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This dissertation reexamines the critical orthodoxies of postmodern American literature by attending to the everyday objects that populate the worlds of narrative texts written from the 1960s to the first decade of the new millennium. Whereas the majority of literary and cultural critics, from Fredric Jameson to Linda Hutcheon to K. Anthony Appiah, argue that postmodernism can be best understood in terms of a commitment to the demystification of social arrangements that seem natural, this project proposes that what makes literature postmodern is a dedication to the ongoing material construction of the social. Beginning with the most mundane items in works of fiction by Leslie Marmon Silko, Don DeLillo, John Barth, Toni Morrison, and others, “Postmodern Materialism” charts the complex interactions of vast arrays of subjects and objects in the assembly of social groups. The resulting inquiry offers two important benefits: 1) a new approach to postmodernism in general through a rereading of postmodern fiction; 2) a unique methodology for assessing the relationship between things and people that reveals the fluidity of, and thus the possibility for remaking, our social structures. By showcasing the simplest components of the social, the project of postmodernism can be seen, I maintain, as calling our attention not so much away from ourselves and our preoccupations as toward the material world that we all share. Such a shift in consideration does necessitate, however, a theoretical movement away from human essence as the gravitational center of our social relations, thus precluding an overly reductive comparison between people that more often than not results in the exclusion, alienation, or marginalization of individuals

and groups based on actual or perceived differences. Along these lines, I conclude that postmodern fiction is especially well-suited for a critical remaking of the social because it is attuned to the ways in which the social is constantly being fashioned by the world of material objects.

POSTMODERN MATERIALISM: THINGS, PEOPLE, AND THE REMAKING  
OF THE SOCIAL IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NARRATIVE

by

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For Jenny. I love you the most.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION: POSTMODERNISM IS NOT POSTMATERIALISM

In their academy-award winning film *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (2004), director Michel Gondry and screenwriter Charlie Kaufman assemble a cinematic narrative that tests the boundaries of memory and consciousness. Protagonist Joel Barish (Jim Carrey) falls in love with the zany and mercurial Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet), but the relationship eventually turns sour and Clementine undergoes a memory-erasing procedure to wipe Joel from her mind entirely. When Joel discovers that he has been erased, he decides to reciprocate and have Clementine erased from his memory. The doctor instructs Joel to go home and retrieve every object, memento, and keepsake of any kind that might remind him of his relationship with Clementine so that these items can be used to construct a map of Joel's brain, which will enable the doctor and his technicians to locate the relevant memories of Clementine and delete them. Joel returns with art supplies, coffee mugs, potatoes he and Clementine had dressed as people, two garbage bags full of things. The technician situates Joel in a chair topped with a brain scanner that resembles a hair dryer at a salon, sets the first object down in front of him—a snow globe—and asks him to “react” to the object. Joel begins by explaining that there is a funny story that accompanies the snow globe, but the technician interrupts and says that he will actually get a better read out if Joel refrains from any verbal explanations of the thing and simply focuses on the memories. Speech, in this scenario, is unnecessary

because the objects alone are enough to generate the necessary brain activity to create the map. The objects are essential to Joel's memories because they were central to the actions and events from which those memories were formed. Without the objects the initial events would not have happened and the memories themselves would not exist in the first place.

Much like the snow globes, coffee mugs, and potatoes that shape and then ultimately become material manifestations of Joel's relationship with Clementine, our lives are populated with everyday material things that are not merely symbolic of our social interactions but also constitutive of them. Without these seemingly mundane objects the organization of our experiences would be entirely different. This potential difference—the possibility of an alternative social arrangement in light of the significance of things—is a prevalent theme in the literature of the postwar period in the United States. And yet, in considerations of an era typically identified with the Beat movement, the counter-cultural revolution, protests on college campuses, the Cold War, and the alleged “end of history,” the material circumstances of daily life often take a back seat to the more sensational conflicts over information and ideas. But are these more lofty and abstract movements, uprisings, and rebellions not the products of everyday interactions between people and things? The chapters that follow offer a rationale and a methodology for reconsidering writers and texts from this so-called “postmodern” age at a time when postmodernism, as such, seems at best to be fading from our critical vocabulary, or, at worst, to have become for many a prime example of our failures to effect true social and political change. This reappraisal is grounded in the materiality of

everyday life, and intended to uncover an important connection between the circulation of things and people in relation to one another. The results offer two important benefits: 1) a new approach to postmodernism in general through a rereading of postmodern fiction; 2) a unique methodology for assessing the relationship between things and people that reveals the fluidity of our social structures.

This project takes its title from two familiar theoretical terms: “postmodernism” and “materialism,” both of which have had an indelible impact on literary and cultural criticism over the last half century. Postmodernism is an infamously amorphous and contentious word, used endearingly as often as it is disparagingly. In studies of literature and culture this term tends to designate a body of texts characterized by the zeitgeist of deconstruction, demystification, and experimentation.<sup>1</sup> However, one fundamental element has been all but overlooked in such conversations: the importance of the material world in postmodern literature. Unlike postmodernism, materialism is, on the surface at least, a more conventional concept. In the Western tradition, materialism has typically denoted two schools of thought: classical antiquity’s “ontological question about the basic stuff of the universe and how it is organized” and the European Enlightenment’s “experimental method of the new physics and its refusal of non-material explanations of physical processes” (Frow 26-27). In the twentieth century, Marx’s influence on literary theory has led to the evolution of an historical and cultural materialism that—while insightful and indispensable—has shifted materialist inquiry from the material domain of “basic stuff” to the forces of economic and social production as the building blocks for the structures of society.<sup>2</sup> While certain writers and texts in the postwar era have been

tagged with the postmodern label, discussion of materialism in this literature has focused on demystifying the social forces such as race, class, and nation that supposedly produce culture rather than on the material constitution of the social itself.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in reexamining the critical orthodoxies of postmodernism in light of the “basic stuff” that provides “material explanations” for the social, “Postmodern Materialism: Things, People, and the Remaking of the Social in Contemporary American Narrative” shows that an attunement to the material objects of everyday life and their roles in shaping relations among people is what makes fiction postmodern.

For all their mundanity, everyday things have a long and complicated philosophical résumé. And so it seems fair to ask, what do I mean by things? John Frow’s references to classical antiquity and the European Enlightenment above suggest what James Knapp and Jeffrey Pence state explicitly in their special issue of *Poetics Today* entitled “Between Thing and Theory” (2003): “the ‘thing itself’ is among the most seductive and elusive notions in the history of Western metaphysics” (654). Even if we were to confine ourselves to studies of the “thing itself” in the twentieth century alone we would be forced to grapple with everything from Bertrand Russell’s chapters on the existence and nature of matter in *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912) to Martin Heidegger’s 1950 lecture on “Das Ding” eventually translated and published as “The Thing” in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971) to Donald Winnicott’s psychoanalytic theory of “transitional objects” in *Playing and Reality* (1971).<sup>4</sup> More recently and closer to home in the world of literary and cultural studies, theorists such as Susan Stewart, Bill Brown, and Barbara Johnson have considered the effects of things in the interactions

among human subjects. Where Stewart is concerned primarily with collections and souvenirs, Brown with a theory of things, and Johnson with a philosophy and poetics of subjectivity and objectivity, I want to look at the literal, material things of everyday life themselves.<sup>5</sup> When I reference things, objects, stuff, or the materiality of everyday life, what I mean are the Coke bottles, balls of twine, socks, baseballs, toy drums, cigarette butts, target arrows, and rings that populate the worlds of the fictional narratives under investigation.<sup>6</sup> I avoid overtly symbolic things such as photographs, artistic things such as paintings or sculptures, propertied things such as houses or land, and things typically scrutinized by psychoanalysts such as Winnicott or Jacques Lacan as objects of desire, transference, or loss.<sup>7</sup> I focus instead on the kinds of things that do not appear to carry such obvious cultural or aesthetic significance. Thus, postmodern materialism is not merely an exercise in interpreting the social as it is represented in things, but an explication of what a character in Walter Abish's novel *How German Is It?* (1979) calls the "thingliness intrinsic to all things" (19 original emphasis). While many studies of things in themselves are philosophical attempts to better understand human subjects in juxtaposition to nonhuman objects, I am interested in what the "thingliness" of things tells us about the larger social networks in which all subjects and objects live and operate.

Rather than following the philosophical and sociological approaches of so many theorists who have set out to understand postwar literature, I do not begin with the social phenomena I think may provide an explanation for the order of things. For instance, many literary critics turn to important writers such as Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard and their work on media, Jean-François Lyotard and his theory of the master narrative, or

Fredric Jameson and his cultural logic of late capitalism, but I turn to everyday things, most recently popularized as a method of inquiry by thinkers such as Brown and Johnson in literary studies, and perhaps most notably Bruno Latour in the realm of social and science studies.<sup>8</sup> The reason for this methodological about-face is that, as Latour has modeled in his assessment of sociological theory, I want to avoid confusing what I “should explain with the explanation” (8). In other words, when we direct our attention to the material domain of the texts that we have been told often takes the deconstruction of familiar social categories as its primary aim, what we discover is that postmodern fiction is not invested in the preexistence of these categories in the first place. Instead, fiction often characterized as postmodern is most interested in the literal construction of the social out of the various material objects that populate its narrative worlds. The social, then, is always a product that is being made and remade by the arrangement and rearrangement of material objects and human subjects into unique and fluid networks. The great insight of postmodernism is not so much that our social collectives are constructed out of some abstract forces and ties and thereby fake or somehow inauthentic, but that the social is constructed out of literal materials and therefore open to reconstruction.<sup>9</sup>

To chart the construction of the social from its most ordinary material components is to describe the very events and entities that we often rely upon to explain other phenomena. That is, to begin with the most quotidian of objects and interactions is to explain the power of the social rather than taking that power for granted as an unseen force that orders associations between things and people. This methodological

commitment grows out of a principal tenet in the work of Michel Foucault, one that he articulates with lucid concision in *Les Mots et les choses*, literally translated *Words and things*, but published under the English title *The Order of Things*. In his chapter on “Representing,” Foucault distinguishes between two basic forms of comparison: that of measurement and that of order. “Measurement,” Foucault explains,

presupposes that [...] one considers the whole first and then divides it up into parts. [...] Order, on the other hand, is established without reference to an exterior unit [...] one cannot know the order of things ‘in their isolated nature,’ but by discovering that which is the simplest, then that which is next simplest, one can progress inevitably to the most complex things of all. (53)

Mapping the construction of social aggregates, I follow Foucault’s theory of order, keeping in mind the difficulties of this task as enumerated by Latour. After all, as Latour has noted,

no one was more precise in his analytical decomposition of the tiny ingredients from which power is made and no one was more critical of social explanations. And yet, as soon as Foucault was translated, he was immediately turned into the one who had ‘revealed’ power relations *behind* every innocuous activity. (*Reassembling* 86n original emphasis)

The translation of *Les Mots et les choses* itself might be read as first-rate evidence of Latour’s observation, but in reexamining the critical orthodoxies of postmodern literature “Postmodern Materialism” resurrects Foucault’s methodology of order by working from the most simple of objects to the dizzying complexity of social collectives.

I reassess the most important theoretical components of postmodernism through a materialist reading of postmodern fiction, which I conceive of as an inductive analysis of



texts that begins with mundane, everyday material objects as actors in the formation of larger and more multifaceted social networks. In his seminal study *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, Brown offers a strong rationale for troubling the boundaries of Marxist materialism in particular when he describes the “gambit” of his work as the tradeoff of “sacrific[ing] the clarity of thinking about things as objects of consumption, on the one hand, in order to see how, on the other, our relation to things cannot be explained by the cultural logic of capitalism” (5-6). But he also points out that a key factor prompting his study is the question of “why literary critics, historians, and anthropologists might have turned their attention to things in the midst of the ‘abstraction [that] increasingly determines our lives’—an updated, intensified version of the abstraction said, by Simmel and others, to characterize modernity” (19). Having just spoken of Henry James’s representation of material objects in *The American Scene* (1907) as a prefiguring of the “postmodern fate of the object,” and “the artistic reproduction of ‘objects as they’re felt, not as they are,’” it seems safe to infer that Brown imagines the fiction and theory of postmodernism as the apotheosis of modernity’s abstractions.<sup>10</sup> Brown’s implicit, and at times explicit, characterization of a fundamentally abstract postmodernism—cultural instead of material—should be no surprise given the legacy of Debord, Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Jameson, who assert that postmodernism renders all experience cultural.<sup>11</sup> Whereas critics like Linda Hutcheon have offered the counterargument that the very work of postmodern theory and fiction is to reveal that everything has always been cultural,<sup>12</sup> I reread postmodern fiction to argue that postmodernism construes culture itself as a product of material arrangements, and

more specifically to propose that postmodernism is not, quite literally speaking, postmaterialism.

But if a materialist reading as I define it asks us to reimagine the entire critical discourse of postmodernism, then why retain postmodernism as a framework at all? Why not simply dispense with this clunky term and its attendant problems and blaze an entirely new materialist trail? There are two primary reasons for continuing to utilize this fraught aesthetic and historical marker. First, one common thread that weaves its way through nearly every critical discussion of postmodernism is the idea of social construction. That is, the concept of social construction has dominated the fictional and theoretical discourse of postmodernism to the extent that the two terms have nearly become synonymous. Michael Bérubé, for instance, wrestles with the ambiguity surrounding postmodernism by exclaiming with some resignation that “it’s hard to determine the relevant facts and features of pomo when so much of pomo has questioned how ‘facticity’ is constructed” (122). I maintain postmodernism as a useful framework because the recognizable body of texts that seems committed to enacting this idea of constructedness specially enables us to ask an important question that has heretofore gone unasked: constructed out of what? If our facts, our social categories, our knowledge of past and present are all constructed, then what are the materials out of which they have been and are being constructed? It is my contention that there is an identifiable tendency to emphasize the significance of everyday material objects as constituent actors in the construction of the social in much of the fiction published from the late 1960s to the end of the century.

Second, my readings suggest that postmodern fiction offers a distinctive representation of the relationship between material objects and human subjects in the literary history of the United States. Whereas, by and large, most of American literature up through the first half of the twentieth century seems to imagine objects and subjects as inherently and ontologically different, fiction of the postwar era envisions the relationship between the two more in terms of Latour's useful questions about the role of subjects and objects in the formation of social ties. "The questions to ask about any agent," Latour insists, "are simply the following: Does it make a difference in the course of some other agent's action or not? Is there some trial that allows someone to detect this difference?" (*Reassembling* 71). Postmodern fiction asks and answers these questions regardless of the nature of the agent, rendering it especially well suited for a remaking of the social because it is dependent not on ethereal social forces or preexisting social categories, but, to borrow a term from Latour, on the human and nonhuman "actors" that constitute the Social.

