underworlds under the early urban planning paradigm were supplanted by the fissures and dispersals of postwar urban renewal. The rationalized city model contained its low-income districts within demarcated zones on the urban grid and regulated the real estate market accordingly and predictably; the neoliberal model redeveloped those zones and consequently redistributed their inhabitants less predictably. Thomas Heise describes this transition between the “Fordist city” to the “postindustrial or postmodern city”: whereas the former is structured as a “doughnut-shaped regional form” with an “inner-city ghetto trapped in

the center,” the latter exhibits “surreal juxtapositions of poverty and wealth replacing the center/periphery model” (24).

Postwar urban renewal conferred value to undervalued urban enclaves by repurposing them for those with higher socioeconomic value; under the post-Fordist model, spatial waste was no longer contained but recycled into prime, mobile real estate. As this dissertation has repeatedly demonstrated, however, any process of expenditure entails waste of some kind. In this case, citizens of skid row areas in major metropolitan hubs were displaced and dispersed throughout the city. Under the aegis of postwar urban redevelopment, the divisions between rich and poor zones became less predictably regimented in space: as Quinn discovers in *City of Glass*, the homeless are “everywhere” the moment you look for them. It was thus that the twentieth-century city “built according to all the rules of architecture” and urban planning principles became “suddenly shaken by a force that defies all calculation” (Kandinsky, 57).

How does the urban novelist represent such spaces, attendant with their “geographies of inequality, immiseration, and uneven development” that are newly “splintered and pluralized” in ways resistant to capture (Heise, 214-215)? This is precisely the project that *Tropic of Orange* undertakes.

### 4.3. “Lifestyles of the Poor and Forgotten”: Highways and Homelessness in *Tropic of Orange*

“Just plain homeless. Doin’ time without the crime.”

—Karen Tei Yamashita, *Tropic of Orange* (1997)

In this penultimate section, we place *Tropic of Orange* in conversation with the foregoing history of homelessness in the postwar United States. While both Yamashita’s and Kennedy’s novels foreground homeless characters, the former directly engages the historical and infrastructural developments surrounding the phenomenon, while the latter does not. Examining these novels in this order reveals two divergent literary tactics—political and apolitical, instrumental and intrinsic, respectively—through which their authors approach disposable bodies. If Yamashita’s method aligns with Acker’s, wherein waste is weaponized against the processes responsible for its creation and abandonment, Kennedy’s aligns more with DeLillo’s, wherein the category itself is recast entirely.

After discussing the structure, setting, and reformist aims of *Tropic of Orange*, we analyze the novel’s exploration of urban renewal, highway occupation, and media representation in its central conflict, before lastly examining the case of the idiosyncratic and voluntarily homeless figure of Manzanar Murakami. In *Tropic of Orange*, Yamashita repeatedly halts highway traffic to examine its alienating and waste-generating effects. In so doing, the text positions the freeway system of Los Angeles as both the site that dispossesses the underclass, as well as the site from which they attempt repossession of their homes and narratives within the media.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> This move bears striking resemblance to that employed by Thomas Pynchon and Kathy Acker as discussed in Chapter Two: since the body is the site onto which disgust-hierarchies of race and gender are inscribed, it is through

Yamashita's novel is comprised of 49 chapters organized into 7 sections. Beginning on Monday, the summer solstice, and ending the following Sunday, each section corresponds to a day of the week during which the events of the narrative, located in Los Angeles and Mexico, takes place. Within each of these 7 sections are 7 chapters, each of which focalizes one of the novel's protagonists: Rafaela Cortez, a Mexican maid married to Bobby Ngu, a Chinese-born, Spanish-speaking janitor assuming a Vietnamese identity in Koreatown; Emi Murakami, a Japanese-American television producer who is dating Gabriel Balboa, a Mexican-American reporter; Arcangel, a Mexican laborer who crosses the border into the United States; "Buzzworm," an African-American who describes himself as "walking social services" for the residents of South Central; and Manzanar Murakami, a homeless Japanese-American man who imagines himself as the conductor for the orchestra of cars on the highway (Yamashita, 26). Our analysis of social waste and homelessness largely restricts our focus to Manzanar, who is the only homeless protagonist, and the interstate system, which he inhabits and which plays a primary role in dispossessing the lower classes.

Through this array of predominantly working class characters of color and their complexities to other nations, *Tropic of Orange* seeks to locate and depict the sources of, and struggles against, cultural and economic inequity in several neighborhoods of 1990s Los Angeles, which has been called "the homelessness capital of the first world" (Davis, 39). In *City of Quartz* (1990), a dense history of urban development and finance allocation in Los Angeles, Mike Davis details a series of increasingly hostile municipal policies that target the homeless, including complex security measures on trash bins, bulldozing public lavatories, and angular benches designed to deter sleeping (232-233). The effects of these tactics, first employed in the late

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a return to the bodily that political critique best emerges. Here, that "body" manifests, municipally and nationally, in the veins of the interstate system, described as a "great heartbeat... pumping and pulsating" (Yamashita, 35).

1980s, is felt by Yamashita's characters in the late 1990s: when Gabriel meets with Manzanar for an interview in the notoriously destitute Pershing Square, the two try and fail "to get comfortable on one of those curved bus benches that won't support a sleeping homeless person" (Yamashita, 107). Such minutiae abound in the novel, which, in frequently shifting locales between Downtown, Koreatown, South Central, Hollywood, the Westside, as well as the I-5 and I-110 interstate systems that connect them, follows a cartographic mission to capture a wide reach of zones in the infamously sprawling and mimesis-resistant city.

Nevertheless, Yamashita's aims are not only regional, but global: in reference to the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that extended the territory of the United States to include everything north of the Rio Grande, Los Angeles is referred to as "the second largest city of Mexico" (212). California and Mexico, with their distinct but overlapping socioeconomic problems, are depicted as individual nodes operating within the global framework of late capitalism. Indeed, both the plot and the title of the novel are concerned with the circulation of commodities and laborers across the borders of international networks: the catalyst for the events of the novel is an orange tree that Gabriel brings from Riverside, California to his vacation house in Mazatlán, Mexico, which he plants on the global latitudinal divide that is the Tropic of Cancer. Shortly thereafter, his maid Rafaela observes an orange fall from the tree and roll "just beyond the frontiers of Gabriel's property to a neutral place between ownership and the highway" (13). Through an abstruse international conspiracy that the reporter Gabriel works to uncover, poisoned oranges containing hallucinogenic drugs make their way to Los Angeles and cause an epidemic: deemed "highly toxic," waste management services ship "the rotting stuff by the tons to landfills" (Yamashita, 142).<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> The convoluted events of the novel in tandem with its macrocosmic perspective united by a spherical object of mediation cannot but recall *Underworld* (1997), published in the same year and exhibiting similar motifs. As will be

As noted, *Tropic of Orange* is an explicitly political novel, which, in line with the work of Kathy Acker, dispenses with subtlety in order to unambiguously identify the forces responsible for the adverse circumstances the characters face. Much like patriarchal conceptions of bodily purity are responsible for the disgust with menstruation in *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984) and *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990), *Tropic of Orange* heavily intimates and at times explicitly states that neoliberalism and urban renewal engender an ethos of disposability and violence towards spaces and subjects alike, particularly those of the urban underclass.

Two passages targeting neoliberal capitalism serve this purpose. Arcangel, the nomadic wrestler who carries the titular orange from Mexico to the U.S, walks to Los Angeles in order to defeat “SuperNAFTA,” a wrestler named after the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994, which liberalized trade by eliminating most tariffs between the involved parties.<sup>78</sup> While making his way to the United States, Arcangel mutters a “strange mumbling mantra” comprised of the keywords and institutions of late capitalism, including the International Monetary Fund:

*Trade balances and stock market figures.*  
*Negatives and positives.*  
*Black and red numbers.*  
*Percentage and points.*  
*Net, gross, and dividends.*  
*IMF debts.* (Yamashita, 148, emphasis original)

While the majority of the novel is written in conventional prose, Arcangel’s chapters frequently include a semi-poetic aesthetic incorporating italics and line breaks. Sometimes recalling

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argued in our upcoming analysis of the novel’s central homeless figure Manzanar Murakami, Yamashita shares with DeLillo an interest in a detailed Joycean mapping of the invisible networks that connect across metropolitan, national, and global boundaries.

<sup>78</sup> In the climax of his narrative arc, Arcangel fights SuperNAFTA while the two debate the principles of neoliberal policy: “free the technology and the commerce that make the money go around,” Arcangel’s nemesis yells (Yamashita, 257).

memories and dreams (“*the woman who sold him the nopales in the plaza*”), sometimes narrating events in the third person (“*People choked with amazement and fear*”), sometimes depicting his impassioned speeches in the first person (“*Noble people, I speak to you from the heart*”), sometimes encapsulating a macrocosmic view (“*He could see / all 2,000 miles of the frontier*”), the function of this aesthetic varies widely throughout his chapters (Yamashita 146, 74, 260, 198, emphasizes original). The passage above detailing the methods of neoliberal policy is of a fifth discursive mode wherein Arcangel appears to be quoting or mimicking anonymous members of the capitalist institutions that he opposes, perhaps in order to prepare for the fight towards which he is headed.