### **The Agency of Objects**

From the earliest exploratory voyages to the most recent novels, the literature of the United States abounds with all kinds of objects that carry special significance: merchantable commodities in Thomas Harriot's exploration narrative; portrait miniatures in the early novels of Charles Brockden Brown and Lydia Maria Child; the preaching license so long withheld from William Apess; Frederick Douglass's root; Nathaniel Hawthorne's scarlet letter; the spoils of Henry James's *Poynton*; Susan Glaspell's trifles; William Carlos Williams's red wheelbarrow; Ralph Ellison's calfskin briefcase; August

Wilson's piano; the things carried by Tim O'Brien's Vietnam platoon; the myriad personal items unearthed in the rubble of the World Trade Center towers in novels of the last decade by Ken Kalfus, Claire Messud, Jay McInerney, and others. From the mundane to the symbolic, these everyday objects play significant roles in the experiences of the characters who make, buy, give, use, and lose them. And yet, throughout most of this literary history, there is a common tendency to view objects and human subjects as ontologically different. That is, objects have primarily been conceptualized as inert and essentially subject to the agency of human beings. Sometimes that distinction is naturalized and not an explicit element of textual discourse. At other times it is used as an explicit means of denying the rights and privileges of personhood to certain groups of people.<sup>13</sup> In other cases still it is an overt feature of the literary aesthetic, for instance, in the modernist poetics of H.D., Pound, and Williams. In one of the most insightful moments of his introduction to *A Sense of Things*, Brown rereads William Carlos Williams's famous dictum "no ideas but in things" by insinuating that this battle cry should be regarded as

a slip of the pen: a claim—on behalf of replacing abstractions with physical facts—that unwittingly invests objects with interiority, whereas Williams meant to evacuate objects of their insides and to arrest their doubleness, their vertiginous capacity to be both things and signs (symbols, metonyms, or metaphors) of something else. (11)

Here lies the essence of literary modernism, and yet I would argue that the disjunction Brown reads in Williams's maxim is perhaps even more representative of the modernist mode than the pronouncement itself. That is, at the heart of much American literature up

through the first half of the twentieth century we find an elemental split between ideas and things, between subjects and objects. However, when we come to the fiction of postmodernism, this divide becomes much less of a chasm and more of a question, begging us to rethink our relationship with the material world.

This reexamination of postmodernism in light of the material accomplishes at least two important goals. First, it demonstrates that postmodernism is not an abstract, immaterial aesthetic, but resolutely material in its commitment to the importance of everyday objects. Everyday materiality is crucial because it shows that the social networks formed by the interaction of human and nonhuman actors can be reformed into different configurations to enfranchise the marginalized, or perhaps at least to dilute the chorus of existing narratives of the social. Rather than merely revealing that the cultural logic of late capitalism drives the society of the spectacle and holds us hostage to the precession of simulacra, postmodern fiction demonstrates the material possibility of remaking society. Thus, the second major goal of this project is to add a material dimension to Hutcheon's, Paul Maltby's and others' assertions that postmodern fiction is relentlessly political and not apolitical, isolationist, or merely playful. Hutcheon claims that postmodernism denaturalizes political structures that seem hegemonic (*Politics* 34), and Maltby posits that despite its "institutional base" in the academy, postmodernism has the power to subvert dominant political discourse (18-19). I would add that an attention to postmodernism's preoccupation with the materiality of everyday life extends and revolutionizes these arguments by breaking them free from the chains of existing political and social structures to which they are currently beholden, and further, offering the

rearrangeable mundane objects of postmodern fiction as the basis for this aesthetic's political efficacy.

If objects are going to serve as the simplest and most basic constituents of the social in this treatment of postwar literature, then we must also be willing to attribute to them some form of agency, resistance, or singularity. Philosophical discussions of the agency of objects tend to differentiate between those mired in human determination and those that retain some independence from human meaning. The former are typically classified as “objects” and the latter as “things.” Most famously, perhaps, Heidegger discusses the thing in juxtaposition to the object in his essay “The Thing,” where he calls on a clay jug as his primary example. In its ability to stand on its own, the vessel is characterized, for Heidegger, by “the self-supporting independence of something independent” and thus it “differs from an object.” He goes on to explain that “when we take the jug as a made vessel, then surely we are apprehending it—so it seems—as a thing and never as a mere object” (166-67). Brown's pioneering essay “Thing Theory” carries this philosophical discussion into the realm of literary theory, not through a jug, but through a window in A.S. Byatt's novel *The Biographer's Tale*. Brown concentrates on a dirty window that causes one of Byatt's characters to look at, instead of through, the glass. “We begin to confront the thingness of objects,” Brown postulates, “when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily” (4). I often use the terms “object” and “thing” interchangeably to denote literal items because of the tediousness of

the language and because most of these items can be understood in both philosophical senses in their respective texts. However, I have chosen the word “Things” as the designator for the material in my title because it is the independence of things, their capacity to resist human determination, to stand alone, to contain stories that is most illuminating when attempting to account for their agency as we move from the simplest to the most complex arrangements of subjects and objects in the remaking of the social.

By framing my analysis with material things and not a theoretical concept such as poststructuralism or deconstruction, or a typical social marker such as class or nation, I am able to trace the circulation of everyday things throughout and across narratives to see what kinds of social collectives get constructed rather than looking to the texts to ask what they can tell us about seemingly prefabricated communities. Thus, each analytical venture into the world of a given text focuses on a specific object or set of objects and works inductively from these things to discern how the social is being made and remade. What becomes apparent as this methodology is employed across the corpus of postmodern fiction is that the very idea of making and remaking the social is the bedrock of postmodernism’s theory of social relations. Paradoxically, then, fluidity is the constant. Because this phenomenon is pervasive throughout so much of the fiction published in the second half of the last century, I have chosen to focus on a handful of texts that I submit are representative both historically and aesthetically. From the denaturalizations of race, gender, class, and nation that saturate postwar literature to the experimental and metafictional writings of the 1960s and 1970s, to the historiographic metafiction popularized in the 1970s and 1980s, to the representations of the so-called

end of history in the 1990s and beyond, this project calls on a cross section of novels and stories to demonstrate the importance of material things across the historical and aesthetic landscape of postmodern fiction. This selection of primary texts includes narratives that demonstrate successful remakings of the social as well as narratives in which the promise of remaking proves elusive as people and things sometimes settle back into the parameters of familiar social categories. While the former brand is perhaps the more pleasurable of the two, the latter is typically more stark and forward in its representation of the potential of the material as the benefits of material remaking are withheld in favor of maintaining the status quo. Both forms heighten the role of things in the organization of the social lives of people.

Although this material methodology does not originate with my inquiry into the everyday things of postmodern fiction, this study extends the recently-dubbed “new materialism” conversation in literary studies in at least two substantial ways. First, an attention to the “object matter of American literature,” as Brown calls it, has not been carried into the postwar era. Despite its self-proclaimed emphasis on “providing a prehistory of consumer subjectivity and agency” and “the discursive processes through which commodities first became identified as privileged vehicles of subjective expression and civic identification,” Lori Merish’s path-breaking *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2000) offers illuminating treatments of a variety of “domestic artifacts” from the late eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries (2, 90). Brown’s *A Sense of Things* (2003) provides the fullest enactment of his new materialist “thing theory,” articulated in the article of the



same name, and in other venues such as the interdisciplinary collection *Material Powers: Cultural Studies, History, and the Material Turn* (2010). Brown's analyses, although partially pitched in response to the perceived abstraction of late twentieth-century fiction and theory, focus on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American writers such as Mark Twain, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Henry James. And in the philosophically-flavored *Persons and Things* (2008), Barbara Johnson extends the consideration of things into the world of literary modernism with her treatment of the "self-consciously *unpoetic*" objects in Marianne Moore's poetry (28 original emphasis). In my treatment of writers that span the historical and aesthetic plane of postmodern fiction, from John Barth to Leslie Marmon Silko to Don DeLillo, I push this discussion into a literary period as yet unexamined by this new materialist methodology.

### **The Social Is Not a Substance**

This study also extends the "new materialism" of literary studies by building on Brown's claim that a new materialism has arisen "that is irreducible to Marxism" ("The Matter" 60) and John Frow's assertion that "the writings of Marx thus have little to do with the traditional preoccupations of philosophical materialism" ("Matter" 29). This project fills a gap in theorizing social relations created by the movement away from Marxist social theory. Far from being a mere historical extension of "new materialism" in general or of Brown's "thing theory" in particular, "Postmodern Materialism" analyzes everyday things in contemporary fiction in order to get out from under the weight of existing social categories. For when we undertake an analysis of any text, whether it be literary, legal, theological, if we begin that process with the framework of a familiar

social category such race, nation, class, or gender, then we may come up with a new way of understanding the category, but we will ultimately still end up within the parameters of the category. Thus, I focus the analytical chapters of this study on the mundane, everyday, quotidian interaction of objects and subjects to see what kinds of material configurations lead to the formation of social structures, rather than starting with the social structures themselves. One distinctive benefit of this attention to the material is that it redirects what cultural capital the concept of postmodernism may have left toward the reconstructive agency of postmodern fiction.

This literary methodology owes a great debt to the sociological work of Latour, especially his influential *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. The weight of Latour's work in *Reassembling the Social* rests on a subtle yet significant distinction between two basic approaches to understanding the relations we call social. The first approach he calls the "sociology of the social" and the second he calls the "sociology of associations." Under the sociology of the social, society or the social order is a "domain of reality" distinct from "other domains such as economics, geography, biology, psychology, law, science, and politics" (3). This approach imagines the social as a phenomenon, a force, a substance that can be used to explain other phenomena, and it has dominated sociology for the last century becoming "common sense not only for social scientists, but also for ordinary actors via newspapers, college education, party politics, bar conversations, love stories, fashion magazines, etc." (4). Under the sociology of associations, on the other hand, there exists no "social force," no substance that we might identify as social. Instead, the social is what is gathered by other

kinds of material connectors, hence actor-network-theory. Latour articulates the distinction succinctly early on:

whereas sociologists (or socio-economists, socio-linguists, social psychologists, etc.) take social aggregates as the given that could shed some light on residual aspects of economics, linguistics, psychology, management, and so on, these other scholars, on the contrary, consider social aggregates as what should be explained by the specific *associations* provided by economics, linguistics, psychology, law, management, etc. (5 original emphasis)

This distinction leads Latour to value material objects, or what he calls “nonhuman actors,” equally with human actors in an effort to account “for how society is held together, instead of using society to explain something else” (13), and also privileges the idea of “worknets” as an optimal model for conceptualizing the social where “it’s the work and the movement, and the flow, and the changes that should be stressed” (143).

What happens when we stop treating the social as a preexisting substance whose presence can help us account for the way things are, and start investigating the material interactions and relations of human and nonhuman actors?

“Postmodern Materialism” considers the ramifications of this approach for literary analysis if not by continuing to develop the familiar social categories that are often used as frames for reading literature (i.e. what can this text tell us about race, class, etc.), then by tracing an explanation for the social and its fluid networks predominantly in the material domain of postmodern fiction. The essential problem with treating the social as a definable substance is that it necessitates a certain level of stasis. In other words, to assume that the social is comprised of different categories such as race, class, nation, and gender is to imagine it as a rubric whose dimensions are established and well-known.

There is no getting outside the rubric. The only variation possible can be found in the extent to which the rubric is fulfilled. Mapping this framework onto the things and people that make up the social unavoidably paints them into static corners where we claim to be able to know, understand, and define race in its entirety, gender in its entirety, and so on. This method is the “measurement” mode of comparison mentioned earlier by Foucault, and it cannot account for either the daily or epic change that the literature of the postwar period is said by many to represent. Thus, instead of treating the social as a substance, I redirect our critical gaze from the larger categories that we generally think of as making up the social to the more quotidian and simple things whose movements and interactions can account for the constant formation of the social itself.

The resulting analysis leads to a redefinition of postmodernism in general and postmodern fiction in particular as a new materialist aesthetic committed to the making and remaking of the social. However, I am not prepared to jettison the crucial lineage of postmodern philosophy and theory handed down from the pivotal thinkers mentioned earlier, including Baudrillard, Lyotard, and Ihab Hassan, Jameson, Andreas Huyssen, and Hutcheon. Each of these influential critics has suggested in his or her own way that what makes a literary text postmodern is its capacity to revisit existing political and social structures. For Baudrillard, postmodernism reveals a nostalgic longing for a past that does not exist, while Lyotard sees postmodernism as a critique of such nostalgic master narratives. Some, like Jameson, believe this repetition to be politically impotent, while others, like Hutcheon, regard this return as a complicit yet critical subversion of dominant political ideologies. In each of these cases, what makes literature postmodern is its

capacity to critique, deconstruct, demystify existing social narratives and structures, and this capacity is valuable. However, when we reexamine the social as “worknet” composed of various actors, what becomes apparent is that the critical, deconstructive power of postmodern fiction is actually the product of its constructive capacity. In other words, it is only the making and remaking of ever-unique and fluid social networks that renders the static categories obsolete. Thus, I am not denying the demystifying powers of postmodernism as outlined by influential and insightful theorists; I am merely asking us to reconsider such definitions in light of the material construction of the social fundamental to the postmodern project and evidenced especially in fiction.

This redefinition resonates closely on some levels with Brian McHale’s interest in postmodern fiction as representative of a shift in what he calls the dominant.<sup>14</sup> Rather than concerning itself primarily with epistemological questions, postmodern fiction, McHale argues, is predominantly invested in questions of ontology. His seminal 1987 study *Postmodernist Fiction* illustrates this argument in a flurry of illuminating readings that trace the literary trajectories of Beckett, Robbe-Grillet, Fuentes, Nabokov, Coover, and Pynchon across multiple texts within each writer’s corpus. McHale convincingly demonstrates a discernible shift from a prevailing attention to questions about knowledge to questions about being. Somewhat similarly, my own inquiry is focused more so on “what is there,” or the ontological, rather than on “how we know it,” or the epistemological. The significant difference between our respective studies is that McHale remains interested in the ontological as an abstract mode of philosophical inquiry, while I am interested in the ontic realm, the literal being of material actors, both nonhuman and

human. Ultimately, where most critics and philosophers define postmodernism as a critique of naturalized social and political structures or a revelation of dominant cultural modes, I define postmodernism as a material construction of the social, and contend that these subsequent critiques and revelations are the products of this construction, much like existing generations of iPhones are only rendered obsolete by the development of new generations of iPhones.