Elsewhere, destitute janitor Bobby Nguyen summarizes his reading of a newspaper thus: “*Globalization of capital. Capitalization of poverty. Internationalization of the labor force. Exploitation and political expediency. Devaluation of currency and foreign economic policy. Economic intervention*” (Yamashita, 162, emphasis original). Yamashita’s inclusion of these economic interludes, in tandem with her ensemble of underclass characters who struggle to survive, makes plain that the socioeconomic inequity in Los Angeles, and indeed all major metropolitan hubs, can be traced directly to the neoliberal policies and institutions that congregate resources for the few and consequently deprive the majority, “dividing into tiny pieces what is always less and less” (257). Such interludes exhibit an impersonal and transactional tone, a curt, top-down approach fixated on numbers and systems rather than the human actors involved—by contrast, the majority of *Tropic of Orange* employs pathos to evoke sympathy for those affected.

Even more directly, Yamashita’s novel targets the process of postwar urban renewal that displaces lower class Angelenos. In the chapter entitled “This Old Hood,” Buzzworm walks

through Compton, comparing the buildings to those from a 1972 map of the neighborhood. Reflecting on the redevelopment and instability of the neighborhood, he recalls the urban renewal efforts responsible for its gentrification in hygienic, classed terms: “Neighborhood meeting at the old recreation center. City bureaucrats come over to explain how they were gonna widen the freeway. Move some houses over, appropriate streets, buy out the people in the way... Everything in pastels, modern-like. Made the hood look cleaned up. Quaint” (Yamashita, 82). Since the history of urban renewal is also that of the American interstate system, *Tropic of Orange* places it as the site wherein the dispossessed literally and figuratively repossess their lost spaces and narratives, shifting from setting to character—albeit only for a moment. The central conflict of the novel, which we now examine, occurs when a dangerous freeway pileup causes drivers to evacuate their cars, which nearby homeless urbanites then briefly occupy.

The freeway accident occurs when a large semi-trailer truck crashes at the East Los Angeles Interchange, the central thoroughfare where four major freeways intersect. Fires erupt, hundreds of cars pile up across ten lanes, and the freeway is shut down and evacuated (Yamashita, 55). Shortly thereafter, a homeless encampment in an overgrowth near the accident—“a dense hidden community living on the no-man’s-land of public property”—move from their encampment into the abandoned cars, thereby coming “into public view” (Yamashita, 121). As the containers of the commodities left behind are punctured and repurposed across class lines, spaces designed for individual, atomized travel become spaces for habitation and interclass communication. When the homeless select their temporary abodes, they prioritize “a spacious interior with storage space,” and deem the exteriors of the cars “of secondary importance” (Yamashita, 121). What is tragic for one class is momentarily utopic for another; a wrench

thrown into the interstate system makes it such that “life filled a vacuum, reorganizing itself in predictable and unpredictable ways” (Yamashita, 121).

The homeless encampment not only occupies public space and private commodities, but the media depiction of the incident. When journalists cover the story on the local news, the highway squatters are given microphones and speak directly on radio, television, and internet broadcasts. Buzzworm, champion of the lowly, reflects upon this inverted phenomenon in proud astonishment: “TV from the bottom. Aspirations of the lowest bum on skid row. Lifestyles of the poor and forgotten. Who’d a thought?” (Yamashita, 193) In diametrical opposition to the top-down chain of command of urban redevelopers, or the middle and upper-class perspectives from which waste-averse reports such as “Seattle is Dying” are told, *Tropic of Orange* imagines a scenario wherein economically vulnerable populations are given the means to reclaim public spaces and the narratives that frame them.

In the brutal finale of the novel, military forces forcibly remove and kill many of the highway squatters, affirming “the utterly violent assumption underlying everything: that the homeless were expendable” (Yamashita, 123). From the top-down perspective, their disposal is justified: lacking value within this framework, they are already socially dead. In the case of *Tropic of Orange*, their literal disposal demonstrates “how human value is made intelligible through racialized, sexualized, spatialized, and state-sanctioned violences” (Cacho, 4).

Nevertheless, “for a scant moment in history,” the homeless move from background to foreground, from setting to character (Yamashita, 239). In this way, *Tropic of Orange* focalizes a “contested terrain where citizen-subjects try to take possession of their own history and spaces, and ownership of their representations in the wider cultural arena” (Heise, 11). Their media occupation within the world of the novel, taken together with the explicit identification of the

economic and infrastructural mechanisms underlying their situation related to the reader, grants the homeless Angelenos both intradiegetic and extradiegetic visibility and agency, however transient.

The novel's interest in social disposability extends from subjects treated as expendable objects to the oft-inscrutable thought processes and value systems of those subjects. In addition to foregrounding the homeless encampment, Yamashita also probes the idiosyncratic behavior of Manzanar Murakami in order to legitimize the non-normative and seemingly irrational subjectivities of a particular subcategory of homeless agent. Manzanar, like the protagonist of *Ironweed*, lacks shelter of his own volition; formerly a surgeon, he abandons his practice, home, and family, electing instead to work as a self-appointed freeway conductor who receives neither financial compensation nor cultural legitimacy. The perplexed and apathetic responses to Manzanar's role as highway conductor underscore both the rejection of deviant behavior under productivist discourse and the increasingly individualistic and alienated mindset of Americans engendered by postwar developments in transit and infrastructure. The following passage, wherein Manzanar conducts the cars below from his highway overpass, illustrates this phenomenon:

Those in vehicles who hurried past under Manzanar's concrete podium most likely never noticed him... and perhaps they thought themselves disconnected from a sooty homeless man on an overpass. Perhaps and perhaps not. And yet, standing there, he bore and raised each note, joined them, united families, created a community, a great society, an entire civilization of sound. The great flow of humanity ran below and beyond his feet in every direction, pumping and pulsating, that blood connection, the great heartbeat of a great city. (Yamashita, 35)

As a homeless man consigned to the category of social waste, Manzanar is victim to the invisibility or background-status that accompanies his class: he "had become a fixture on the

freeway overpass much like a mural or a traffic information sign or a tagger's mark" and subsequently evades notice (Yamashita, 36). Despite genuinely believing in his role as a composer, he does not meet the officially-sanctioned standards of production that culturally and economically legitimize the role. When perceived at all, his efforts are met with criticism; as such, he remains "unknown," "unheard," "maligned," and "invisible" (Yamashita, 36).

What causes his invisibility, however, is not only his position as illegitimate, nonproductive citizen who fails to generate a tangible or useful product within the urban ecosystem, but the infrastructural and psychological paradigm shift that characterizes the postwar ascent of automobile use under the burgeoning interstate system. As individuals using private transit acting as a form of material and social insulation, the drivers are "hurried" and quite literally "disconnected" from Manzanar. The distinction between private and public becomes more porous as automobiles, private properties moving through public space, bring the former into the latter. Manzanar, who exists entirely in public, believes his actions serve as a counterweight to this contemporary condition, forming an invisible but valuable network that permeates and unites its individual nodes.

Like the majority of texts within the literature of waste, *Tropic of Orange* interrupts the seamless flow and efficiency that characterizes rationalized systems of expenditure. Yamashita positions the homeless subject as both byproduct of, and wrench in, the machinery of the interstate system—not unlike what DeLillo does with landfills and consumerism, Burroughs and Acker do with their "word hoards" and communication, and Wright and Ellison do with underbellies and urban planning. What is left behind from processes of expenditure—and how can it be focalized to illuminate the histories and textures of those processes, to rematerialize what has been dematerialized? In that vein, *Tropic of Orange* slows down the highway to

consider those excluded from its promise of increased mobility—not only in the literal event of its shutdown and occupation previously examined, but through the figure of Manzanar, whose chapters are predominantly narrated from the static position of his podium on the highway overpass.

To mitigate the miscomprehension of public poverty that the pedestrian faces in the dynamic process of navigating the city, or that the postwar motorist faces tenfold in the rapid process of navigating the highway, Yamashita foregrounds and interrogates the deviant subjectivity of the largely-immobile Manzanar. In so doing, *Tropic of Orange* allows its readership to reconsider the value of unsheltered subjects considered confounding, irksome, or harmful. For many, the homeless are akin to waste in that both can be disruptive and irritating; Robert McNamara notes that Americans “have become used to their presence, and at the same time, annoyed by it” (xi). In his essay on the relationship between homeless urbanites, public spaces, and property values, Burton Leiser cites examples of their “deleterious impact upon the local community,” including their occupation of “benches intended for the enjoyment of local residences,” the “refuse” they leave behind, and their tendency to intercept “passersby and householders” in order to panhandle them (13). The effect of these interruptions, Leiser writes, is that “the peace of the community is disrupted” (13). Joel Blau similarly notes the effects of this phenomenon on the consciousness of those who have access to private property: “the intrusion of homeless people in your field of vision disrupts your train of thought; it derails the track of your own life” (17). On this view, then, the homeless physically and psychologically obstruct the uninterrupted circulation of urbanites traversing public space.

In the case of Manzanar, his disruption is not only a physical occupation of public space, but a behavioral and psychological disruption to productivity and rationality more broadly.

Because they stem from a distinct system of value at odds with conventional reason—namely that cars are not musicians and do not need to be conducted—his aims and behavior defy the comprehension of the general populace. Furthermore, the fact that the musical metaphor is but one of many possible metaphors that may be employed suggests that Manzanar's actions exist within the context of a linguistic surplus—in this vein, it may be argued that waste-oriented literature utilizes surpluses in language to examine material and social surpluses in culture. To interrogate the unvalued in spite of learned patterns of aversion is a central endeavor of the literature of waste; to transform disposable populations from setting to protagonist and legitimize their non-normative subjectivities through language is a major function of the literature of social waste.

A quick pivot back to Auster helps illustrate this point. When Quinn observes the homeless New Yorkers in *City of Glass*, he sees a man walking back and forth, beating on the pavement with drumsticks. Initially perplexed, Quinn considers that “perhaps he thinks he is doing important work. Perhaps, if he did not do what he did, the city would fall apart” (Auster, 167). In this moment, Quinn conducts a charitable thought experiment on behalf of a man exhibiting illogical or nonproductive behavior, and attempts to think through potential justifications beyond his ingrained system of value. Given that such thoughts exist beyond his horizon of understanding, his analysis amounts to hypothesis: “perhaps.” Nevertheless, the consideration marks an attempt at expanded comprehension and empathy; the attempt alone constitutes an expansion of Quinn's personal economy of value through language.

Yamashita performs a similar analysis in *Tropic of Orange*, but dispenses with the guesswork by way of omniscient narration. When interviewing Manzanar for a story, Gabriel exhibits a Quinn-like curiosity; observing “his arms reaching and caressing the air,” he wonders:

“for the sounds and rhythms of... of what?” (Yamashita, 46). A chapter that focalizes Manzanar follows, providing further explanation:

Manzanar imagined himself as a kind of recycler. After all he, like other homeless in the city, was a recycler of the last rung. The homeless were the insects and scavengers of society, feeding on leftovers, living in residue, collecting refuse, carting it this way and that for pennies. In the same manner, who would use the residue of sounds in the city if Manzanar did not? (Yamashita, 56)

Here, as as recurs in the Western literary tradition since Baudelaire, the publically impoverished act as stewards and recyclers of trash. Manzanar’s idiosyncrasy is to extend the logic of physically reusing tangible objects to abstractly reusing intangible noises; whereas the former is a survival tactic, the latter has no readily obvious explanation. Within the discursive parameters of Manzanar’s interiority, however, he is reconciling the sounds of alienated, dematerialized motorists in order to unify them into a collective composition signifying “the blood connection” of the “great flow of humanity” (Yamashita, 35).

In this regard, *Tropic of Orange* cannot but recall the work of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Don DeLillo, whose texts similarly explore the notion of intersubjective mediation enabled by mutually-experienced physical objects and spaces. Indeed, Manzanar visualizes a pervasive hidden network beneath Los Angeles that resembles the ambitious project of

*Underworld* (1997):

Yet, below the surface, there was the man-made grid of civil utilities: Southern California pipelines of natural gas; the unnatural waterways of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and the great dank tunnels of sewage; the cascades of poisonous effluents surging from rain-washed streets into the Santa Monica Bay; electric currents racing voltage into the open watts of millions of hungry energy-efficient appliances; telephone cables, cable TV, fiber optics, computer networks. (Yamashita, 57)

Much like the extensive passage in the “Ithaca” chapter of *Ulysses* (1922) that follows the flow of water throughout Dublin to Leopold Bloom’s kitchen sink, this Joycean passage presents an exceedingly detailed description of the matter and energy—gas, water, sewage, electricity—that concretely unify the city’s residents through an incomprehensibly vast, pervasive, and invisible network. As with *Underworld*’s intricate waste-management systems that “no one saw... or thought about” (DeLillo, 185), Manzanar reflects that “ordinary persons never bother to notice” the “complexity of layers” of hidden energy he seeks to channel through his music (Yamashita, 57). Despite exhibiting distinct approaches—one subtle and conceptual, the other overt and political—both texts posit a materialist understanding of human history as an accumulation of trash and debris accessed by such networks: *Underworld* calls waste the “secret history, the underhistory” of mankind (DeLillo, 791), while *Tropic of Orange* states that “human civilization covered everything in layers, generations of building upon building the residue, burial sites, and garbage that defined people after people for centuries” (Yamashita, 171).

An important distinction in scope, however, aligns *Tropic of Orange* more closely with *Ironweed*, which we now examine at length. Whereas DeLillo’s novel focalizes an entire country over the span of half a century, Yamashita’s and Kennedy’s take place predominantly within individual cities over the course of a few days. The truncated duration of narrative time allows these novelists to focus on the minutiae of daily hardship their impoverished central figures must undergo in order to survive, to render in text the quotidian materiality and precarity of being “on the bum.”

*Tropic of Orange* also touches upon a series of motifs explored at length in *Ironweed*: the namelessness of the homeless (“We marked the graves N.N. No nombre”), the notion of homelessness as purgatory or death-in-life (“Homeless are like the dead. You the medium,”

Buzzworm says to Gabriel), and the proximity between the lower classes and trash (the novel's first chapter opens with Rafaela "sweeping both dead and living things") (Yamashita, 147, 158, 3). These themes guide our inquiry into *Ironweed*.

#### 4.4. *Literary Tombstone for the Nameless: Liminality, Precarity, Camaraderie in Ironweed*

"Bodies in alleys, bodies in gutters, bodies anywhere, were part of his eternal landscape: a physical litany of the dead."

—William Kennedy, *Ironweed* (1983)

The third in a series of novels depicting the author's hometown of Albany, New York during the Great Depression, *Ironweed* narrates the return of destitute vagabond Francis Phelan after a self-imposed absence of twenty-two years. A former big-league baseball player with a history of violence, Francis leaves Albany after a series of deaths culminating in the accidental death of his infant son, Gerald. Overwhelmed by guilt, Francis abandons his wife and children to exist in a state of "prolonged humiliation" (Kennedy, 19). Haunted by the memories of the lives they once led, Francis and his companions Helen and Rudy struggle to survive on the streets of Albany over the course of three days wherein *Ironweed* takes place. The novel ends ambiguously when, after losing both Helen and Rudy to suicide and street violence respectively, Francis contemplates returning to his family at last.

Our analysis of *Ironweed* fixates on its themes of purgatory, namelessness, precarity, and camaraderie in that order—each of which contribute to its overarching function to confer identity to, and narrate the underhistory of, a "castoff world" comprised of forgotten "fragments that no longer had names" (Kennedy, 91). The general direction of this analysis necessarily moves from negative (the purgatorial feeling of being dead while alive, the loss of identity that occurs when

names are forgotten, the vulnerability of existing entirely in public space) to positive (the tenderness exhibited within homeless communities, including the means through which members name and remember each other), from deprivation to recuperation. At the same time, we demonstrate that, in stark contrast with *Tropic of Orange*, *Ironweed* is decidedly not a novel with political aims, or even a “homelessness novel”: Kennedy aims to humanize his characters without pitying or categorizing them, and to depict a segment of their lives wherein they happen to be homeless, rather than presenting them as paradigmatic cases of homelessness. To that end, the chapter closes with a non-instrumental and apolitical approach to the category of social waste that Kennedy’s treatment of protagonist Helen Archer novel enables and demands.

A 1984 interview in *The New York Times* entitled “The Sudden Fame of William Kennedy” helps illuminate Kennedy’s literary aims. A background in investigative journalism, including a series on the city’s slums throughout the 1960s, led Kennedy to encounter “bums, winos, gamblers and gangsters” in the underworld of Albany (Croyden, 33). When asked why his work inevitably focalizes a “nightmare world of outcasts,” Kennedy responds both that “any human being is worthy of the poetry one can achieve,” and that “when fiction closes in on a subject, you know more about what it means to be alive than you can in any other way” (33-34). Much like the other texts examined in this dissertation, Kennedy’s work therefore functions to confer value to undervalued subject matter through the sustained attention of a narrator in the novel medium.

That the novel form is particularly suited to analyzing waste has been argued in each of the preceding chapters—whether in the nonlinear, macrocosmic approach of *Underworld*, the synecdochal fragmentation of *Naked Lunch* and *Blood and Guts In High School*, the subterranean perspectives of “The Man Who Lived Underground” and *Invisible Man*, or the

exploration of deviant subjectivities in *City of Glass* and *Tropic of Orange*. Literary critics have posited distinct reasons for this claim. Susanne Dumbleton argues that the access to interiority provided in *Ironweed* and other novels depicting homelessness allows its readership to “see what is otherwise understated” in a manner that is “particularly powerful” (72). In his analysis of modernism, Michael Tratner contends that the novel form provides readers with “valuable moments derived from representing triviality and waste,” such that, metatextually, “it becomes in itself a model of the finding of value in what has been seen as a loss of value before” (50). In so doing, the narrative mode of novels enables the setting to character transformation that has guided the inquiries of this chapter.

These claims do indeed apply to *Ironweed*, which focalizes a type of subjectivity many consider worthless—according to Corlies Smith, Kennedy’s editor in the early 1980s, publishers were reluctant to print the novel, rejecting it thirteen times. “A book about bums,” said Smith of the novel’s arduous publication process, “was not easy to sell” (Lance and Grondahl, 14). In tandem with the two functions just enumerated—enabling access to subjectivity and foregrounding the quotidian—the novel form allows for a diachronic presentation of human life through the mind of its characters, replete with the ostensibly trivial minutiae of their daily lives. As argued in Chapter One, waste is a paradigmatically diachronic phenomenon, an ongoing process of becoming and unbecoming more akin to a verb than a noun: a process for which the temporally-unfolding novel form is particularly well suited. This is no less true with respect to social waste; the novel can represent several stages and reversals of this process as experienced by consciousness and manifested in the banalities of everyday survival. The coalescing of these features of the medium is what, according to Kennedy, most thoroughly imparts the knowledge of “what it means to be alive.”