The implications of this reexamination of the critical discourse of postmodernism also reach beyond the realm of literary studies and beyond the twentieth century, where we find critics looking back on this seemingly outdated concept. At the turn of the millennium, for instance, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri extend Jameson's "cultural logic of late capital" and Daniel Bell's characterization of postmodernism as coextensive with post-industrialism to build the case that

the postmodern situation is eminently paradoxical when considered from a biopolitical point of view [...] On the one hand, in this situation all the forces of society tend to be activated as productive forces; but on the other hand, these same forces are submitted to a global domination that is continually more abstract and thus blind to the sense of the apparatuses of the reproduction of life. (64)<sup>15</sup>

Hardt and Negri consider the political implications of what they call postmodernization as one stage in the dialectical "succession of economic paradigms since the Middle Ages" where the global economy has shifted away from its modern foundation built on industry to a more abstract and immaterial foundation of services and information (280). Under this rubric, postmodernism is just as immaterial as it seems in the literary theory of Jameson or Hutcheon. It is this postmodernism that Terry Eagleton imagines as the

denouncement of “dreams of ambitious change [...] as illicit ‘grand narratives’” (45). However, if we turn our critical gaze away from the ethereal “forces” of power and toward the literally-material constitution and construction of such forces then the attendant problems of this postmodernization process can be better understood or even remedied. When we follow Foucault and Latour and no longer substitute “an invisible, unmovable, and homogeneous world of power for itself” (*Reassembling* 86), when we look instead at the hosts of human and nonhuman actors that compose the networks that make up our social world, we will be able to see the possibilities for remaking those networks.<sup>16</sup>

The material promise of remaking the social also has the capacity to contribute to any number of critical conversations regarding race, class, nation, and gender without merely reifying these categories as static and making them organizing principles of a literary and theoretical study. While some have leveled criticism at postmodern conceptions of class, as we have seen in the works of the Marxist critics above from Jameson to Eagleton to Hardt and Negri, others have criticized postmodern theories of race, gender, and nation for casting such markers as mere linguistic constructs. In her 1994 review of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, Jayne Chong-Soon Lee summarizes Appiah’s ontology of race as something that cannot be analyzed “from within frameworks that already assume biological difference” (753). Lee complains that, for Appiah, “any conception of race that is significant is really just culture in disguise” (770). She goes on to charge that the “most important weakness of Appiah’s dismissal of race is that in declaring biological and

essential conceptions of race useless and dangerous, he fails to recognize that race is defined not by its inherent content, but by the social relations that construct it” (772). But Lee does not take into account Appiah’s theory of the “manufacture of otherness” that I take up in Chapter 2 and which actually provides a more grounded theory of race than the “social relations” upon which Lee relies. Addressing the same problem in broader terms, Rey Chow has offered the more nuanced argument that the language of theory and of poststructuralism in particular has had a profound effect on “multiculturalism, postcoloniality, and ethnicity” and that “in the face of the practical struggles that go on daily against different forms of social injustice, it is, for many, unacceptable to declare, in accordance with poststructuralist theoretical logic, that these versions of X do not exist” (178, 180). She goes on to diagnose our political and intellectual climate:

The conundrum we face today in the wake of theory may thus be described as follows: In their attempts to argue the specificity of their objects of study, critics of marginalized historical areas often must rhetorically assert their resistance to or distrust of Western theory. (180)

But in each of these cases a materialist reading can revolutionize the legacy of Western theory in the second half of the twentieth century by demonstrating the value and reconstructive agency of even the most mundane objects.

If the social can be reconsidered as a fluid network of material interactions as opposed to a collection of forces that disenfranchise and marginalize, then what becomes clear is that the social configurations that result in disenfranchisement and marginalization can be remade through the reorganization of their material components. If everything human and nonhuman is, to use Latour’s terminology, a mediator instead of



an intermediary,<sup>17</sup> then altering the relationship between even the most ordinary objects can have a serious impact on the larger networks in which those objects operate. Locating the material at the supposedly absent center of postmodern fiction transforms our understanding of this body of literature by uncovering its generative and constructive potential. Rather than serving as representative of the need for deconstruction, critique, and demystification, a materialist reading of postmodern fiction reveals these approaches to be facets of a larger constructive process in which the social is being constantly made and remade as a fluid network of human and nonhuman actors. Thus, change is possible because all actors are significant, not because the configurations of actors are fake, inauthentic, or purely linguistic.

### **The Social In Process**

“Postmodern Materialism” also adds a material dimension to the theory of social construction by demonstrating how the fiction of the last half century relies especially on the significance of everyday objects in its remaking of the social. Novels such as Silko’s *Ceremony* and Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping* enact the remaking of the social despite the best laid plans of characters who seek to maintain the status quo. DeLillo’s *Underworld*, Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, and Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* chart the circulation of things and people in the assembly of social networks that renders familiar social categories obsolete, or at least less potent. Fiction by Barth, David Foster Wallace, and Jonathan Lethem bogs down in its attempts to remake the social, highlighting the supreme tragedy of allowing the possibilities of the material domain to remain unrealized. From the earliest text, Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968)

to the most recent text, Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003), the fiction I identify as postmodern exhibits a unique relationship between material objects and the everyday lives of the characters who come in contact with them. These texts imagine this relationship as especially fluid because of their vision of material objects as coextensive with human subjects in the construction of the social and because of the significance they allot to material objects as the constituent elements of the otherwise ethereal forces we imagine as constitutive of the social. Each of the chapters is thus organized around movements of ideas and things rather than around a central text or author. The first moves from critique to construction; the second from otherness to what I call inclination; the third from poststructuralism to postmodernism; and the fourth from knowledge to experience. This arrangement suggests that there are no abstract power structures that exist "out there" somewhere. Instead, there are only material structures that are made, and thus can be remade to enfranchise the marginalized or at least to dilute the influence of existing narratives of the social.

Along these lines chapter 1, "Recollecting the Social: From Critique to Critical Construction" argues that postmodern fiction shifts the locus of social relations from human essence to the material interactions of human and nonhuman actors through its reconstruction of familiar social categories such as race, nation, and gender. Here I focus on collections of everyday objects compiled by characters in Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980) to show that what becomes apparent in any close reading of postmodern fiction is that it is not merely critical or deconstructive. In other words, postmodern critique is not essentially a matter of revealing that the social

collectives we perceive as natural are, in fact, constructed. The central problem I take up in this first chapter is that “constructed” is more often than not taken to mean fake, inauthentic, unnatural, or artificial. But when we turn to the material objects that populate the worlds of Silko’s and Robinson’s novels we find concrete actors participating in the formation of these naturalized categories. The consequences of familiar social markers such as race and nation are certainly real, so why should we conceptualize the markers themselves as artificial? My contention is that postmodern fiction does no such thing. Instead, and with much more proficiency than has been recognized to date, postmodernism provides a material, process-oriented way of thinking about the social phenomena that such familiar categories attempt to express. This materialist, in-process approach accounts for the significance of all human and nonhuman actors in the constant construction of social collectives, from the Coke bottles collected by one of Silko’s characters to Ruth, the protagonist of Robinson’s novel, to the socks collected by Ruth’s grandmother.

Working in conversation with well-known postmodern theorists and scholars of Native literature alike, Chapter 1 also reads Silko and Robinson to demonstrate the importance of minimizing the distinction between human and nonhuman actors in the assembly of the social. In the Euro-American literary tradition, this idea is relatively unique to the postmodern mode. However, critics such as Paula Gunn Allen and Craig Womack and novelists such as Silko and Linda Hogan reveal that facile distinctions between “manmade” and “natural” things have oftentimes been of little importance in the traditions of Native writers. In *Ceremony* and *Housekeeping* the elevated recognition of

material objects collected by various characters reveals a constant networking, or gathering of things that indicates the social is always under construction, even when some characters may be actively working to preserve the status quo. These collections are not only representative or symbolic of the materialist brand of social construction I have in mind here, but are also active agents in making and remaking the social along with the characters in the novels.

Chapter 2, “Narrating the Social: From Otherness to Inclination,” charts the circulation of two specific material objects in novels by DeLillo and Alvarez to reread “otherness” as a classic feature of postmodern discourse. Whereas Chapter 1 concentrates on collections of objects to demonstrate the obsolescence of familiar social categories in the face of in-process networks, this chapter zeroes in on two singular things to show that otherness, or difference more generally, is the product of material inclinations between actors. Following the trajectories of these objects through their respective texts reveals that a central feature of postmodern fiction is its valuation of the material even at the level of the narrative. While opponents and proponents of postmodernism seem to agree that one of its most important characteristics is a celebration of difference, a materialist reading of this fiction shows that “otherness” is not foundational but a constantly-remade effect of ever-shifting arrangements, or inclinations, of actors in relation to one another. DeLillo and Alvarez both structure their novels, in part, around material objects, and in the process create connections between a variety of entities that defy the stratification of the social into essentially different and preexisting categories, spheres, or strata. Rather than investing in difference as an organizing principle for understanding the social and

thus perpetuating essentializing naturalizations of various groups, postmodern fiction privileges the material domain, uncovering a fluid network of human and nonhuman actors that can challenge and reconstruct dominant narratives of the social.

Both DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) and Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) also feature significant shifts in narrative voice as components of their material remakings of the social. The end of each novel makes a sharp transition to a second-person perspective, implying that a network model of postmodern materialism even has the capacity to diminish the distance between the worlds of writer, narrator, and reader. In *Underworld*, the reader is allowed to fill in gaps in the circulation of a souvenir baseball that the characters cannot close, and DeLillo capitalizes on our complicity by turning to "you" at the novel's end. Alvarez explicitly turns her narrator toward the reader by having her speak to "you" as she draws her narrative to a close in the literal hollow space of a toy drum. Each of these turns relies on the reader's knowledge and understanding of the material object and identifies not a fundamental difference between the world of the novel and the world in which the novel is read, but an attempt, as Roland Barthes says, to "abolish (or at least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading" ("From Work to Text" 162).

Pointing out the closing gap between writer, text, and reader is certainly not original to postmodern materialism. However, adding a material component to this metafictional convention invests all human and nonhuman actors with the necessary agency to become true mediators. Chapter 3, "Writing the Social: From Poststructuralism to Postmodernism," concentrates on material objects in Barth's metafictional classic *Lost*

*in the Funhouse* (1968) and Wallace's rewriting of Barth's title story in his novella "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," originally published in the short story collection *Girl With Curious Hair* (1989). Barth and Wallace both experiment with typically postmodern styles of writing by calling attention to the process of writing itself, resulting in extremely self-aware narratives. But rather than approaching this self-reflexivity as the epitome of postmodernism's supposedly poststructuralist critique of structuralist systematicity, I turn to the material domain of these stories to see what interpretations present themselves when we consider the less overtly-linguistic characteristics of these texts. Once again, we find that postmodernism is not synonymous with a purely theoretical, poststructuralist critique of oppositional hierarchies and closed systems because it is busy stressing the work, movement, flow, and changes amongst human and nonhuman actors.

Barth's and Wallace's commitments to the centrality of everyday material objects such as bee bobs, glass bottles, target arrows, name-coins, and stoves ultimately shift the substance of postmodern fiction from abstract language play to material networks. Thus, the readings in Chapter 3 are designed to frustrate the conflation of postmodernism and poststructuralism, if not to dilute the power of language, then at least to make it into one factor in a larger material network rather than the ultimate stuff of knowledge and experience. It is postmodern fiction's investment in the significance of all human and nonhuman actors that renders them reconstructive agents. When all actors are significant agents, the disenfranchisement and marginalization of certain individuals or groups cannot be blamed on ambiguous "social forces" or nebulous "social structures" because

such vague ties do not exist. The social is not a substance. Instead, in the networked relations of postmodern materialism, the problem can be traced back to identifiable interrelations between actors responsible for making and remaking the social.

Postmodernism's valuation of material objects as co-participants with humans in the construction of social networks calls for a unique inquiry into the ontology of the social. Rather than feeding the flames of disputes over epistemic relativism, lack of truth, or the absence of meaning, I propose postmodern fiction exhibits a stubborn unwillingness to bracket the existence of the material world in favor of a meditation on knowledge and experience. Extending the critical convention that postmodernism favors ontology over epistemology, Chapter 4, "Remaking the Social: From How We Know to What Is There," argues that postmodern fiction enacts more than a mere shift in philosophical questions. Tracing the influence of a single type of object, a ring, across novels by Morrison and Lethem, this chapter asks: What if postmodern fiction does not set out simply to bring "social forces" to light as constituted by material objects? What if these narratives are also invested in actively remaking the social as a network out of the various human and nonhuman actors that populate the worlds of these texts? What would such a remaking look like? Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) and Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) both feature rings that participate in the formation of networks in which human actors ultimately own up to their agency in forming the social, and thus offer ideal opportunities to answer these questions.

The supreme difference between the formation process in each novel is that while Morrison's ring joins human actors in the successful remaking of the social, Lethem's

ring is relegated to a less significant role in the network at various times throughout the narrative. The resultant contrast between the social networks that get constructed in each text is both sharp and revealing. Morrison's novel uncovers the generative power of the material domain by rendering its nonhuman actors participants. That is, when all actors are recognized and valorized in consideration of their roles in the cultivation of relational networks, then a remaking of the social becomes possible. But when the material domain is bracketed in deference to the abstract musings of human actors alone, as in Lethem's novel, the top-down, familiar social categories that so often determine the lived experience of people are reinforced. The perpetuation of the social as a substance ultimately nullifies any remaking of the social. Lethem's novel closes this study, then, to leave us with a powerful image of the consequences of neglecting the significance of the material domain in postmodern fiction as his characters bog down and settle into the familiar roles predetermined for them by the strictures of race and class.

This study finally demonstrates that what underlies the project of postmodernism as it has typically been defined over the last few decades is not merely an absent center, a nostalgia for a past that does not exist, or a critique of all that seems natural. Instead, "Postmodern Materialism" uncovers a complex and fluid web of things and people whose relations are forever alterable, changing, in-process. Literature of our new millennium seems so far to extend this materialist aesthetic by continuing to remake the social in ways unimaginable even during the last half century. Early twenty-first century narratives such as Lethem's suggest that at least some writers see the possibilities as well as the dangers of allowing those possibilities to go unrealized. Other writers such as Jonathan



Safran Foer (*Everything is Illuminated, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*), Nicole Mones, (*A Cup of Light*), Colson Whitehead (*John Henry Days*) and Sherman Alexie (*Ten Little Indians*, especially “Do Not Go Gentle”), have also carried the significance of everyday things into the new century, and although a full treatment of these texts is not possible here, at least one common feature can be traced across these narratives and many others written around this time. In each instance material things play an important role in the formation of a community that does not conform to the well-established parameters of any familiar social category. And yet, none of these texts dismisses the effects of nationality, race, age, or gender. Postmodern materialism does not render the consequences of preexisting categories null and void. As a matter of fact, one of the central benefits of reading postmodern fiction in this way is that it provides a material means of redressing these effects by offering marginalized characters the opportunity not only to work within existing systems of power, but also, since systems of power do not exist apart from their material making, it offers the realization that their actions change the social structure itself. This reality has always been the case but many have not been in a position to see, and so this project sets out to illuminate things, people, and the potential for remaking the social in literature of the postwar era.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> From its earliest invocations in the discourse of literary criticism, postmodernism has been represented as an exercise in critique. In a 1959 essay published in *Partisan Review* and treated at length in the next chapter, Irving Howe argues that, “at least in our time, the novel seems to lend itself irrevocably to the spirit of criticism” (429). Looking back on the emergence of postmodern fiction in his influential 1991 study *Dissident Postmodernists: Barthelme, Coover, Pynchon*, Paul Maltby observes that “in the 1960s a number of critics, notably Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, and Susan Sontag, welcomed postmodernism as a species of subversive writing” (17). Linda Hutcheon theorizes postmodernism as a “complicitously critical” mode, one that can’t help but perpetuate the problems it sets out to parody, critique, and ironize (*The Politics* 34, 94-101).

<sup>2</sup> Working in direct conversation with Marx and Engels’s *The German Ideology* and *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Terry Eagleton articulates the thrust of Marxist materialism in his seminal 1976 study *Marxism and Literary Criticism*: “The social relations between men, in other words, are bound up with the way they produce their material life. Certain ‘productive forces’ –say, the organization of labour in the middle ages—involve the social relations of villain to lord we know as feudalism. At a later stage, the development of new modes of productive organization is based on a changed set of social relations—this time between the capitalist class who owns those means of production, and the proletarian class whose labour-power the capitalist buys for profit. Taken together, these ‘forces’ and ‘relations’ of production form what Marx calls ‘the economic structure of society,’ or what is more commonly known by Marxism as the ‘base’ or ‘superstructure’” (2-3). Thus, Marxist materialism is interested in the “social” relations whose literally-material constitution remains unexamined. I turn our attention to the material composition of these “relations.”

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the only title to combine postmodernism and materialism, *Postmodern Materialism and the Future of Marxist Theory: Essays in the Althusserian Tradition*, in which editors Antonio Callari and David F. Ruccio offer a collection of essays that “find echoes in postmodernism” and offer a new Marxism that “retain[s] a focus on class, but [does so] on different grounds and in a different way. Its specific contributions would continue to be found in its analyses of the class aspects of social practices in capitalist (and other) social formations. It, however, would negotiate the relations between class and nonclass aspects of social processes in a quite different way, assigning a strategic, not tactical, function to the proposition that social beings and processes are multidimensional and multiplicitous” (3). Thus Callari’s and Ruccio’s “postmodern materialism” continues to rely on the immaterial social “processes,” rather than offering a material explanation for the processes themselves.

<sup>4</sup> Russell opens his second chapter by asking, “is there a table which has a certain intrinsic nature, and continues to exist when I am not looking, or is the table merely a product of my imagination, a dream-table in a very prolonged dream? [...] For if we cannot be sure of the independent existence of objects, we cannot be sure of the independent existence of other people’s bodies” (9). Russell identifies a certain material equanimity between things and people with regard to their physical existence, and goes on to consider the ethical importance of sense-data in establishing the presence of physical objects as it relates to our ultimate responsibilities to one another. Martin Heidegger considers a similar question: “what is the thing in itself?” in his discrimination between a “thing” and an “object”: “Plato, who conceives of the presence of what is present in terms of the outward appearance, had no more understanding of the nature of the thing than did Aristotle and all subsequent thinkers. Rather, Plato experienced (decisively, indeed, for the sequel) everything present as an object of making. Instead of ‘object’—as that which stands before, over against, opposite us—we use the more precise expression ‘what stands forth.’ In the full nature of

what stands forth, a twofold standing prevails. First, standing forth has the sense of stemming from somewhere, whether this be a process of self-making or of being made by another. Secondly, standing forth has the sense of the made thing's standing forth into the unconcealedness of what is already present. Nevertheless, no representation of what is present, in the sense of what stands forth and of what stands over against as an object, ever reaches to the thing *qua* thing. The jug's thingness resides in its being *qua* vessel" (168-69). Thus, for Heidegger, a thing is not its manmadeness nor its self-madenes, but the void that it holds as the jug's thingness is defined by the space into which liquid is poured. The maker shapes the sides and bottom but cannot shape the actual void. Donald Winnicott most famously expounds his concept of things in relation to people in the well-known *Playing and Reality* (1971). In this touchstone psychoanalytic work, Winnicott develops his theory of the transitional object, which most of us know as the security blanket. For Winnicott, this object aids in an infant's transition away from oral fixation on fingers and fists. "I have introduced the term 'transitional objects' and 'transitional phenomena,'" Winnicott writes, "for designation of the intermediate area of experience, between the thumb and the teddy bear, between the oral erotism and the true object-relationship, between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected, between primary unawareness of indebtedness and the acknowledgment of indebtedness" (2).

<sup>5</sup> Stewart breaks important new ground in her 1993 study *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, in which she argues at one point that "the souvenir magically transports us to the scene of origin, but the collection is magically and serially transported to the scene of acquisition, its proper destination. And this scene of acquisition is repeated over and over through the serial arrangement of objects in display space. Thus, collected objects are not the result of the serial operation of labor upon the material environment. Rather, they present the seriality of an animate world; their production appears to be self-motivated and self-realized. If they are 'mad,' it is by a process that seems to invent itself for the pleasure of the acquirer. Once again, an illusion of a relation between things takes the place of a social relation" (165). Bearing echoes of Heidegger's "The Thing," Stewart's analysis makes a connection between things and people in her reference to the social, but she subordinates the role of things to that of people, a substantial point of divergence between her analysis and mine. Bill Brown's seminal "Thing Theory" essay, first published in a special issue *Critical Inquiry* in 2001 devoted to "Things" has laid the foundation for much of the so-called "new materialist" work in literary studies over the last decade. However, as Knapp and Pence have argued that Brown's work, along with the other essays that appear in the special issue, "do not ground their inquiry in things but, rather, consider the concept of things—and specific examples that can be seen to represent the concept—in theoretical terms" (653). Barbara Johnson's *Persons and Things* (2008) is a brilliant meditation on the personhood of things and the "thingliness" of persons, ultimately concerned with understanding things as means of grappling with the "difficulty in being sure that we treat *persons* as persons. In other words, the relations between persons and things might be the *norm* in human relations already and not the object of an impossible quest. A study of persons and things might reveal all the ways we already treat persons as things, and how humanness is mired in an inability to do otherwise" (2). Although my own methodology takes a different approach, there are important resonances between Johnson's fundamental concern with human relations and my own investment in the fluidity of those relations.

<sup>6</sup> I address the distinction between "thing" and "object" fundamental to any discussion of things throughout the history of philosophy at length in chapter 1, and at other moments throughout the study. Bill Brown offers an especially illuminating review of the literature on this subject in his seminal "Thing Theory" essay published in the special issue of *Critical Inquiry* devoted to "Things" in the Autumn of 2001.

<sup>7</sup> I discuss Winnicott's "transitional object" briefly in note 4. As for Lacan, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, which constitutes Book XI of his *Seminar*, he imagines the object, or *objet petit a*, as the thing to which the subject opposes itself and thereby finds its place in the larger order of things (62-63, 73). Or, in Slavoj Žižek's description of our material existence in reality in relation to parallax: "Materialism means that the reality I see is never 'whole'—not because a large part of it eludes

me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which indicates my inclusion in it.” He continues, “Nowhere is this structure clearer than in the case of Lacan’s *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire. The same object can all of a sudden be ‘transubstantiated’ into the object of my desire: what is just an ordinary object to you is to me the focus of my libidinal investment, and this shift is caused by some unfathomable X, *a je ne sais quoi* in the object which can never be pinned down to any of its particular properties. *L’objet petit a* is therefore close to the Kantian transcendental object, since it stands for the unknown X, the noumenal core of the object beyond appearances, for what is ‘in you more than yourself’” (18-19).

<sup>8</sup> Guy Debord analyzes and attacks the omnipotence of media representation in his 1967 classic *Society of the Spectacle*, while Baudrillard most famously takes up meaning and the media in *Simulacra and Simulation*. Lyotard’s theory of the master narrative was first translated into English in the 1984 edition of *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, and Fredric Jameson’s influential theory of postmodernism as the cultural logic of late capitalism was first published as an essay in the *New Left Review* in 1984, and then in book form in 1991 by Duke. Barbara Johnson’s *Persons and Things* was published in 2008, but Bill Brown’s “thing theory” has been, by far, the most influential critical wave of the so-called “new materialism.” Brown defines his unique brand of materialism in the 2001 special issue of *Critical Inquiry*, reprinted as the introduction to his collection *Things*, the latter of which features an essay by French sociologist and science studies theorist Bruno Latour. Latour’s *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, challenges existing theories of the material, and has proven foundational to this study.

<sup>9</sup> I offer extensive treatment of the concept of social construction in chapter 1. The most important point at stake here is that “constructed” should not be conflated with unnatural, inorganic, unreal, or inauthentic.

<sup>10</sup> Brown’s language here bears the marks of Fredric Jameson’s seminal claim that in the postmodern era “the producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture” (*Postmodernism* 17-18). Jameson’s argument builds on Debord’s, Baudrillard’s, and Lyotard’s claims regarding postmodernism as fundamentally cultural, meaning that “reality” or “the real” is not a matter of, well, matter, but of socio-economic and cultural convention. My argument is that socio-economic and cultural conventions are products of the constant fluctuation of material networks comprised of both human and nonhuman “actors,” to borrow a term from Latour.

<sup>11</sup> As James A. Knapp and Jeffrey Pence, editors of “Between Thing and Theory,” a special issue of *Poetics Today*, have argued, “In scholarly fields as diverse as our own specializations—early modern culture and film studies—a widespread trend has emerged consisting in the privileging of the historical record as corrective to the vagaries of interpretation and the allegedly unproductive reflexivity that is often associated with the influence of French intellectual thought—especially that of Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault but also of Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari—on the literary and cultural theory of the 1970s and 1980s” (642). Thus, across the board the work of theorists and philosophers most often identified with literary postmodernism has been understood as vague, ethereal, abstract, immaterial, in need of a more concrete corrective.

<sup>12</sup> Hutcheon’s argument is articulated most lucidly in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (34), although she also takes up this problem in her earlier and more definitional *A Poetics of Postmodernism*: “Postmodernism teaches that all cultural practices have an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very possibility of their production of meaning” (xii-xiii).

<sup>13</sup> In her 1824 novel *Hobomok, A Tale of Early Times*, Lydia Maria Child employs a portrait miniature of Mary Conant’s beloved as a significant motif intended to stand in for the man himself in his absence: “Brown’s miniature was not forgotten; and as it lay before her, she could think of nothing, only that the form, which once could boast so much dignified beauty, was now unshrouded and uncoffined in the deep,

deep ocean” (123). In this instance, material objects are important symbols acting as tools and conduits for the thoughts and feelings of human subjects. In contrast, the “discourse of humanism,” as Saidiya Hartman points out, necessarily led to the objectification of black bodies throughout the legal history of the U.S. and in narrative texts such as Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and also transformed “declarations of slave humanity” into “brutal exercise[s] of power upon the captive body rather than ameliorating the chattel condition” (*Scenes of Subjection* 5). And, moving into the twentieth century, Charles Johnson says of Richard Wright’s great achievement in *Native Son* that, “Every prop on the stage of this sustained, brutal thriller refers *back* to Bigger’s mind, to his special, twisted way of seeing. Nothing is neutral. Everything is charged by the broken heart and broken mind of a black boy reduced to a state of thinghood” (*Being and Race* 14).

<sup>14</sup> McHale credits Jurij Tynjanov with the developing the concept of the dominant, but relies primarily on its articulation in the work of Roman Jakobson, in which the dominant is defined “as the focusing component of a work of art” (6). McHale goes on to provide a rationale for the possibility of a plurality of dominants in any given discourse. He then catalogs the definitions of postmodernism in contrast to modernism offered by David Lodge, Ihab Hassan, Peter Wollen, and Douwe Fokkema to argue that “in all these cases, the oppositions tend to be piecemeal and unintegrated; that is, we can see how a particular postmodernist feature stands in opposition to its modernist counterpart, but we cannot see how postmodernist poetics as a whole stands in opposition to modernist poetics as a whole, since neither of the opposed sets of features has been interrogated for its underlying systematicity” (7). He then offers the concept of the dominant as a means of both eliciting “the systems underlying these heterogeneous catalogues” and of beginning “to account for historical change” (7).

<sup>15</sup> In their monumental work *Empire* Hardt and Negri argue that the familiar imperialism perpetrated by the nation-state as the lowest common denominator in the world political system has been replaced by a new form of empire that is not reducible to the sovereignty of the nation-state: “In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colors of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial rainbow” (xii-xiii). While Hardt and Negri may be somewhat overstating the decline of the nation-state as a locus of sovereignty on the global stage, the charges they level against postmodernism as a conceptual framework are legitimate and further highlight the benefits of a materialist reading as I have defined it.

<sup>16</sup> The reference for Latour found in *Reassembling the Social* is included in the text. The footnote referencing Foucault in Latour’s work provides no specific referent to Foucault, however. I suggest the interview entitled “Truth and Power” that appears as the sixth chapter of the 1980 collection *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Writings 1972-1977*. See especially his explanation of power and genealogy on pages 115-117.

<sup>17</sup> I discuss Latour’s distinction at length in chapters 1 and 3, and at other times throughout the study, but for my present purposes Latour’s most basic definition will do: “An *intermediary*, in my vocabulary, is what transports meaning or force without transformation [...] *Mediators*, on the other hand, cannot be counted as just one” (39). In other words a mediator is anything that has an effect on the other agents that come into contact with it, as opposed to an intermediary which is a mere conductor or conduit.