*Ironweed* transmits this information as it pertains to the lives of those deemed disposable; it presents the lives of its characters before, during, and after the processes of their social and often biological deaths. In an early passage of the novel, Francis and Rudy encounter a woman lying face-down in the snow and attempt to help her. When Francis asks who she is, the following dialogue is exchanged:

“She’s been a bum all her life.”

“No,” said Francis. “Nobody’s a bum all their life. She hada been somethin’ once.”

“She was a whore before she was a bum.”

“And what about before she was a whore?”

“I don’t know,” Rudy said. “She just talks about whorin’ in Alaska. Before that I guess she was just a little kid.”

“Then that’s somethin’. A little kid’s somethin’ that ain’t a bum or a whore.” (Kennedy, 31)

Despite attempting to save her, Rudy and Francis later find the remains of her corpse left behind by predatory dogs. Nevertheless, this early exchange serves as a microcosmic paradigm for Kennedy’s project in the novel. The question of who lowly subjects were before their decline—their names and their histories—is the driving force in *Ironweed*, which demonstrates that everyone, no matter how destitute, has a history and identity that precedes and exceeds their social categorization as homeless or trashy—that, in Kennedy’s parlance, any human being is worthy of poetic consideration.

The facet of this consideration with which both the novel and our inquiry begin is the purgatorial or death-in-life motif. The notion of homeless as a form of purgatory recurs throughout history: “Seattle is Dying” refers to homeless Seattleites as “lost souls who wander the streets, untethered to home, or family, or reality” (Johnson). The history and literature of homelessness in the United States indicates that this description, however hyperbolic and

pejorative, exhibits some validity. Our earlier genealogy of homelessness in Colonial America revealed that settlements often “warned out” their unsheltered inhabitants, banishing them and notifying other communities to do the same, spurring a state of permanent transience homelessness scholars Robert McNamara and Carrie Whitney deemed “geopolitical limbo.” Indeed, homelessness as limbo or purgatory is arguably the dominant theme in *Ironweed* from its onset, which begins with an epigraph from Dante Alighieri’s *Purgatorio*, the second section of the *Divine Comedy* (1320). Moreover, the first chapter opens with Francis visiting the graves of his deceased family members, who, along with the other ghosts of his past, figuratively follow him and appear to speak to him throughout the novel.

In this regard, this chapter continues a line of inquiry begun in the preceding chapter. The hellishness of impoverished urban areas guided our analysis in Chapter Three, which argued that, in the view from below exhibited in post-Harlem Renaissance fiction, the worlds above and below ground mixed to form a hybrid subjectivity both human and bestial, both not-waste and waste. In *Ironweed*, the purgatorial motif similarly situates its castoff subjects both in and beyond the world, both in the present and the past, both named and nameless, alive and dead. The death-in-life motif encapsulates the many contradictions experienced by the vagabonds of the novel; the underhistory that is *Ironweed* signals to times wherein its lost souls held higher social capital and physical security, qualitatively and conceptually depicting the purgatorial mixture of these prior histories and affects with their current circumstances.

Death weighs heavily and constantly on Francis, whose crimes and mistakes both directly and indirectly led to a series of deaths in his past, and whose present circumstances are consistently morbid. From the first page, *Ironweed* makes this ambience plain: working as a ditch-digger in the Saint Agnes Cemetery, Francis looks upon the graves of the “illustrious men

and women, captains of life,” as well as, elsewhere, the “flowing masses” of the lowly and forgotten (Kennedy, 1). Like Sandra, the barely-alive woman he encounters with Rudy, the majority of his fellow vagabonds die over the course of the novel. Her unmoving, unresponsive body is not an outlier, but a constant: “bodies in alleys, bodies in gutters, bodies anywhere,” the reader is told, “were part of his eternal landscape,” described as “a physical litany of the dead” (Kennedy, 29). In line with this course of thinking, Francis frequently considers others and himself deceased, whether due to their low standard of living, the inescapable memories of past deaths, or spiritual impoverishment. When Rudy insists he is alive, Francis retorts “That’s what you think” without explanation (Kennedy, 20). Reflecting on the gendered religious imperatives imposed on his Irish-Catholic mother, he considers her to have “been dead all her life” due to her perpetual unfulfillment and lack of agency (Kennedy, 99). Working in a junkyard for a day earns Francis a small sum of money; the miniscule amount, however, seems only to defer death by a day or two: “even as he felt rich, he felt dead” (Kennedy, 93).

However he may feel, Francis is not *biologically* dead: like the durable weed from which the novel takes its title, he continuously survives through unfavorable conditions. Nevertheless, the memories of the deceased, the memories of his once-purposeful life as baseball player and family man, the omnipresence of those currently dying around him, and his precarious state of abjection make him *feel* dead while alive; such contradictions lead him to answer, when asked of his whereabouts, “nowhere” (Kennedy, 178).

For many, the personal histories and identities transmitted to posterity soften the harsh effects of non-existence; *Ironweed* states that the homeless, however, are largely omitted from this process. Digging a grave for some “illustrious” person, Francis notes: “I never knew a bum yet had a gravestone” (Kennedy, 12). Because they generally die alone, forgotten, and penniless,

the disposable bodies surrounding Francis do so without transmitting their personal narratives. By contrast, Francis reflects, “Being dead here would situate a man in place and time” (Kennedy, 13). As a corollary, then, dying without a gravestone unmoors men from place and time; they become “fragments that no longer had names,” human detritus stripped of identity and ejected from history. As Luc Sante says in the preface to *Low Life*: “the ghosts of Manhattan are not the spirits of the propertied classes,” for they are “entombed in their names, their works, their constructions” (xiv). Rather, New York’s ghosts are “the resting souls of the poor, the marginal, the dispossessed, the depraved, the defective” (Sante, xv). The lowly are thus not only dead-in-life, but experience an enduring waste-status that, in rescinding value at the level of the identifying signifier, continues beyond the grave.

Without graves or names, then, individual bodies dissolve into anonymous fragments in collective putrefaction. The relationship between individual and collective identity, and the conceptual and material transformations therein, is of central import to each branch of the literature of waste: in landfills, junkyards, cesspools, and slums, discrete units coalesce to form a conglomerate. As Mary Douglas writes, “a long process of pulverizing, dissolving and rotting awaits any physical things that have been recognized as dirt. In the end, all identity is gone. The origin of the various bits and pieces is lost and they have entered in the mass of common rubbish” (197). In order to circumvent this fate, the object must be endowed with value of some kind. In the case of fictional and nonfictional social networks, the individual is extracted from the mass when named or focalized: as argued at the beginning of this chapter, the sustained attention of a narrator moves these components from setting to character, from population to person.

As will be demonstrated shortly, *Ironweed* functions to rename the nameless and narrate their underhistories to counteract the dissolution of the lowly taken as a conglomerate. Because something must be unnamed to be renamed and because something approaches death when in danger, the intertwined motifs of purgatory, namelessness, and precarity are enumerated beforehand. To that end, we now continue the novel's exploration of the death-in-life motif, shifting emphasis to its relationship with the precarity of homelessness and the modern association of public spaces with dirt, danger, and disorder.

As an economically vulnerable underclass and manifestation of public poverty, the unsheltered exist in a nearly-perpetual state of physical and mental vulnerability, both to the elements and predatory urbanites. In *Gimme Shelter: A Social History of Homelessness in Contemporary America* (1991), Greg Barak elucidates the "psychological, physical, and social violence that enshrouds the homelessness condition" (7). Barak notes that, while true that some homeless Americans commit crimes, many of them (such as unpaid traffic violations, public intoxication, vagrancy, and sleeping on private property) are petty, victimless, or indeed inevitable results of circumstance (Barak, 91). By contrast, unsheltered individuals are victims of crimes at a much higher rate than the general population: in a 1989 study, homeless individuals were targets of violence 32 times out of 1000 in comparison to 2.8 times for American citizens at large (Snow et al., 539). In a 2008 study on homeless men in Orlando, Florida, the majority of those interviewed said that they had been assaulted, and that they chose to avoid homeless encampments and busy urban areas as a result; when navigating these regions was a necessity, they attempted to mitigate the visibility of their economic condition as a defensive measure (Donley and Wright, 51).

Grime, cold, theft, and murder impinge upon the publicly-situated bodies in *Ironweed*. The novel chronicles the hourly struggles of its unsheltered characters, whose makeshift shoes blister their feet (Kennedy, 9), who are unable to sleep in the cold unless they are drunk (Kennedy, 8-9), whom children assault and steal from (Kennedy, 60), who cannot clean themselves or their clothes (Kennedy, 71), who must prostitute themselves to other homeless individuals for makeshift shelter (Kennedy, 89), who are too weak to work from selling blood (Kennedy, 199), who are targets of police hostility and violence (Kennedy, 197), and, in the novel's climax, are murdered by strangers seemingly without reason (Kennedy, 217). Each of these issues results directly from the inevitable physical vulnerability experienced by those without the basic necessities of food, clothing, shelter, and hygiene. In public reach, under public gaze, covered in filth—without recourse to the insulating barriers of private property, the unsheltered figures of the novel occupy a highly vulnerable state accessible to any hostile force they may encounter.