CHAPTER II  
RECOLLECTING THE SOCIAL: FROM CRITIQUE  
TO CONSTRUCTION

Published in the summer 1959 issue of *Partisan Review*, Irving Howe's "Mass Society and Post-Modern Fiction" marks a seismic shift in American literature and culture. In fact, the table of contents for that issue can be read as a microcosm of the changes taking place at the time as Howe's essay is situated in between an essay by modernist stalwart Robert Penn Warren and poems by John Ashbery and Charles Olson, writers often recognized as forerunners of American postmodernism. In this early attempt to make sense of a new phenomenon in American fiction, Howe suggests that, like the modernist authors who set out to challenge the traditional values of the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these "post-modern" writers work against social assumptions in modernist novels. Howe says these emerging writers "recognize that the once familiar social categories and place-marks have now become as uncertain and elusive as the moral imperatives of the nineteenth century seemed to the novelists of fifty years ago" (426). In part, his point in calling attention to a modernist framework of "familiar social categories" is to introduce a new and unfamiliar "mass society" emerging in the late 1950s and early 1960s, a society that cannot be understood purely in terms of preexisting social markers such as class, nation, and religion. For Howe, what drives the emergence of literary postmodernism is the need to challenge these existing social narratives, and so he concludes that this new "post-modern" novel "seems to lend itself

irrevocably to the spirit of criticism” (429). This characterization of postmodernism as an inherently critical paradigm unable to complete its own project by offering alternatives to the “familiar social categories” it undermines has become a defining trait in both aesthetic and historical definitions of postmodernism.<sup>1</sup>

From Howe’s 1959 essay to Hutcheon’s influential 1989 book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, the motive behind theorizing postmodernism as a rejection of familiar social categories has been noble. Critics have picked up on postmodern fiction’s impulse to push us away from essentializing narratives that seek to determine the status and potential of individuals based on the larger social collectives in which they live and operate. Along these lines, Hutcheon asserts that postmodernism is a paradoxical mode of “complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world” (*Politics* 11). For Hutcheon, what makes fiction postmodern is its paradoxical participation in whatever dominant or naturalized cultural narratives it actually sets out to critique. As with Howe’s “spirit of criticism,” this paradox has evolved into a defining characteristic of almost any text we might be compelled to identify as postmodern. Hutcheon’s theorization of postmodern fiction as complicitously critical, so to speak, is integral to our understanding of the important political work these texts do because it provides a methodology for how they challenge conventional narratives dependent on familiar social categories. It is my contention, however, that this theorization is incomplete. Postmodernism’s critique of the naturalized is, in fact, part and parcel of an ongoing construction of the social. As Howe himself

implies, it was only the emergence of a new social structure that revealed the inadequacy of familiar social categories in the first place.

Let me clarify by pointing out that it is not postmodernism itself that is an incomplete project, but our reading of postmodernism. Hutcheon maintains that

postmodernism's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (they might even include capitalism, patriarchy, liberal humanism) are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us. Even nature, postmodernism might point out, doesn't grow on trees. (*Politics 2*)

The value I see in this critical move is not its revelation that any "natural" cultural narrative is somehow artificial, but the way in which it levels the playing field by demonstrating that all such entities are equally "made by us, not given to us." Thus, the work of postmodern fiction has the potential not merely to disprove dominant narratives but also to give voice to those who have traditionally been marginalized. Taking Hutcheon's insightful reading of postmodernism in another direction, then, I would disagree with her conclusion that postmodernism lacks reconstructive agency. At the end of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon attributes postmodernism's conflict with feminist criticism to the way it "manipulates but does not transform signification; it disperses but does not (re)construct the structures of subjectivity" and, more generally, the social world (168).<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, I would argue that what makes texts postmodern is the reconstruction of narratives that does not depend solely on prefabricated ideas of the social but arises instead out of the very material world these narratives represent. Postmodern fiction may be complicitous as others have pointed out because it draws on



naturalized narratives in order to build alternatives among those already in existence. However, what is important to understand about postmodern literature is that it moves away from the static constructs we imagine as social categories and demonstrates that the social is actually a more complex and fluid matrix of networks by dwelling on the materiality of everyday life.

So far we have seen that postmodernism has been charged by both early detractors like Howe and supporters such as Hutcheon with ineffectiveness on two fronts. First, in its irrevocably critical spirit, postmodern critique is forced to work within the confines of that which it intends to subvert, rendering this subversion complicit with, even accomplice to, its target. Therefore, it has been alleged that postmodernism cannot offer an alternative to what it attempts to expose. Second, mired in the endless recycling of the very narratives it seeks to dismantle, postmodernism has also been said to lack any substantial impact on the social. Concerned only with the critique of existing social categories, postmodernism lacks its own grasp of everyday life, and, therefore, any tie to the objectual materiality of the everyday. As such, it is an abstract and immaterial mode that cannot deliver because of its complicity with the status quo as well as its ceaseless reprocessing of old ideas. In response to such stances, this chapter makes a case for the effectiveness of postmodernism insofar as I contend that its critique does not operate directly on the “familiar social categories” with which it has typically been associated. Instead, and much more successfully than most critics will allow, postmodern critique both constructs and challenges social narratives as it works with and through the material domain of everyday objects. Thus, postmodern fiction is especially well-suited for a

critical remaking of the social as it is attuned to the ways in which the social is fashioned by the world of material objects.

The idea of construction is nothing new to discussions of postmodernism, but the term most often used, “social construction,” has ironically reinforced conceptions of postmodernism as an immaterial philosophical endeavor committed only to demolition. On the surface, it seems obviously inconsistent to claim that a paradigm interested only in tearing down can also be defined by its commitment to building up. This disconnect arises from a fundamental misunderstanding of postmodern construction. Standing on the shoulders of Howe and early postmodern intellectuals such as Susan Sontag and Leslie Fiedler, most literary theorists have contended that what postmodernism teaches us is that our social categories have been socially manufactured. Hutcheon’s denaturalization of dominant narratives is a case in point, as is Satya P. Mohanty’s argument that the heart of postmodern literary and cultural theory is a constructivism that “may be defined most basically as the idea that all those epistemological norms which were so dear to the Enlightenment [...] are no more than social conventions, historically variable and hence without claim to universality” (11). Whether intended or not, the result of such theories has been the equation of construction with artificiality. Latour has explained this misunderstanding by recalling the deflation of his excitement upon learning how colleagues in the social and natural sciences reacted to his theory of the assembly of social networks: “To say that something was ‘constructed’ in their minds meant that something was not true. They seemed to operate with the strange idea that you had to submit to this rather unlikely choice: *either* something was real and not constructed, *or* it

was constructed and artificial, contrived and invented, made up and false” (*Reassembling* 90 original emphasis). Similarly, in an effort to avoid essentialism, literary theories of postmodernism have appropriated the word construction as a means of signifying that our social categories are artificial. If postmodern fiction simply reveals that our social categories and narratives are all equally artificial, then the stories these novels tell might be said to show that everything we know about the social is equally false, or, what amounts to the same thing, equally true. However, “constructed” should not be understood as a synonym for artificial, nor as an antonym for natural.

Perhaps the most straightforward way to demonstrate that postmodernism’s brand of construction is not purely negative and immaterial is to answer the question: What is the stuff out of which the social gets constructed in the worlds of these texts? Postwar fiction turns to everyday objects as well as human subjects, or what David Herman calls “actants,” and the stories located in these actants, as building supplies out of which to assemble the social.<sup>3</sup> Postmodern fiction makes and remakes the social through the networking of a vast array of these actants. That is to say, postmodernism moves from a merely intellectual social construction to a material construction of the social. Latour has pointed out that the traditional understanding of society as made up of enduring social ties—i.e. the social categories rejected by postmodernism—“begs the question of how and through which means this increase in durability has been practically achieved,” and he adds that “to jump from the recognition of interactions to the existence of a social force is, once again, an inference that does not follow from the premise” (*Reassembling* 65). In fortuitous proximity to Herman’s use of the term “actants,” Latour asks that we

think of both human subjects and material objects as “actors, or more precisely, *participants* in the course of action waiting to be given a figuration” (*Reassembling* 71 original emphasis). I contend that postmodern fiction overtly invites us to consider both objects and subjects as significant actors in the formation of the various networks of relation we identify as social. Specifically, postmodern fiction sets about building social networks, at least in part, out of things, stuff ranging from pencils, to pebbles, to placebos. The recent interest in such everyday objects as evidenced by the popularity of material culture studies and “thing theory” has encouraged us to consider the role that these inanimate objects play in the organization of the lives of animate subjects, but following Latour, the distinction between subject and object breaks down even further. Thus, I want to push the envelope (in hopes that it might push back) and look at a few texts that demonstrate the brand of construction intrinsic to postmodernism’s critique of naturalized narratives and familiar social categories.

Both texts examined in this chapter, Silko’s *Ceremony* (1977) and Robinson’s *Housekeeping* (1980), have been excerpted, anthologized, and critically interrogated as representative of postmodern fiction insofar as they seem heavily invested in demonstrating that dominant understandings of identity markers such as nationality and gender are in fact constructed.<sup>4</sup> But such treatments, either explicitly or implicitly, almost invariably conflate “constructed” with artificial, and thus miss out on the possibilities of a literal and material construction of the social. Thus, this chapter asks what these novels might reveal if we examine sets of material objects collected by their respective characters as representative and constitutive of the construction of the social. Silko’s and

Robinson's novels are certainly not the only works of postmodern fiction concerned with the significance of everyday objects as the literal materials out of which the social is made. Thomas Pynchon's protagonist Oedipa Maas is sent on a wild goose chase in part because of a stamp collection in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966). A.M. Homes's *The Safety of Objects* (1990) includes stories such as "Looking for Johnny" that experiment with material objects as catalysts in relationships between characters that challenge and reconstruct gender. Nathaniel Mackey's avant-garde saxophonist Lambert gathers an entire audience in a night club amongst the dispersed pieces of his disassembled instrument as the saxophone is recollected before their eyes in *Bedouin Hornbook* (1986). What becomes apparent when we open up our approach to the concept of construction to include the remaking of the social is that these texts are best read as displacing the locus of social connections from some human essence to material contexts of interaction between a wide array of actors.

The problem is, paradoxically, both that construction gets represented as artificial and that, in turn, the resulting social categories produced are branded as natural. Silko demonstrates this problem in an essay first published in *The Nation* in 1994 in which she recalls various run-ins she has had with local, state, and federal officials when driving through states or crossing state lines in the U.S. Once while being detained she remembers realizing that the officers were profiling her and other travelers based in part on the various material objects that constituted their appearances: "White people who appear to be clergy, those who wear ethnic clothing or jewelry and women with very long or very short hair (they could be nuns) are also frequently detained; white men with

beards or men with long hair are likely to be detained, too” (“Border Patrol” 414). However, while it is things, the material stuff such as clothing and jewelry, that mark these various drivers and passengers as either “religious” or “ethnic” their social status is ultimately reduced only to the larger categories of race, religion, and gender. What is missing from this profiling tactic is the realization that the categories the officers believe will aid them in their job are actually constant products of the various material actors they almost unconsciously seek out. The officers’ techniques seem to indicate that the particular relationship a person has with her material surroundings determines her social identity, but their actions scream out that the larger and more familiar social category is the lowest common denominator. Silko’s novel accentuates this disjunction by resisting the reductive categorization of its mixed-blood protagonist Tayo as perpetually stuck between worlds of race and nation. As a whole, *Ceremony* reimagines whiteness, Nativeness, and Americanness as in-process markers of individual and collective identity as Tayo assembles his identity out of the various materials he encounters throughout the novel. Robinson’s novel lays bare the generational reconstruction of the nuclear family through two sisters who desire entirely different social experiences. But what is most compelling about *Housekeeping*’s reinvention of the family unit is that it is carried out through the character who is most passionately invested in attaining a stereotypically conventional home.

### **No Ceremony Without Objects**

*Ceremony* has garnered a staggering amount of critical attention, ranging from Charles Larson’s early treatment in *American Indian Fiction* (1978), which Gerald

Vizenor calls “the first serious critical interpretation of published fiction by [...] authors identified as Native American Indians” (*Manifest* 80),<sup>5</sup> to Paula Gunn Allen’s “recover[y] of the feminine” in the novel in *The Sacred Hoop* (1992), to Rick Mott’s 2011 discussion of digitizing the novel for twenty-first century students (“Ceremony Earth”). At its best, this body of criticism attends to the novel’s and its characters’ “ability to interpret the patterns within changing cultural and historical contexts,” as Chadwick Allen has pointed out (172). At its worst, this conversation has turned to typically postmodern conventions, such as rewriting, to discuss the novel in terms of “the postmodern reality of hybridized traditions, mixed races, and crossed borders. *Ceremony* is neither entirely Indian-based nor completely western but a hybrid of both” (Spurgeon 76).<sup>6</sup> The latter approach is especially problematic because although it asks us to reframe our understanding of the social categories on which those narratives and traditions depend, it is ultimately unable to do anything more than recycle these conventions because, like so many other treatments of postmodern fiction, it focuses on the clash of social forces as if they were substantive things holding definable groups together. If we focus on the idea of hybridity, we inevitably end up with static and familiar social categories because we begin with static and familiar social categories. Since the Native American literary renaissance, Native writers as diverse as Sherman Alexie in *Indian Killer* (1996) and Linda Hogan in *Power* (1998) have explicitly addressed this “between two worlds” approach to Native subjectivity.<sup>7</sup> In the influential *Red on Red* (1999), Craig Womack proposes that novels like *Ceremony* amass such critical and popular attention because they focus on “reconnection to Native culture” as opposed to “posit[ing] that indigenous peoples

throughout the Americas will take back their land” as in Silko’s later novel *Almanac of the Dead* (11). He goes on to ask, “does the Native American literary renaissance, in addition to its many positive qualities, also play, in troubling ways, into the vanishing notion by allowing Native people to be fictional but not real?” (11).

Womack’s concern with the realness of Native people as represented and read in Native American fiction cuts to the core of theorizing the relationship between Native writing and postmodernism because it exposes the problems that accompany the “social construction” of any identity. Womack purposefully avoids what he sees as the axiomatic skepticism of postmodernism in relation to Native history in *Red on Red* because, as he maintains, “it is way too premature for Native scholars to deconstruct history when we haven’t yet constructed it” (3).<sup>8</sup> Silko herself does not seem keen on the relevance of a postmodern aesthetic to Native writing. In a review of Louise Erdrich’s *The Beet Queen* (1986), Silko criticizes Erdrich not for adopting what she sees as a postmodern prose style, but for attempting to use what she calls a “self-referential” style to “place her characters and action in places and points in history that are loaded with ‘referential’ significance” (“Review” 180). However, if we alter our view of postmodernism by moving away from deconstruction, demystification, and “the postmodern reality of hybridized traditions” (Spurgeon 76), and allow for a more material assemblage of categories such as “white,” “Native,” and “American,” then what becomes clear is that such groupings have always been under construction. To make this move is to embrace the proclamation of Silko’s mixed-blood, Navajo medicine man Betonie who expresses



the fluidity of Native culture and tradition by explaining: “You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing” (126).

In *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*, Gerald Vizenor engages with Hutcheon’s theory of history as representation in *The Politics of Postmodernism* and Lyotard’s rejection of metanarratives in *The Postmodern Condition* to carve out a space for “tribal memories and the coherence of heard stories” (67). He defines this effort in terms of Native writing early on as the survivance and triumph of postindian warriors over what he calls manifest manners:

Manifest manners are the simulations of dominance; the notions and misnomers that are read as the authentic and sustained as representations of Native American Indians. The postindian warriors are new indications of a narrative recreation, the simulations that overcome the manifest manners of dominance. (6)

Similarly, in his “A Postmodern Introduction” to *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*, Vizenor calls on Brian McHale’s articulation of postmodernism as a mode that creates new insights and coherence by generating more and more discourse, and goes on to argue that “Native American Indian literatures are tribal discourse, more discourse. The oral and written narratives are language games, comic discourse rather than mere responses to colonialist demands or social science theories” (4). Thus, for Vizenor postmodernism offers a generally useful approach for studying Native writing because it multiplies the meaning of “Indian,” allowing for infinite “recreations,” and thereby making it difficult to define Native Americans in static terms.<sup>9</sup> Some critics of Native writing, such as Kimberly Blaeser, rely on Vizenor’s work insofar as it

check[s] the process of literary annihilation and free[s] Native American identity from the grasp of literary colonialism. He does this both by struggling against established literary and linguistic structures, practices, and images, and by working to create new ones: by undermining the colonial “strategies of containment” and replacing them with strategies of liberation. (73)

Others, like Womack, acknowledge the value of Vizenor’s contribution on this front but also question whether or not there should be unlimited free rein in defining “Indian.”

Referencing Vizenor’s theoretical faith in poststructuralism and postmodernism, Womack points out in a more recent essay that, “If all language is socially mediated, as some would claim, some native thinkers might respond, ‘Yes, but it is also mediated by others besides humans,’” and then asks, “Do we want to remove ‘Indian’ so far from its social reference that definitions are no longer possible?” (“A Single Decade” 65). I would answer that a theory of postmodernism that takes into consideration both Womack’s emphasis on “others besides humans” and his question about impossible definability might be able to account for the kind of fluid, yet not indefinable, conception of “Indian” that he envisions as ideal. In other words, postmodern fiction has the agency to accomplish the kind of political work that Womack and other critics see as invaluable to Native identity because of its investment in nonhuman actors, but this important aspect has been overlooked. I am not simply arguing that we should think of all Native writing as necessarily postmodern. Instead, what I am suggesting is that there is a significant overlap between a theory of postmodernism that accounts for the material and the unique interest of many Native fiction writers and critics in resisting the impulse to “privilege subject positions, that is, human perceptions” (Womack “Theorizing” 370). The relevance of materiality to both approaches leads to a recognition of the agency and

significance of nonhuman actors in the determination of human experience, which often manifests itself in the absence of facile distinctions between “manmade” and “natural” things. As the narrator of Linda Hogan’s novel *Power* (1998) says of her aunt’s house, “The house is sinking back into the earth and Ama would let it. It is the natural thing” (79).

For *Ceremony*’s protagonist Tayo, nonhuman actors play a significant role in determining his social station from a very young age. Born to a prodigal Native mother and unknown white father, Tayo is raised alongside his cousin Rocky by his Auntie and her husband Robert, his uncle Josiah, and his grandmother. Rocky is bound for success, while Tayo seems doomed to the low position in the family his mother occupied before him in Auntie’s eyes. When Tayo comes into the household for good, Auntie maintains a distance between the two boys based on what she sees as a clear distinction in their social positions, and she does so using the most mundane of everyday objects:

When she was alone with the boys, she kept Rocky close to her; while she kneaded bread, she gave Rocky little pieces of dough to play with; while she darned socks, she gave him scraps of cloth and a needle and thread to play with. She was careful that Rocky did not share these things with Tayo, that they kept a distance between themselves and him. (67)

Rocky is supplied with the necessary materials out of which to build imaginary worlds and games, while Tayo is denied these things and forced to think about his empty-handedness. Moving forward, Rocky is given other advantages intended to help him construct a life of success that is virtually conflated with non-nativeness by the authority figures in his life from his white teachers to his own mother. Rocky becomes an A-

student and star athlete whose teachers tell him, “Nothing can stop you now except one thing: don’t let the people at home hold you back.’ Rocky understood what he had to do to win in the white outside world” (51). When presented with the opportunity to volunteer to fight in World War II, Rocky jumps at the chance. Auntie actually wants her son to go to war, but she explains to Grandma that Tayo should not be allowed to go: “Rocky is different [...] but this one, he’s supposed to stay here” (73). From childhood to young adulthood, Tayo and Rocky are distinguished by the things and opportunities given them out of which to construct their respective places in the larger social world, but for many of the characters this construction process is overshadowed by its own products: the “white outside world” of America set aside for Rocky and the Native “here” where Tayo belongs.

What stands out as we attend to different characters’ interactions with the material world throughout the novel, however, is that not all the characters are blind to the material construction of the social categories such as white, Native, American, Mexican that present themselves as irreducible. Paula Gunn Allen identifies two sets of characters in *Ceremony*, and argues that

those in the first category belong to the earth spirit and live in harmony with her, even though this attunement may lead to tragedy. Those in the second are not of the earth but of human mechanism; they live to destroy that spirit, to enclose and enwrap it in their machinations, condemning all to a living death. (118)

Extending Allen’s assertion I would like to alter the distinction by claiming that those in the first category are conscious of the fluidity of interactions between actors that constitute the social, while those in the second category are blind to the material and rely

on the larger and more facile categories that are said to comprise the social.<sup>10</sup> Rocky's desperate academic, athletic, and patriotic attempts to conform to the "white outside world" and become "American" are indicative of the quest for an Americanness that does not exist in the sense that he imagines at all because that marker is always changing. Rocky's desperation and blindness in the face of the in-process matrix of social relations is contrasted by Betonie's embrace of the materiality of everyday objects in the healing ceremony he performs to help Tayo overcome the sickness brought back from the war.

Although Tayo's sickness manifests itself physically through nausea, alcohol addiction, and vomiting, the Laguna elders and Army doctors alike seem to agree that the source is psychological. Despite the fact that the army doctors are unable to help Tayo overcome what they diagnose as the symptoms of "battle fatigue" (31), Silko does not merely contrast "white medicine" with "Indian medicine," even if some characters in the novel do make such a distinction. Auntie reminds her mother, who is worried about Tayo and wants to call a medicine man, "'You know what the Army doctor said: 'No Indian medicine.' Old Ku'oosh will bring his bag of weeds and dust. The doctor won't like it.'" (34). But Old Grandma insists, and Ku'oosh is called. He comes with blue cornmeal and stalks of Indian tea, but the ceremony is ultimately ineffective. The Army doctors and Ku'oosh all prove unsuccessful in their attempts to heal Tayo because their approaches misunderstand the cause of his illness. The Army doctors blame the war and then liquor (53); Ku'oosh gestures toward "an absent white father" and the differences between Native and white warfare (35-36). Ku'oosh does briefly put his finger on the root of the sickness when he tells Tayo that "this world is fragile," and uses a word to express

“fragile” that is “filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and with a strength inherent in spider webs woven across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web” (35). But his remedy consists only of stagnant, traditional things such as the blue cornmeal and the stalks of Indian tea. The narrowness of the Army doctors’ and Ku’oosh’s treatments cannot account for the “continuing process,” or fundamental flux of the disease. Tayo’s sickness is, in fact, the product of something much larger that, in his own words, has “been going on for a long time” (53). Thus, the appropriate treatment must also be growing, changing, and dynamic.

The cause of Tayo’s disease seems to be that his participation in the war has somehow disconnected him from his “true” identity. For the Army doctors, this means his affinity and empathy for his cousin and even for the dead Japanese have severed Tayo from his American individualized selfhood (125). For Ku’oosh, this means he has somehow become detached from his Laguna Puebloness in “the white people’s war” (36). Both treatments accordingly set out to force Tayo back into these respective social categories, and both treatments imagine these categories as essentially static. Their methods are dependent upon an understanding of the social as a stable category into which Tayo must merely be reinserted in order to feel better. But what if Americanness and Lagunaness are not preexisting categories? What if these categories are instead in-process constructions? But how can “Laguna Pueblo” or any such category be anything other than an established collection of traditions and rituals passed down from generation to generation? Silko’s Navajo medicine man Betonie intimates that a better question

would be, how can any such category remain the same after being passed down from generation to generation?

The fluidity of tradition is materialized in the objects that comprise the healing ceremony Betonie designs for Tayo. After arriving at Betonie's hogan overlooking the Gallup ceremonial grounds, Tayo looks around the place at the confused and chaotic collection that occupies the medicine man's home. He sees herbs, roots, hides, boxes bound in brass, newspapers, cardboard, clothing, rags, twigs, telephone books, Coke bottles, pouches and bags, hammered silver buttons, gourd rattles, deer-hoof clackers, calendars (119-120). Betonie's collection of ceremonial objects does not respect the boundaries of either the medical practices of the Army doctors or the traditions of Ku'oosh. Nowhere is this observation more clear than in the calendars that Tayo notices and that give Betonie "some place to start" the ceremony. These Santa Fe Railroad calendars feature scenes with "Navajos herding sheep, deer dancers at Cochiti, and little Pueblo children chasing burros" (121). This commercialization of Native life is probably not what Tayo had expected to find in the home of a Navajo medicine man. But he soon remembers his uncle collecting the same calendars and thinks to himself, "on the reservation these calendars were more common than Coca-Cola calendars. There was no reason to be startled. This old man had only done the same thing" (121). When he tells Betonie that he recognizes two of the calendars, Betonie begins the healing ceremony by explaining, "All these things have stories alive in them" (121). Thus, the ceremony gets underway with Tayo's memories of a commodification of Native life on the pages of a

calendar published by a railroad company notorious for its exploitation of Native land and peoples.

The calendars might be seen by white consumers as representative of an authentically Native way of life, while Native peoples might view them as misrepresentations designed to perpetuate romanticized visions of Native life in the minds of non-natives. Betonie recognizes them for what they are for better or worse: material objects that form Native identity in the eyes of both Native and non-native peoples.<sup>11</sup> What is important about Betonie's characterization of the calendars is the fact that they "have stories alive in them" (121). The living, breathing nature of the stories indicates that the Army doctors misunderstand the ideal of American individuality and that Ku'oosh misunderstands Laguna Pueblo identity to some extent because they do not account for the indefiniteness of these modes of being. Betonie contrasts his own healing ceremony with those of other Native healers such as Ku'oosh:

The people nowadays have an idea about the ceremonies. They think the ceremonies must be performed exactly as they have always been done, maybe because one slip-up or mistake and the whole ceremony must be stopped and the sand painting destroyed. That much is true. They think that if a singer tampers with any part of the ritual, great harm can be done, great power unleashed." He was quite for a while, looking up at the sky through the smoke hole. "That much can be true also. But long ago when the people were given these ceremonies, the changing began, if only in the aging of the yellow gourd rattle or the shrinking of the skin around the eagle's claw, if only in the different voices from generation to generation, singing the chants. You see, in many ways, the ceremonies have always been changing. (126)

The calendars speak to changes in perceptions of Nativeness itself by gathering images of Navajos, Cochitis, and Pueblos together in the pages of a single object. That is, for



unversed consumers, these distinct peoples might be viewed as identical, or perhaps for the Santa Fe Railroad Company, modern-day Natives are nothing more than the nostalgic representatives of a museumified way of life. Still others might view the calendars ironically as signs critiquing westward expansion via the railroads. The calendars are both illustrative and formative of concepts of Nativeness.

Betonie's ceremony is not designed to help Tayo reconnect with his essential Laguna Pueblo self or to serve as a critique of naturalized narratives of the wandering, disappearing, and drunken Indian that wind their way through popular lore as well as United States Indian policy. Instead, the ceremony provides Tayo with the necessary materials that enable him to contribute to the construction of Laguna Pueblo identity. In stark contrast to the diagnostic methodologies of the Army doctors and Ku'oosh, Betonie's approach avoids the oversimplified categories that are treated as irreducible in favor of focusing on the more elemental and rearrangeable components of those categories. When Tayo wonders if his problems might stem from the fact that his mother was Laguna and his father white, Betonie responds, "'nothing is that simple,' he said, 'you don't write off all the white people, just like you don't trust all the Indians'" (128). The deeper problem at hand is the "witchery" that seeks to divide the otherwise complete world into tidy compartments. Silko presents the story of the witchery in verse rather than prose, and we are not entirely sure who sings, speaks, or chants it, insinuating that its rightful position lies outside the narrative proper. The story goes that white people are the products of a contest amongst a diverse collection of Native witch people to see who could produce the most impressive powers. Finally, one witch bests all the others by

telling a story about a “*white skin people who see no life / when they look / they see only objects. / The world is a dead thing for them / the trees and rivers are not alive / the mountains and stones are not alive. / The deer and bear are objects / They see no life*”

(135). The witchery always seeks to create opposition, to set up binaries, for instance, between whites who “see only objects,” and Natives who ostensibly see something more.