The confluence of these deprivations generates a precarious state wherein the likes of Francis, Helen, and Rudy are never far from complete annihilation, a liminal state of living in proximity to entropy and death that accounts for the dominance of the death-in-life motif and the association of the publicly impoverished with waste and the lowly. In an act of self-naming, Francis describes these effects in the degenerative, dehumanizing terms associated with social waste, referring to himself as a “social maggot” and “streetside slug” (Kennedy, 160). Indeed, the presence of literal and figurative waste in public spaces diminishes the value of those spaces in the esteem of those with shelter, augmenting the atomized state of privatization in postwar America that is of central concern in *City of Glass* and *Tropic of Orange*. In *City of Quartz*, Mike Davis argues for this negative association by noting that the “contemporary opprobrium attached

to the term ‘street person,’” indicates a pervasive “devaluation of public spaces” (226). In the hermeneutic circle of spatial and social waste, subjects are deemed lowly by virtue of their inhabitation of unreputable regions and vice-versa: the pejorative effects of “slug” and “streetside” in Francis’s description therefore amplify one another.

Precarity and liminality are intrinsically unstable states that inevitably move in one of two directions: towards safety or danger, this or that. The uncertain positions of the unsheltered reach an extreme conclusion towards the end of the novel, when Francis and Rudy briefly rest in a homeless encampment colloquially termed “the jungle.” Tellingly, the space is described as “a resort of those for whom motion was either anathema or pointless or impossible,” for “people who had come here at journey’s end to accept whatever disaster was going to happen next” (Kennedy, 208). The disaster in question comes swiftly in the form of an anonymous army of men who, armed with torches and bats, burn and pillage the encampment. Though seemingly a random act of violence against the unprotected, the attackers exhibit an animosity towards the dehumanized and dirty citizens of the jungle, calling them “filthy bums,” and evincing “hatred on their faces” (Kennedy, 218). Despite the protective efforts of Francis, Rudy is killed and dies as he lived, with his “face smudged,” his clothes “spattered with blood” and “covered with dirt” (Kennedy, 220). As a member of an unprotected underclass at the lowest rung of the social ladder, Rudy is disposed of without legal consequence.

Rudy’s death illustrates the extreme endpoint of the vulnerability the unsheltered face. As purgatorial urbanites, Francis, Helen, and Rudy are pulled in two conflicting directions: towards the promise of existing once more with shelter or purpose, and towards the complete annihilation that always threatens. Do they work to clean themselves up and combat precarity, or embrace it and sink into the dirt? Rudy, along with the other homeless characters of the novel, frequently

contemplates suicide as an option (Kennedy, 199). While Rudy is ultimately robbed of this choice, Francis and Helen undertake two distinct approaches: the former works to counteract the foregoing issues through acts of naming, narrating, and camaraderie, while the latter seeks to escape public reach by attaining the ultimate privacy of death.

Despite the pervasive presence of misery, loss, and death in the novel, there is nevertheless a tenderness and camaraderie between the homeless characters in *Ironweed* that serves as an amelioratory presence. Francis, who is hardened, laconic, and stoic, exhibits a particular kindness towards his fellows that stems from their shared adversity. While he and Rudy dig graves together, Francis admits that, although he considers Rudy a “simpleton” and has “no desire” to share intimacy with him, the mutual act of “throwing dirt on dead people” in fact “generated a bond that Francis found strange” (Kennedy, 23). Francis goes on to elaborate an alternative social model that he deems “the protocol of bums” and “the brotherhood of the desolate”:

They were both questing for the behavior that was proper to their station and their unutterable dreams. They both knew intimately the etiquette, the taboos, the protocol of bums. By their talk to each other they understood that they shared a belief in the brotherhood of the desolate, yet in the scars of their eyes they confirmed that no such fraternity had ever existed, that the only brotherhood they belonged to was the one that asked that enduring question: How do I get through the next twenty minutes? (Kennedy, 23-24)

This question serves, in many ways, as the narrative thrust of the novel, wherein Francis, Rudy, and Helen search for nourishment and shelter to carry them through each night. The protocol that unites them is to scavenge and survive with minimal harm to others of their class, to share what little they gather to those in greater need, and to occasionally find solace through entertainment. To this end, they “feared dregs, cops, jailers, bosses, moralists, crazies, truth-tellers, and one

another,” and “loved storytellers, liars, whores, fighters, singers, collie dogs that wagged their tails, and generous bandits” (Kennedy, 24).

Because the unsheltered occupy a peripheral legal position wherein they often must commit crimes to survive and are frequently unprotected against criminal behavior, and due to the historical, cultural, and etymological disapprobation associated with bums and tramps, the concept of “bum etiquette” initially appears oxymoronic and paradoxical. The antagonistic and fear-based mentality of street survival, including the fear of fellow unsheltered individuals (ending the list of feared subjects is “one another”), also undercuts any romanticized notion of kinship such concepts may suggest—it is both a brotherhood of the desolate and a fraternity that “had never existed.”

Nevertheless, both real-life homeless communities and those in *Ironweed* display a profound sense of camaraderie that mitigates their collective vulnerability. The study on homeless men in Orlando cited earlier found that, in spite of major theft issues, shelter inhabitants guarded one another, watched each other’s belongings, and shared food when they could (Donley and Wright, 49). In the absence of legal protection, the men protected one another—in Yamashita’s terms, life filled a vacuum. Moreover, the notions of theft and private property themselves functioned differently within the shelter. When interviewed about being victims of theft, focus group participants “were exceedingly calm in their responses,” noting that “anyone who would steal from other homeless men” must have been “really hungry” (Donley and Wright, 50). One man whose shoes had been stolen stated that the thief “must have needed them more” than him (Donley and Wright, 50). Theft, in other words, was acceptable in extreme cases of need, so long as it was not seen as exploitative but deemed necessary for survival.

In this public “brotherhood of the desolate,” then, the dispossessed were far less possessive of private property.<sup>79</sup> In *Ironweed*, Francis serves as protective comrade to Helen, Rudy, and many others he encounters throughout the novel: he shares the money he earns with Helen (Kennedy, 59), finds her a car to sleep in to survive the cold while he sleeps in the weeds (Kennedy, 86), and gives the other members of “the jungle” sandwiches and other food he had just procured for himself after briefly visiting his family (Kennedy, 213). The dwellers of the jungle are welcoming and generous to one another, sharing food, wine, and fire (Kennedy, 212). By visiting the homeless encampment directly after visiting his family, Francis transmits resources from one (nuclear and biological) family to another (alternative and socioeconomic) family. While violent and flawed, Francis exhibits generosity and selflessness towards his street family, working to carry them to the next day as a collective unit—an exhibition in marked contrast to the dematerialized, insulated motorists speeding by Manzanar in *Tropic of Orange*.

Equally important to providing resources to his comrades in life is transmitting their names and narratives after death. On a particularly cold night, Francis tells his companions of the “many old bums” he once knew who “died in the weeds,” naming several of them and briefly sharing their stories (Kennedy, 77). After Rudy dies in the hospital shortly after the assault on the homeless encampment, Francis invents a last name for him based on his interests. When a nurse asks for his full name, he calls him “Rudy Newton,” telling her that he “knew where the Milky Way was,” in reference to an earlier discussion wherein Rudy shared his interests in astronomy and Isaac Newton (Kennedy, 221). In so doing, Francis commemorates Rudy; though he dies

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<sup>79</sup> The reasons for this are both material and cultural, stemming from a shared sense of perpetual vulnerability and desperation, as well as social stigmatization and disposability. While the homeless are made to feel lowly and trashy, these feelings are sometimes a source of union. As William Cohen writes of the subject, filth can “provide an appealing point of identification for subjects”: those who are “degraded, dispossessed, or abjected by a dominant order” can embrace the categorization to the end of “self-formation and group identification” (x-xi).

without a gravestone, he is given a makeshift linguistic monument in the form of hospital paperwork. Similarly, when he discovers Helen's corpse after her suicide, Francis vows to "one day hunt up Helen's grave" and "place a stone on top of it with her named carved deeply in its face" (Kennedy, 223). Through these acts of naming, Francis acts as social historian for the disposed and forgotten, situating them in space and time rather than leaving them eternally unmoored.

By commemorating these narratives of socioeconomically peripheral, alternative communities in fiction, *Ironweed* serves as a collective underhistory for its castoff characters, a literary tombstone for the lowly and the nameless.

We conclude our chapter with a consideration of the alternate route undertaken by *Ironweed*'s Helen Archer, a character who elects to evade, rather than reframe, the dispossessing forces of culture, history, and biology. Once more to *City of Glass*: when Quinn observes the homeless New Yorkers, he reflects on this Baudelaire excerpt from the prose poem "Anywhere Out of the World" in *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869): "Baudelaire: Il me semble que je serais toujours bien l'a o'u je ne suis pas. In other words: It seems to be that I will always be happy in the place where I am not. Or, more bluntly, Wherever I am not is the place where I am myself. Or else, taking the bull by the horns: Anywhere out of the world" (Auster, 168). In this moment, Quinn thinks of the suffering of those dispossessed of privacy, who cannot escape the encroach of the public; he imagines where, given their circumstances, they could evade the vulnerability of existing as spatially extended subjects. He interprets the excerpt as a desire for radical existential escapism, concluding that it may be *beyond* the known contours of the world and life itself "where one could finally disappear" (Auster, 167).