But the witchery itself is also diverse. Some of the witches at the great contest untie “skin bundles of disgusting objects: / dark flints, cinders from burned hogans where the dead lay” (134). These witches use their materials to assemble charms and powers. But the witch whose story speaks white people into being does not gather its charm out of material objects at all. It “just [tells] them to listen” (135). And after the prize is won the other witches ask the speaker to take back what it has said, but it responds “*It’s already turned loose. / It’s already coming. / It can’t be called back*” (138). This most sinister witchery presents itself not as a material construct but as an inevitable statement of what is the case. However, Silko ultimately refutes this idea when she reveals that even the witchery is constituted of material objects. Near the end of the novel, some of Tayo’s war buddies and fellow Indians who have grown to despise him kidnap his friend Harley in an attempt to draw Tayo out of hiding so they can kill him. The men are drunk, and Tayo has a screwdriver with which he could easily attack and kill them, saving his friend:

This was the time. But his fingers were numb, and he fumbled with the screwdriver as he tried to rub warmth back into his hands. [...] He moved back into the boulders. It had been a close call. The witchery had almost ended the story according to its plan; Tayo had almost jammed the screwdriver into Emo’s skull the way the witchery had wanted. (253)

The witchery is not a self-sustaining power, but rather a narrative that is propped up by those who fear it. That is, the witchery needs the screwdriver in Tayo's hand to perpetuate its work and make Tayo into "another victim, a drunk Indian war veteran settling an old feud" (253). Thus, the most deadly kind of witchery is that which claims to have no material basis for its power to establish entire groups, but Silko demonstrates the material possibilities for resisting and remaking the witchery by having Tayo move back into the boulders and pocket the screwdriver. In that moment, rather than giving in to the perceived power of the witchery, Tayo reveals that this power is not some ethereal force but the product of the interaction of the actors involved in the conflict.

The point here is that Nativeness itself is a process, much in the way that whiteness is spoken into being by a witch and thus not coeternal with the existence of the world. Neither of these markers is a preexisting phenomenon that determines the lives of those who seem to fit within its parameters, even when other networks of actors do their best to make it appear so. While critics have dealt with the survival, fluidity, change, and endurance of Native identity and culture in *Ceremony*,<sup>12</sup> a materialist attention to the things that constitute a significant portion of such markers reveals that identity and culture are much too large to serve as bases for understanding individual and collective identity. Everyday, nonhuman actors disrupt our understanding of the social by shifting the starting point entirely from some perceived individual or cultural essence to the literal and material interactions between calendars, screwdrivers, Coke bottles, and people that are the *figurae* of those larger categories. These objects provide a prism through which to reflect on the novel's larger reconstruction of Tayo's identity because their capacity for

being rearranged literally enacts a remaking of the two categories that seem to exert the most pressure on him: white and Laguna Pueblo.

What should be clear by now, however, is that we cannot simply strand Tayo “between these two worlds” because to do so is to reinforce each of these social categories as a substance and not a process. It is a misunderstanding of Betonie’s healing ceremony to argue that “Tayo’s recovery hinges on replacing constructed beliefs with organic beliefs; he becomes healthy because he grows to feel an inherent relationship between all life forms” (Caton 108).<sup>13</sup> To pitch constructed beliefs against organic beliefs is to misunderstand “constructed” in the sense I have explained, and also to conflate the idea of construction with whiteness and the idea of organic with Nativeness. Silko’s representations of Native cultures do not contrast “constructed” and “organic.” What the materiality of the ceremony reveals instead is that whiteness and Laguna Puebloness are both processes that are constantly affected and altered by the actors out of which they are made, and that, in turn, the resultant networks also change the actors themselves and their subsequent influence on other networks. Following the healing ceremony, Silko makes this materialist process clear in her depiction of a folding steel chair kept in the meeting house on Tayo’s reservation. Tayo appears before a council of elders to update them on the status of his health, and, as he enters the kiva, “The old men nodded at a folding steel chair with ST. JOSEPH MISSION stenciled in white paint on the back. He sat down, wondering how far the chair had gone from the parish hall before it came to the kiva” (256). The chair was once one among many folding steel chairs from the St. Joseph Mission, but it now props Tayo up in front of the Laguna elders who occupy the room

alongside “boxes and trunks with tarps pulled over them to protect them from uninitiated eyes” (256). Although the St. Joseph Mission has spray-painted its moniker on the chair, even this naming cannot contain the object. Tayo wonders about the chair’s trajectory, imagining the path it has taken to Laguna “from the parish hall.” The chair seems endowed with some agency as it makes its way from St. Joseph’s Mission to the kiva at Laguna through some journey that Tayo cannot fathom, and yet here it is, providing him with a seat as he tells the story of his healing ceremony.

What we do not discover is how far the chair might possibly go beyond the kiva. The chair as actor certainly plays an important part in Tayo’s ceremony as it supports him during the final stages, but considering how far the object has come, it seems fair to point out that its story is also in process. Who knows where the chair might end up next or how it might affect some other situation? As Womack reasons, “The objects of my perceptions, nonetheless, have their own stories, not just the ones I impose on them” (“Theorizing” 377). Betonie says something similar at the beginning of the ceremony when discouraging Tayo from blaming his illness on white people: “‘Look,’ Betonie said, pointing east to Mount Taylor towering dark blue with the last twilight. ‘They only fool themselves when they think it is theirs. The deeds and papers don’t mean anything. It is the people who belong to the mountain’” (128). Much like the caretakers at St. Joseph’s sought to claim the chair by branding it with the name of the mission, the philosophy of private property has led those who pushed across North America to entitle the land to themselves by recording their names on pieces of paper. In both cases, the relationship between material object and human subject is more complicated than anyone anticipates

because the things have “stories alive in them,” as Betonie says. The nonhuman actors have agency in the lives of human actors. Nowhere is this insight more important than in the moment when a group of cowboys hired to protect private land happen upon Tayo searching for his uncle’s stolen cattle. They apprehend him, but the mountain provides a mountain lion and the men are more interested in tracking the rare animal so they abandon Tayo.

In this scene, both whiteness and Nativeness are cast as products of these characters’ respective relationships with the material world

the destroyers had tricked the white people as completely as they had fooled the Indians, [...] But the effects were hidden, evident only in the sterility of their art, which continued to feed off the vitality of other cultures, and in the dissolution of their consciousness into dead objects: the plastic and neon, the concrete and steel. (204)

The cowboys think of the mountain itself—“these goddamn Indians got to learn whose property this is!”—and the lion—“greasers and Indians—we can run them down anytime. But it’s been a couple of years since anybody up here got a mountain lion”—in different terms and this is what separates them from Tayo (202). The primacy of this relationship to the material is crystalized through Silko’s characterization of Emo, another Indian veteran, and one of the men who attempts to kill Tayo. Emo’s relation to the material world resembles the cowboys’ much more than it resembles Tayo’s. Whenever the Indian veterans gather to drink at a local bar Emo always eventually breaks out his prize trophy from the war: a Bull Durham tobacco pouch filled with human teeth. One night Emo pours the teeth out onto the table and pushes “them into circles and rows like unstrung

beads; he scoop[s] them into his hand and [shakes] them like dice” (60). The teeth are described as Emo’s souvenirs, and we are told explicitly that they come from the corpse of a Japanese soldier. Much like the cowboys, Emo wants to arrest these objects in time and space. He maintains them as a physical connection to the war that, for a moment, allowed him, a Native person, to be American in the eyes of those who consider themselves to be American.

Whiteness and Nativeness are thus not inherent modes of being or substantive categories into which individual human actors can be neatly situated. Instead, whiteness and Nativeness are processes, modes of relating to the myriad human and nonhuman actors that constitute the social. Emo clings to the teeth because they remind him of how white people in the army thought of him: “he was the best, they told him; some men didn’t like to feel the quiver of the man they were killing; some men got sick when they smelled the blood. But he was the best; he was one of them. The best. United States Army” (62). If whiteness and Nativeness were substantive markers then Emo’s bag of human teeth would operate differently because Emo is a Native person. In other words, the novel as a whole is working toward the processual nature of Native identity and Silko accomplishes this representation, in part, by aligning a Native character more closely with white people than with his “fellow” Natives in terms of his relationship to the material. Laguna Puebloness is not only a matter of blood or skin, as we know Emo looks down on Tayo for being “part white,” a “half-breed” (57). Emo is ostensibly not of mixed-blood, yet it is clear by the novel’s end that Tayo is a more ideal representative of Laguna Pueblo than Emo, who participates in two killings and is finally banished from

the reservation by the same elders who bear witness to Tayo's healing after the ceremony. Thus, the markers "white," "Native," "American," "Laguna," are, in fact, the products of material circumstances and the interactions of human and nonhuman actors. Emo relies on his ancestry to establish him as Laguna but conforms his desires to those of the people he imagines as "real" Americans, and thus at the novel's end we find Tayo more closely aligned with the elders at Laguna and Emo with the white soldiers who lusted after death and counted bloodshed as an indicator of Americanness during the war.

This distinction relies on a willingness to change our perception of the relationship between human and nonhuman actors. Returning to Betonie's claim that it is not the mountain that belongs to the people, but "the people who belong to the mountain," *Ceremony* reveals that human actors are not merely producers, consumers, and users of nonhuman actors, but that we "belong" to the same network. Robinson picks up on this wrinkle in the typical subject/object dichotomy in *Housekeeping* as she shows how even the characters who most desperately want to maintain the status quo are substantially refashioned through their interaction with material objects. As we begin to trace a pattern across the corpus of postwar fiction, what becomes clear is that these narratives all seem committed in their own ways to the reconstructive agency of nonhuman actors. Without this reconstructive agency the social cannot truly be remade because the variables of the equation (static categories such as "white," "Laguna," "American") always remain the same even when rearranged into different configurations. When the variables always remain the same then no matter how you organize them, the equation will always only produce some combination of those variables. Thus, what



makes fiction postmodern is its commitment to revealing how those variables themselves are products of more quotidian material interactions, and how there is not such a large gap between the significance of human subjects and material objects as actors. Paula Geyh reconsiders this gap when she responds to Jameson's stark separation of subject and object in his formative essay on the cultural logic of late capitalism: "Jameson's dichotomy (reproduced in the work of so many other literary and cultural critics) is rooted in a false conception of space as 'objective' and external to subjectivity" (104). Geyh's comments reflect how postmodern critics have been leery of the subject/object dichotomy for some time, and reflect both *Ceremony's* and *Housekeeping's* attempts to demonstrate the significance of the nonhuman alongside the human in the construction of the social.

### **No Objects Without Stories**

To disrupt Jameson's dichotomy, Geyh investigates how subjects and spaces mutually constitute one another in *Housekeeping*. Also drawing from Robinson's text, I would like to suggest that we look at the house that is kept in this novel, not as a space or concept that illuminates subjectivity, but as a material object filled with collections of material objects. If Gilbert and Gubar and other important feminist critics and writers have shown how domestic spaces and "trifles" have determined female subjectivity, I am also interested in how these nonhuman actors work in cooperation with human actors to form the very social categories that are being determined.<sup>14</sup> *Housekeeping* is narrated in the first-person by a young girl named Ruth whose mother leaves her and her sister Lucille in the town of Fingerbone with their grandmother, Sylvia Foster, before

committing suicide. Ruth and Lucille are raised for some years by their grandmother, then briefly by her sisters-in-law after Sylvia passes away, and finally by their aunt Sylvie, when the sisters-in-law decide the girls are too much for them to handle. Sylvie is a wandering woman, heretofore uninterested in settling down anywhere. Her odd mannerisms resonate with Ruth but disgust Lucille, who yearns for a stereotypical “American girl” experience. Although the critical discussion surrounding the novel has acutely focused on themes of gender, family, and social constraint vital to the novel, these treatments often start with these concepts as frames and thus foreclose the ways in which the text constructs such concepts. In these respects, *Housekeeping* might take its place alongside other important postwar works of feminist literature and criticism such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), Bobbie Ann Mason’s *Shiloh and Other Stories* (1982), and Adrienne Rich’s *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963). But what happens when we set aside for a moment the notion that these social categories are merely artificial and focus instead on how they actually get assembled? Robinson provides a rich array of everyday objects that offer the perfect opportunity to take inventory of the materials out of which the social is made, and her characters capitalize on these materials by building new families for themselves.

From the 1980s to the present the vast majority of criticism dedicated to *Housekeeping* has focused on Robinson’s characterization of Ruth and Sylvie as subversive of social conventions related to gender. Thomas Foster calls on Julia Kristeva’s essay “Women’s Time” to demonstrate the value of “deconstructive critique to feminist theory” by showing “how an analysis like Kristeva’s might organize a narrative

of women's resistance to the historical limitations imposed on them" in a novel such as *Housekeeping* (73-74). Martha Ravits also focuses primarily on the novel's negative powers when she argues that "repudiation of the domestic sphere by [Robinson's] female quester enlarges the central tradition to include women" (644). Marcia Aldrich, Anne-Marie Mallon, Paula Geyh, Sonia Gernes, and Maggie Galeshouse all employ the language of transience/transcendence to "subvert[] convention by presenting 'a difference of view,'" as Aldrich says (127), and to provide a "detailed account of the transition from domesticity to indigence," as Galehouse posits.<sup>15</sup> For each of these critics, transience, transcendence, wandering, and vagrancy are key in the novel not only because they demonstrate the constructed nature of social conventions regarding women and domesticity, but also because, as Geyh reasons,

the present options for women do not appear to me to be limited to either vagrancy or inscription within the household, to Sylvie's transient or Lucille's settled subjectivity. What Robinson's conception of the transient subject seems to imply instead is that the feminine subject might be constituted at present, at least in part, by an interaction between the two. (120)

This body of criticism, and Geyh's argument especially, illustrates the underlying point of this chapter by demonstrating that when you start with predetermined social categories and use them to explain other phenomena, you may discover some new arrangement, but you ultimately end up with the same basic categories. Geyh says as much when she asserts that the novel does not rework or remake the two options available to its female characters, but merely offers an alternative constituted by "an interaction between the two."

Rather than starting with gender or domesticity, I begin with the constituent actors of these larger categories to see how their interactions form the very categories that seem *a priori* in most treatments of the novel. When we focus on these ordinary objects and their relations to the characters in the novel, what results is a reading in which even the events and entities most dedicated to preserving the illusion of the social as a substance wind up revealing that the social is a process. As with the calendars Betonie pulls from his vast assortment of things, I want to look most intently at two collections in this novel and the stories that these objects contain. If the calendars, screwdriver, and folding steel chair in Silko's novel contain stories themselves and are thus active agents in the reconstruction of Tayo's identity through the healing ceremony, then the prime difference between the two collections in *Housekeeping* is that the objects in one are allowed this agency while those in the other are cut off from it by being separated from their respective stories.