As a final attempt to feel safe and undisturbed after a lifetime of being “wasted by weariness,” Helen Archer ultimately resorts to this form of escapism in the form of suicide (Kennedy, 129). At the nadir of her physical and psychological vulnerability, Helen feels a sudden compulsion to rent a hotel room, “and get it immediately. She did not want to collapse crossing the street. She needed a place of her own, warm and dry” (Kennedy, 132). While Helen seeks the temporary solace of privacy and shelter, the room serves a momentary form of insulation that, by barring further interference from hostile forces, enables the more radical and permanent insulation of her suicide. As she hangs herself, Helen “feels her legs turning to feathers” as her body, described as a “white bird,” “bends under the weight of so much joy” (Kennedy, 139). In contrast to Francis, who compares himself to slugs and maggots, the narration here likens Helen to a dove, a creature that does not crawl but soars, that is not abominable but holy. Rather than existing in a deteriorated and “wasted” state, waiting to be picked off like Sandra and Rudy, she asserts a counterintuitive form of agency by forcing her fate to definitively move in one direction. She achieves her desire to disappear from the world in a moment that, through a tightly-focalized free indirect discourse, Helen experiences as poignantly transformative, cathartic, and uplifting. In lieu of being disposed of, she disposes herself.

At the same time, *Ironweed*'s narrator disallows extrapolating easy generalizations about fate, suicide, or homelessness from this moment. In this concluding section, we consider a non-instrumental approach to homelessness that qualifies the analyses of this chapter. Despite the work the novel performs in transmitting the forgotten histories, the dire vulnerability, and the conflicting, contradictory interiorities of several homeless characters, *Ironweed* refuses to be seen only as a “novel of the homeless,” or to present its characters as archetypes, models, or

symbols by which sympathetic or reformist readers can extrapolate cause and effect. Instead, *Ironweed* demonstrates skepticism towards the power of the literary medium, distaste towards essentializing or categorizing its characters, and a rejection of simplistic models of causation in favor of a fundamentally ambiguous and unknowable view of psychology, identity, and reality.

Far before the end of Helen's narrative arc wherein this idea is fully explored, *Ironweed* frames its characters as resistant to capture by the instruments of literary criticism. In the graveyard chapter that opens the novel, Francis visits the resting place of his son, Gerald, whom he accidentally dropped to his death two decades prior. Although Gerald's death is often implied as the reason Francis abandons his family, the following passage suggests that he possesses qualities that are not reducible to a plot catalyst, literary trope, or symbol for his father's guilt:

Gerald rested in his infantile *sublimity*, exuding a high gloss induced by early death, his skin a radiant white-gold, his nails a silvery gray, his cluster of curls and large eyes perfectly matched in gleaming ebony. Swaddled in his grave, he was *beyond capture by visual or verbal artistry*. He was *neither beautiful nor perfect* to the beholder but rather an *ineffably* fabulous presence whose like was not to be found anywhere in the cemetery, and it abounded with *dead innocents*. (Kennedy, 17-18, emphases added)

Gerald is sublime, ineffable, and beyond mimetic capture, especially by idealized or romanticized tropes or impulses. He is not merely the archetype of the "dead innocent"—there is something unknowable, the narrator implies, that evades the scope of such categorizations. Neither can he be reduced, a later passage informs us, to the sole or even central reason for Francis's self-imposed vagabondism. Francis wonders exactly what those reasons are when watching Oscar, a talented but failed singer, perform at a bar: "What was it, Oscar, that did you in? Would you like to tell us about it? Do you know? It wasn't Gerald who did *me*. It wasn't drink and it wasn't baseball and it wasn't really Mama. What was it that went bust, Oscar, and

how come nobody ever found out how to fix it for us?” (Kennedy, 50) The novel’s hermeneutic-resistant treatment of Gerald, in conjunction with its refusal to identify simplistic models of causation and character motivation, intimates that artistic reproduction cannot render the deceased in a totalizing fashion, and that the human psychology and behavior that engenders homelessness and other states of abjection operates by way of multilayered and, in some cases, unknowable factors. Thus, at the same time that *Ironweed* functions as literary tombstone and underhistory for the lowly, it recognizes its own limitations in these efforts. In stark contrast to the explicit condemnation of urban renewal and neoliberalism in *Tropic of Orange*, *Ironweed* does not hold any one factor responsible for homelessness.

As Helen is about to kill herself, the narrator interjects a warning that borders on metafiction: just as Gerald is not merely the embodiment of dead innocence, “Helen is no symbol of lost anything, wrong-road-taken kind of person, if-they-only-knew-then kind of person” (Kennedy, 135). The narrator states that those who “feel that some particular thing went wrong somewhere and that if it had only gone right it wouldn’t have brought a woman like Helen so low” are committing an “error” in thinking (Kennedy, 135). The narration goes on to expound Helen’s acuity and wisdom in decision-making: “since Helen was born,” she “has been making her own decisions based on rational thinking, reasonably current knowledge, intuition about limitations, and the usual instructions by friends, lovers, enemies, and others” (Kennedy, 136). Helen was well-read, well-informed, intelligent, talented, disciplined, hygienic when it was possible, kind to others, and devoutly religious throughout her life.

This personal history, however, is hidden from the surface of Helen’s dirty life on the streets, and erased by generalized preconceptions towards the lowly and impoverished that render them as voiceless backdrops. Those who accost or condemn her know nothing of her past,

and indeed “never think of that sort of thing when they call a woman like Helen a drunken old douchebag” (Kennedy, 136).

Kennedy’s nuanced treatment of Helen Archer appears as a rebuttal to two pervasive American views on homelessness: homelessness as result of personal defect and homelessness as tragic symbol for socioeconomic disparity. Social welfare scholar Joel Blau provides a taxonomy of emotions the homed feel in confrontations with the homeless, including guilt, fear, and scorn; in “Go Out and Find a Job,” he argues that these emotions stem “from the deeply rooted American belief that poverty can almost always be attributed to personal defects,” including “laziness, alcoholism, or drug abuse” (17). It should be noted, however, that such sentiments have increasingly come to constitute a minority view: in a 1989 national survey, fifty-four percent of Americans believed homeless occurs as a result of circumstances beyond the individual’s control, as opposed to twenty-seven percent, or roughly half, who blamed the individuals (Kane, Parsons, and Associates). Even so, regardless of their stance on the issue, eighty percent of respondents believed homeless “dramatically symbolizes the tragic inequities in American society” (Kane, Parsons, and Associates).

By exploring the pristine personal history of one of its protagonists and resisting essentializing or typifying its characters, *Ironweed* demonstrates that both views—uncharitable and charitable alike—are flawed. Just as Gerald is not reducible to a symbol of the protagonist’s guilt, Helen is not reducible to a symbol of American inequality. There “are no women like Helen,” the narrator states in another blunt warning, demanding that his readership consider her intrinsically and not instrumentally (Kennedy, 135). In so doing, Kennedy rehumanizes the dehumanized, reverses Helen’s trash-status. To this end, *Ironweed* is not a novel specifically intended to represent the homeless, but a novel about people who happen to be homeless at the

temporal moment depicted. Despite detailing the plight of its homeless characters in poignant, tragic detail, it is not a political call to action, a sentimental attempt to evoke pity, or even to represent the homeless as a class or category.

The narrator's interjections also provide a second, related rebuttal that draws a parallel between culturally ingrained conceptions towards the homeless and literary-interpretive methods regarding tragic protagonists. When warning the reader not to think of Helen's decline and demise as consequences of poor choices, the narrator adds that "Helen knows all about Lily Bart and Daisy Miller" (Kennedy, 136). The allusions to Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905) and Henry James's *Daisy Miller: A Study* (1879) allow the narrator to deflect a chain of thought in literary interpretation that directly mirrors attitudes towards the homeless: the view of the heroine's downward spiral as direct corollary to poor decision-making. While true that Helen, Lily, and Daisy meet similarly morbid ends, Kennedy's narrator draws a boundary between his protagonist and the others: she meets the same fate without making the same mistakes, suggesting an issue with this causal mode of interpretation.

Since French author Émile Zola wrote, in 1893, that the naturalists are "experimental moralists," whose stories demonstrate "in what way a passion acts in a certain social condition," it has been a critical commonplace to read naturalist fiction within the scientific, deterministic framework of cause and effect: the writer places characters within a social laboratory, observes the decisions made in response to their environment, and notes the results (25). Consequently, interpretations of texts like *The House of Mirth* and *Daisy Miller* often trace a causal trajectory from the decisions of the heroines to their ultimate positions. Within the contexts of these particular narratives, these choices necessarily have to do with gender imperatives pertaining to modesty, marriageability, and reputation. As Lily Bart herself remarks, "I have to calculate and

contrive, and retreat and advance, as if I were going through an intricate dance, where one misstep would throw me hopelessly out of time” (Wharton, 38).

In the framework of social determinism, social deviance leads to castigation. On this reading, Lily’s and Daisy’s missteps result from their conspicuous incongruities with Victorian culture and are met with discipline accordingly. As Myrto Drizou notes of Lily Bart, this results from her “failure to manage her impulses and intentions” in her attempts to negotiate her social network and her personal desires (28). Writing of the coquettish Daisy Miller, Motley Deakin concludes that since she “will not conform, society must punish her” as a matter of “social and symbolic necessity” (57).

Putting aside the fundamental ambiguities exhibited in these narratives—*The House of Mirth*, for instance, never resolves the question of whether Lily’s suffering is “her own fault or that of destiny” (Wharton, 22)—the distinction Kennedy’s narrator makes clear is that Helen does not resist social mores, but in fact thoroughly adheres to them. If, in the scientific framework of cause and effect, the same effect can be produced without the cause that ostensibly produced it, the framework cannot be exhaustively explanatory. As with Daniel Quinn when he does *not* see the homeless, and even as with the pedestrian who *does* see the homeless, something operates remotely and invisibly in the background in excess of the perceptual and narrativizing mechanism. While the literature of waste works to illuminate those recesses, some further obscurity always remains beyond its scope.

Through dismissing the lowly-as-symbol, whether cultural or literary, Kennedy disallows his readership to absorb Helen into narrative systems that stigmatize the subjects of nonfictional and fictional tragedies alike. Instead, the reader is presented with the sometimes-disorderly

mechanisms of reality and the incalculability of fate, a messy process of entropy and decay that sometimes wastes lives without identifiable cause.

The broader effect of this maneuver is to encourage caution in cultural, literary, and scientific methods of interpretation that utilize their foregrounded object of study to extrapolate systematic truths about the world, to claim access to a full perspective of foreground, middleground, and background. Kennedy's insistence that Helen be read in primary and not secondary terms proves instructive in considering the limitations of literary-historical analyses of waste conducted throughout this dissertation, a topic explored further in the coda that follows.

## 5. Coda: Unproductive Inquiries and Ephemera

In closing, we consider alternate frameworks and objects of inquiry for future scholarship. In the spirit of the subject matter, the pieces that follow are mostly fragments, linguistic detritus about detritus.

### *5.0. Non-Instrumental Analyses*

The central goal of this dissertation has been to uncover the various roles waste, and its literary reproductions, have played in specific moments over the last century of American history. To that end, waste has been excavated to prove assertions regarding the contradictions of the plastics industry; the invisibility and omnipresence of waste-management systems; the rise of rhetoric extolling convenience and disposability, the resultant waning of stewardship towards objects and deep historical perspective, materialist systems of intersubjective mediation moving through space and time; repression of the biological and historical realities of death, war, and menstruation; transformations in what constitutes public and private spaces and behaviors; dissolutions of individual identities coalesced into cesspools, junkyards, and the fractured literary devices best suited to depicting them; models of efficiency and order in novels, language, factories, urban planning, and interstate systems, and their eventual reconfigurations; the flexibility and instability of waste as political and economic category deployed asymmetrically to maintain social hierarchies; the use of biological disgust as oppressive rhetorical device and as artistic insulation that allows an expanded comprehension of matter; the violence and spatial

politics embedded in the concept of surplus populations, and the physical and psychological effects, both degenerative and epiphanic, of existing in abjection.

While illuminating the role waste has played and continues to play in the cultural imaginary, each of these analyses seeks to typify waste-matter and extrapolate its broader significance—to interpret it, perhaps, as a “dramatic symbol” through an instrumentalist hermeneutics that *Ironweed* warns against. As seen in each chapter, however, waste exhibits characteristics that always exceed its assimilation, whether material, conceptual, technological, biological, spatial, or social. The intractability of plastics that we can no longer manage, the visceral potency of disgust-responses that exceed conceptualizations of life and death, the inexplicable idiosyncrasies of abjected subjects operating on wholly distinct systems of value—each of these phenomena sees some facet of waste-matter resisting totalized capture by waste analysis.

In lieu of the last chapter’s analysis of Helen Archer, here we briefly consider an alternative, nonproductive framework derived from Martin Heidegger’s and Bill Brown’s formulations on subject-object relations in order to qualify the instrumentalist and conceptually productive analyses of this dissertation. In light of the modernist and aestheticist notions of *quiddity* or thingness inherited from Aristotle, the study of waste objects must be careful not merely to read them as the discarded elements of cultural economies, hierarchies, and values, but also in their status as trash itself (Auster, 117; Brown, 2; Derrida, 266). In the passage on broken equipment in *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger analyzes the ways in which subjects approach objects not in terms of their objecthood, but primarily in terms of the pragmatic function or activity they allow the user—a “towards which,” which is only interrupted when the object is broken or misused (102). When the object is no longer “ready-to-hand,” it becomes

“conspicuous” or phenomenologically nontransparent, an excess of its objecthood prompting attention of a distinct and more nuanced order (Heidegger, 103). In the same way, trash must be read instrumentally and intrinsically, and on one reading, the instrumental analysis of trash brings it back into systems of value which its deteriorated state resists—a new readiness-to-hand, however alternative the context may be.

This alternative framework—a hermeneutics of nonproductive *analytic* expenditure—problematizes any reading of trash, excretion, space, or body as cultural signifier, and questions any tactic that would imbue waste with productive capacities. In *Subterranean Cities*, David Pike warns precisely against such analyses of filth, which become “reabsorbed as an idealized counterpart of the ideological determining that which is clean” (197). In the same vein, Susan Sontag argues that literary obscenity in the work of Bataille and other excretory writers is something “much more profound than the backwash of a sick society’s aversion to the body,” that it is perhaps instead a “primal notion of human consciousness” (56-57). Waste and its artistic renditions intrigue, in other words, beyond their negative status as the castoffs of waste-averse systems of production, circulation, and disposal. As Brown notes in his extrapolation of Heidegger, it is only when one looks at objects as *ends*, not *means*, that they can become dislodged “from the temporal dictates of modern life,” dictates pertaining to histories and practices of production and exchange, and even their possible translation into art (9). Future studies on the subject, then, might envision a more radical hermeneutics of waste that, in thoroughly embracing its lack of use or assimilability at the academic level, evades the self-fulfilling economies of value which, in valorizing productivity and secondary functionality, work to generate the categories of waste in the first place. Such studies might analyze waste purely in terms of its texture, objecthood, and thingness, substances in their own right rather than

extensions of human subjects.

Analyses of Burroughs in Chapter Two come the closest to this line of thinking: to say that *Naked Lunch* (1959) is an anarchic explosion of waste in line with Bataille's conception of nonproductive expenditure is to consider literary modes wherein waste is deployed wastefully. More than the others, this chapter allows waste to "be itself."

### 5.1. *Ecocriticism*

A body of scholarship that scrutinizes similar primary materials to largely different ends, ecocriticism constitutes another common direction for studies of the subject. Foundational texts and recent developments in ecocritical discourse overlap to some extent, however, with the materialist and cultural studies approach of this dissertation. In a text considered foundational to the discipline, Lawrence Buell's *Writing for an Endangered World* (2011) provides a nuanced conception of the ecocritical perspective on nature. The importance of physical nature, Buell writes, "ceases to be located in its promise as past, present, or future sanctuary," but instead in its "standing as humanity's codependent and coconspirator in coping with the fact/awareness that the nature one engages must now be—if indeed it has not always in some sense been—not pristine but the effect of 'second' (i.e. modified) nature" (45). The contemporary view of ecocriticism, then, does not bemoan a post-Edenic "fall" into toxicity from a state of purity, but posits a multi-directional system within which human actants, physical spaces, and manmade contaminants interact with, influence, and impinge upon each other over time. Here, the ecocritical focus on ecology, conceived capaciously, resonates with the long view of systems of production, consumption, and disposal which "The Lowly Remains" foregrounds.

Many ecocritics employ an explicitly materialist methodology and resist the anti-essentialism of post-structuralism and cultural studies which, as Stacy Alaimo warns in *Bodily Natures* (2010), “may bracket or minimize the significance, substance, and power of the material world,” but which this dissertation sometimes retains (8). “The Lowly Remains” utilizes a heterogeneous approach wherein either materialism or cultural studies is deployed depending on the particular manifestation of waste in question, attending to the material with regards to excretion, for instance, while attending to the cultural with regards to contingent categories of pollution which have been essentialized in moral and aesthetic economies, as well as examining the dialectic between the two domains.

## 5.2. *Trash Tropes*

The following are brief examples of other writers exploring the same tropes as those seen in the dissertation, many of which were omitted due to the considerations of focus, organization, and length.

### *Waste and Death*

Chapter Two examined the usage of fecal matter as Pynchonian anti-symbol for death—in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973), shit is the most potent and direct manifestation of death, most resistant to euphemisms and other linguistic, cultural, and psychological tricks that put morbidity out of mind in order to propagate deception and genocide.

Literary connections between waste and death predate Pynchon, although they often

manifest in the symbolic, euphemistic manner *Gravity's Rainbow* decries. Trashmen stand in for death in Carl Sandburg's poem "The Junk Man" (1916) and John Dos Passos's short play *The Garbage Man* (1926). Sandburg's Junk Man arrives in a wagon to collect defunct clocks once their wheels are "worn and slow" (3), while Dos Passos's garbage man, a "Man in Black Overalls," carts the dead off in his car (1.3.13). In each text, the eponymous figure functions as a modernized form of what Pynchon calls "some abstract-arty character with a scythe" arriving in a carriage (701). While trash and excretion are both physical forms of waste, the former is further removed from the biological processes of putrefaction and death. Nevertheless, because trash similarly implies the end of a process, it recurs as a fitting trope.

Further back in literary history, Walt Whitman's poem "This Compost" (1855) examines the relationship between waste and death in a manner towards which excretory authors would likely be more sympathetic. The speaker in Whitman's poem wonders how the earth can continue to provide nourishment and life when filled with "distemper'd corpses," described as "sour / dead" and "foul meat" (12, 15-16, 27). Whitman's text presents death more directly, in corporeal rather than euphemistic terms, as bodily rather than manufactured waste.

### *Monism and Ooze Identification*

Chapter Two also included analyzed Kathy Acker's literary reconciliation between the alienated female subject and the anatomy she has been taught to abhor, a sentiment captured in the phrase "I sense that blood is who I am" (117). Muriel Rukeyser does exactly this in her 1973 poem "Despisals":

In the body's ghetto

never to go despising the asshole  
 nor the useful shit that is our clean clue  
 to what we need. Never to despise  
 the clitoris in her least speech.  
 Never to despise in myself what I have been taught  
 to despise. Nor to despise the other.  
 Not to despise the it. To make this relation  
 with the it : to know that I am it. (16-24)

In Rukeyser's poem, the speaker warns against dualistic conceptions of identity/body and of self/other as thoroughly separate entities, a dyad that enables disgust, loathing, and aversion—one more frequently experienced by women under the aegis of menstrual etiquette and other forms of misogyny. In monist fashion, the self is always-already the other, permeated and in part constituted by waste: a point Rukeyser and Acker wish to drive home, a false sense of distance their texts wish to reverse.

### *Waste and Domesticity*

The relationship between waste and gender also provides a different avenue of examination with regards to labor and social organization. Under the Victorian "Doctrine of Separate Spheres," for instance, waste management falls almost exclusively to the housewife. Within the context of this common sexual division of labor, wherein men oversee "social production and the state," while women handle "domestic reproduction and personal life," work is divided more or less rigidly by gender (Chodorow, 10).

Mierle Ukeles, Artist in Residence at New York City's Department of Sanitation during the late 1960s, explores this asymmetry in her "Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!" The distinction her manifesto draws between development and maintenance maps onto the sexual

division of labor: development is the waste-generating sphere of production, while maintenance is the waste-management sphere of cleaning up after male production (Ukeles, 382). “Clean your desk, wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes, wash your toes, change the baby’s diaper... keep the customer happy, throw out the stinking garbage... I’m out of perfume... flush the toilet, stay young,” a list of maintenance demands reads (Ukeles, 383). The “Maintenance Art” manifesto elevates the conventionally female sphere of production to an art form, acknowledging the important, necessary function of maintenance practices and challenging their secondary status.

### *Sterility and Queer Antinatalism*

Perhaps more than any other chapter, the fourth chapter on homelessness could have gone in many other directions. The two other potential “dangerous classes” considered were queer populations and substance users.

Both populations were touched upon, briefly, in Chapters Two, Three, and Four, which dealt indirectly with sexuality, substance abuse, alcoholism, and other “lowly” behaviors and groups. For our present purposes, the most important of these is the discussion of Lee Edelman’s antinatalism in “Disposable Bodies,” which argued that much ire towards the homeless emerges from the perspective of the heterosexual middle-and-upper classes who consider them a threat to the safety of the nuclear family. Edelman’s form of antinatalism is also a queer philosophy, arguing that the oft-maligned lack of biological reproduction among certain queer individuals in fact helps create an equitable culture wherein bodies are not measured against standards of (re)productivity and made to suffer for the sake of hypothetical unborn lives.

Had the analysis of social waste focused on queer antinatalism, it might have explored Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* (1936). Because the novel is populated by sexual nonconformists and other outcasts—what Julie Goodspeed-Chadwick calls “punishable identities”—*Nightwood* serves as a fruitful paradigm in thinking of social refuse and the body of the marginalized (35). From the unromantic opening passage wherein Felix's mother Hedvig births him, “thrust him from her, and died,” the novel presents biological production wholly in negative terms (Barnes, 4). A brief examination of two impotent “child products” or failed “corporeal commodities”—Felix and Robin's son and Nora and Robin's doll—works to illustrate this point.

After marrying pretend-baron Felix Volkbein and providing him a son, enigmatic quasi-protagonist Robin Vote abandons them in lieu of alcoholism and numerous affairs with women. The child she leaves behind is sickly, both physically and mentally impaired. The narrator describes Guido as “mentally deficient and emotionally excessive, an addict to death; at ten, barely as tall as a child of six, wearing spectacles, stumbling when he tried to run” (Barnes, 114). Guido may be read as physiological symptom of a wider cultural cause, the result of Felix's heteronormative desire for a bourgeois lineage. His sickly nature certainly disrupts and effectively prevents the Volkbein blood from future perpetuation; in so doing, it serves as a textual case of sterility obstructing reproduction. The phenomenon is not applicable to Guido alone, however; Erin Carlston considers Guido's case “only one of the incomplete or interrupted lineages in *Nightwood*—interrupted usually by the absence of mothers, in a world where women especially struggle to escape their role in reproducing humanity and thus human pain” (52).

Carlston briefly introduces a reading of sterility into the discourse of *Nightwood*, including the “the literal sterility of the sexual relationship between Robin Vote and Nora Flood” as well as “numerous other images of sterility, castration, impotence, abortion, and decline” (52).

While the biological sterility between Rob and Nora is considered a shortcoming under heteronormative natalist discourse, it serves as an advantage for Edelman and other queer antinatalists.

“We give death to a child when we give it a doll,” Nora declares in anguish, “it’s the effigy and the shroud; when a woman gives it to a woman, it is the life they cannot have, it is their child, sacred and profane” (Barnes, 151). Nora depicts the doll in terms of contradictions—the doll is a model for a life that is yet to come (the effigy) even as it is the material with which it is buried (the shroud). It is worth noting that she frames the doll in terms of affecting “a child,” the figure Edelman positions as the center of oppressive heteronormative discourse. On one reading, Nora’s sorrow is framed in terms of protecting a future, symbolic Child, displacing her own present suffering in a manner devoted to reproductive futurity and the familial immaculate.

While on one view it constitutes the limitations of the homosexual, on another it sidesteps the problem of compulsory reproduction and the dispossession of female agency therein entailed. Thus, even while Nora and Robin’s doll is “a reminder... of what they cannot have,” it is concurrently a symbol for “what they have escaped” (Carlston, 53), namely: the perpetuation of reproductive futurity, and the disapprobation assigned to “unproductive” populations as a result.

Indeed, lesbianism as a social mode often realizes this radical potential. Carlston notes that the Women of the Left Bank, Barnes’s predecessors and expatriate milieu often considered the “decadent lesbians,” “emphasized the sterility of lesbian sexuality” as a kind of “proud perversion” (47). This radical stance boldly and proudly “named lesbianism as a threat to bourgeois morality, the family, the Church, and ultimately the State” (Carlston, 48). When such institutions decry the figure of the queer as a social threat to systems of social and biological reproduction, a common response is to reframe the queer as capable of normalcy and the

formation of a nuclear family through adoption or assisted fertilization. This move depends on futurity and productivity to legitimate its vocabulary; it precludes the possibility of envisioning the queer as fulfilling its culturally designated role as social refuse, sterile and unable—and unwilling—to procreate whatsoever.

### *Substance Use and Getting Wasted*

Another surplus population considered for the subject of the fourth chapter was that of alcoholics, drug users, and others either experimenting with or addicted to consciousness-altering substances. In our lexical taxonomy of waste in the dissertation introduction, we noted that the adjective “wasted” often denotes substance use, and that “getting wasted,” used pejoratively, “entails becoming like material waste” (Alworth, 65). Under hygienic and productivist discourse, getting wasted is a waste—of normal, healthy biological functioning and of labor power, respectively.

If mind-altering substances are viewed as contaminants, then substance use makes the user wasted in a biochemical sense as well. In his analysis of the relationship between *Naked Lunch*, embodiment, and late capitalism, Christopher Breu argues that heroin is the “ultimate commodity” insofar as it is a “superaddictive drug that interacts directly with the substance of the body, reshaping and reorganizing it on a microcellular level” (210). A literary study of waste and drug culture might examine the interplay between consumerism and the physiological facets of contamination in the work of Burroughs, or more contemporary drug-heavy fiction like David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest* (1996) or Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice* (2009).

*The Future of Waste Management*

As noted in “Tracing Trash,” the central role waste plays across Don DeLillo’s body of work, especially in *White Noise* (1985) and *Underworld* (1997), lends itself to plentiful analysis by waste scholars. Our focus on trash in Chapter One precluded the novel’s several other representations of waste, from nuclear waste to e-waste, the importance of which have only grown since its publication.

Perhaps the most multifaceted and underexplored development of waste in the contemporary moment is its commodification by the waste management industry. As of the 1994 implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, trash is designated as a “primary commodity” alongside food and tobacco (Ghosn and Jazairy, 42). The major industry players, such as Republic Services, Inc and Cleanaway Waste Management Limited, have generated billions of dollars of revenue in recent years (Szcepanski, Cleanaway). The waste management industry has thus produced an official, economically-sanctioned reclamation of waste as a lucrative commodity exhibiting exchange-value—a relatively recent historical development that considerably complicates any analyses of waste going forward. As waste-executive Nick Shay reveals in *Underworld*, “the best kept secret in the world” is that waste is, in fact, extremely profitable (DeLillo, 281).

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