The separation of a thing from its stories has historically been theorized in terms of the distinction between a thing and an object. As Brown distinguishes between thing and object in his seminal "Thing Theory" essay,

we look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. [...] the story of objects asserting themselves as things, then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation. (4)

In a footnote to the same discussion, Brown engages with Nabokov's idea in his novel *Transparent Things* that focusing on a material object can cause us to sink into its history

to point out that “we don’t apprehend things except partially or obliquely (as what’s beyond our apprehension). In fact, by looking *at* things we render them objects” (4n). Brown’s analysis recalls *Ceremony*’s white people created by witchery: “*When they look / they see only objects. / The world is a dead thing for them / the trees and rivers are not alive / the mountains and stones are not alive. / The deer and bear are objects / They see no life*” (135). As Heidegger says in his essay on “The Thing,” “An independent, self-supporting thing may become an object if we place it before us, whether in immediate perception or by bringing it to mind in a recollective re-presentation” (167). A thing is denied its thingness when it becomes a mere object of our attention, when it is overdetermined by its productive, consumptive, or use value in the hands of human actors.

The tension between object and thing mirrors the tension between the social as substance and the social as process. When the social is treated as a substance, say in the presumption that gender is an established category that can illuminate other social phenomena, then what gets obscured is the fact that gender is a process. Gender is always under construction. So to start with gender is to begin where we should actually end. Similarly, to view a material actor as a mere object is to paper over the complex stories that the actor contains, whereas recognizing the actor as a thing is to acknowledge its various and complicated constitution. Heidegger uses a jug as his prime example of this problem:

The making, it is true, lets the jug come into its own. But that which in the jug’s nature is its own is never brought about by its making. Now released from the making process, the self-supporting jug has to gather itself for the task of

containing. In the process of its making, of course, the jug must first show its outward appearance to the maker. But what shows itself here, the aspect (the *eidos*, the *idea*), characterizes the jug solely in the respect in which the vessel stands over against the maker as something to be made. (168)

The first of Robinson's two collections provides us with a series of nonhuman actors whose thingness has been eradicated by sentimentality, or in keeping with Heidegger's example, have been kept from gathering themselves for their respective tasks. These objects correspond with a particular understanding of the social in the novel, the fixed, substantive social that so many literary critics have set out to demystify as "constructed" (read artificial). However, when we consider the material constitution of the social, then we realize that gender, for instance, is certainly a construct in the novel, but not in any artificial sense. Robinson's subtle treatment of the two contrasting collections finally privileges things over objects and thus construction over critique because critique always already implies the existence of the social as a substance.

The first collection belongs to Ruth's and Lucille's grandmother, and consists of odds and ends divided between two locations: the bottom drawer of a chest of drawers, and a hatbox on top of the wardrobe. Between these two places, Grandmother has collected,

balls of twine, Christmas candles, and odd socks, [...] a shot glass with two brass buttons in it, [...] a faded wax angel that smelled of bayberry, and a black velvet pincushion in the shape of a heart, in a box with a San Francisco jeweler's name on it [...] a shoebox full of old photos, each with four patches of black, felty paper on the back [...] a brochure of, it seemed, great and obvious significance. (90)

and a “dim coil of thick hair, saved from my grandmother’s girlhood [...] along with my mother’s gray purse” (209). As Ruth narrates, she describes this collection as “memorabilia,” “randomly assorted, yet so neatly arranged, that we felt some large significance might be behind the collection as a whole. We noted that the socks, for example, all appeared unworn” (90). Grandmother’s collection is hidden away in private places where it might be discovered only by someone who knows its locations, or by someone cleaning, putting away laundry, organizing the house. In other words, this assortment of objects is reserved only for those who might participate in the domestic duties stereotypically set aside for women. These items are represented as keepsakes, memorabilia, material reminders to Ruth’s grandmother about experiences or people from her past. The photographs and hair are overtly symbolic, but the worn and unworn socks are more complicated. Why save these things? Ruth and Lucille cannot parse the significance of the unworn socks. Although the novel offers no explicit rationale for the collection, the fact that they were memorable to Sylvia Foster provides some insight into their significance.

Sylvia is characterized as a conventional, traditional woman. In the wake of her husband’s death in a railroad accident that landed him and his fellow passengers in the depths of the lake in Fingerbone, Ruth explains,

it seems that my grandmother did not consider leaving. She had lived her whole life in Fingerbone. And though she never spoke of it, and no doubt seldom thought of it, she was a religious woman. That is to say that she conceived of life as a road down which one traveled, [...] and that one’s destination was there from the very beginning [...] She accepted the idea that at some time she and my grandfather would meet again. (9-10)

While we cannot decipher the symbolism of the socks or the shot glass with any true accuracy, these items seem to be signposts on Sylvia Foster's journey down the road of her life. They are emblematic of specific people, places, and events. They are true "objects" in Heidegger's and Brown's sense. Thus, rather than helping to reveal to Sylvia that she is one among many actors involved in the construction of her own life, these items are arrested in time and space. Their fixity is indicative of the larger vision of the social that Sylvia passes down to her daughters and granddaughters, and to which some turn for comfort and against which others rebel. Her oldest daughter becomes a missionary to China. Helen, Ruth's and Lucille's mother, elopes with a man and then shows up with "a trunk full of wedding clothes, and with a box of cut flowers and champagne packed in dry ice" to "salve [Ruth's] grandmother's feelings" (14). Sylvie leaves to visit Helen in Seattle and only comes home once before returning to care for the girls. The oldest embraces a Christian mission, the second attempts to rebel but comes home to soothe her mother's feelings, the third disappears and all but refuses to return. And it is this third daughter, Sylvie, who assembles a collection in the Fingerbone house that utterly defies the sentimental things her mother saved over time.

Sylvie's collection comprises an odd array of objects stored in open spaces all over the kitchen. While her mother stored things in hatboxes and drawers, Sylvie chooses the kitchen table, counters, and floors as the sites for her collection of tin cans and other items. Ruth says of the tin cans that Sylvie "washed the labels off with soap and hot water. There were now many of these cans on the counters and windowsill, and they would have covered the table long since if Lucille and I had not removed them now and



then” (125). The cans are empty and arranged open end facing down, “except for the ones she used to store peach pits and the keys from sardine and coffee cans” (125). So Sylvie’s collection consists of tin cans, peach pits, and aluminum keys. Ruth and Lucille almost embrace the organization of the articles: “frankly, we had come to the point where we could hardly object to order in any form, though we hoped that her interest in bottles was a temporary aberration” (125). Whereas Grandmother’s collection is fixed in time and space, Sylvie’s collection is relieved of its labels and set out in the open. The labels would have designated specific contents, dates, brands, but without these markers all the cans are alike. The keys no longer serve a functional purpose, and the peach pits are saved, but not planted in the orchard that stretches out back behind the house. Each item in Grandmother’s collection looks backwards and captures distinct memories.

Conversely, Sylvie’s collection is under constant construction. Ruth says that the tin cans would have taken over the entire kitchen if “Lucille and I had not removed them now and then” (125). Where one collection is static the other is fluid. Where one looks back to name specific persons, places, or events, the other constantly looks ahead and refuses to name anything.

The contrast between the two collections is further illuminated by a heated confrontation between Ruth and Lucille in which Ruth’s behavior mirrors that of her aunt while Lucille’s echoes that of her grandmother. Lucille asks Ruth to help her make a dress based on a set of plans and patterns. The instructions call for a set of pinking shears, and since the girls don’t know what those are, Lucille calls for a dictionary. But rather than sticking to the plan and following the instructions, Ruth is sidetracked by flowers

pressed in between the pages of the dictionary. Far from bemused, Lucille takes the book by the spine and shakes it: “scores of flowers and petals fell and drifted from between the pages” (126). Ruth wants to save the flowers, but Lucille crushes them in her hands. Lucille has only one goal, to make the dress, to create all the elements of the ensemble that will ultimately be “coordinated.” Neither the dictionary nor the flowers fit into the pattern she has brought home from the store and so they must be ignored or even destroyed. Ruth, on the other hand, gets caught up in the process of making the dress and perusing the dictionary. She marvels at the relationship between the word “Queen Anne’s lace” and the sprig of the plant she finds on that page. After Lucille crushes the flowers, Ruth tries to hit her with the dictionary, and the two fight. For Lucille the dictionary can fill in gaps in knowledge because it contains the definitions of things, but when Ruth opens the dictionary she finds multiple definitions for each word. In all of her actions Lucille seeks a preexistent model or pattern, whereas Ruth lives in the moment and imagines her life as a living organism that is constantly taking shape.

The novel’s two collections are ultimately abandoned along with the house by all three major characters. Lucille leaves Sylvie and Ruth to go live with her home economics teacher. Sylvie and Ruth decide to leave Fingerbone altogether, but cannot bear the thought of abandoning the house to be picked over by the townspeople and thus they decide to burn it down. In her explanation for why they decide to set fire to the house, Ruth further illuminates the significance of each collection:

even things lost in a house abide, like forgotten sorrows and incipient dreams, and many household things are of purely sentimental value, like the dim coil of thick hair, saved from my grandmother’s girlhood, which was kept in a hatbox on top

of the wardrobe, along with my mother's gray purse. In the equal light of disinterested scrutiny such things are not themselves. They are transformed into pure object, and are horrible, and must be burned. (209)

If all things contain their own stories and not just the stories we impose on them, then when we do our best to scrutinize and divorce things from the stories they contain they become nothing more than the imaginative ciphers of human actors, "pure objects." So when Ruth and Sylvie burn the house it is because the house itself and the objects it contains have become "pure objects," that is, they lack a certain thingness. The objects in the Fingerbone house have become so pure and so fixed in human determination, and so divorced from their reconstructive possibilities that they are only fit for burning. It seems that, for Ruth and Sylvie, even the unlabeled cans, the aluminum keys, and the peach pits have become too representative of a particular time and place, and so they set fire to the house and leave Fingerbone.

Although we follow Ruth and Sylvie in their dangerous and transcendent escape, Robinson demonstrates the difficulty in truly changing our way of thinking about the social as the fire ultimately burns itself out before destroying the house altogether. However, while it may be difficult to change our understanding of the social, this struggle does not negate the important revelation that the social as process has astounding implications for Ruth's and Sylvie's capacity to leave the house behind and set out on a new course. But what most critics have missed in their assessment of the novel by focusing mostly on Ruth and Sylvie is that it is Robinson's characterization of Lucille that perhaps best illustrates the possibilities for uncovering the construction of the social. This blind spot is no surprise considering Lucille's adamant desire to distance herself

from Ruth and Sylvie and conform to a more “normal” life. But even this “normal” ideal is a construction. In an essay entitled “Family” from *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought*, Robinson lays out the history of the family in its modern, Western form and explains how this idea of the family came to be constructed in response to industrialization, child labor, and economic growth. At the outset of this piece, she suggests that

we are all aware that ‘family’ is a word which eludes definition, as do other important things, like nation, race, culture, gender, species,” and goes on to say that “the attempt to impose definition on indeterminacy and degree and exception is about the straightest road to mischief I know. (*The Death* 87)

Connecting this insight to *Housekeeping*, it is obviously Lucille who desires to conform her life to the stagnant, albeit arbitrary, definition of family I have discussed in terms of familiar social categories. Yet, what is so important about Lucille’s desire to pattern her life, much like her dress, after this social category is that it is actually Lucille around whom a social network is refashioned, one built not solely out of biological kinship, but also out of reappropriated actors such as pinking shears, dictionaries, and a home economics teacher.

Whereas Silko primarily relies on characters like Betonie and Tayo, those who represent the construction of identity, as models for remaking the social, Robinson uses Lucille, a character who represents an allegiance to familiar social categories, as a model for postmodernism’s reconstructive agency. *Housekeeping* reveals that the building of social networks is constantly taking place, even when characters are actively pursuing the codification of familiar social categories. Ruth and Sylvie undermine preexisting social

expectations, but in her attempts to fulfill such expectations an entirely new network forms around Lucille. After a year of Sylvie's influence, Lucille and Ruth reach a crossroads at which they take separate paths. Reminiscent of Rocky in *Ceremony*, Lucille embraces school, self-improvement, exercise, and "a group of girls who ate lunch in the Home Economics room" (136). When the sisters go to make the case to their school principal that they are back on track, Ruth does not say much, leading the principal to encourage her to speak for herself. Lucille looks at Ruth and explains to Mr. French, "She has her own ways" (135). Lucille recognizes that Ruth's ways do not conform to the accepted norms of social behavior that Mr. French can relate to, and to which she herself longs to conform. Eventually, Lucille's detestation of Sylvie's and Ruth's "own ways" leads her to leave home and go live with the home economics teacher, Miss Royce. Ruth narrates, "Miss Royce gave her the spare room. In effect, she adopted her, and I had no sister after that night" (140). Thus, in her attempt to conform to the social category of "normal girl" in Fingerbone, Idaho, Lucille leaves her own family and, in effect, creates a new family for herself. Ruth says that Miss Royce adopts Lucille "in effect," not legally. Robinson returns to Lucille's new social situation at the end of the novel as Ruth and Sylvie wander the United States and speculate about what has become of their sister/niece: "we do not know where she is, or how to find her. 'She's probably married,' Sylvie says, and no doubt she is" (217). So it would seem easy enough to surmise that Sylvie and Ruth have lambasted and burned down the social and are assembling it anew, while Lucille has done her best to prop up the old categories. However, the conclusion of the novel is vague and all-but-impossible to decipher as to what has become of Lucille.

The first-person narration is important here as we are asked to filter our idea of Lucille through Ruth's consciousness. Ruth instructs us to

imagine Lucille in Boston, at a table in a restaurant, waiting for a friend [...] Sylvie and I do not flounce in through the door, smoothing the skirts of our oversized coats and combing our hair back with our fingers. We do not sit down at the table next to hers and empty our pockets in a damp heap in the middle of the table, and sort out the gum wrappers and ticket stubs, and add up the coins and dollar bills, and laugh and add them up again. (218)

Ruth's speculation of Lucille's imagination throughout these final pages is representative of the kind of reliance on the conventional idea of social construction that I am working against in this chapter, the idea that our culture is somehow artificial, because it is manufactured, constructed. A lengthy quote from Robinson's essay "Puritans and Prigs" can illuminate this point:

Americans never think of themselves as sharing fully in the human condition, and therefore beset as all humankind is beset. Rather they imagine that their defects result from their being uniquely the products of a crude system of social engineering. They believe this is a quirk of their brief and peculiar history, a contraption knocked together out of ramshackle utilitarianism and fueled by devotion to the main chance. [...] Clearly there is an element of truth in this. The error comes in the belief that they are in any degree exceptional, that there is a more human world in which they may earn a place if only they can rid themselves of the deficiencies induced by life in an invented nation and a manufactured culture. (*The Death* 154)

Regardless of how we might disagree as to Robinson's formulation of "the human condition," Ruth's vision of Lucille's life in Boston, and of her own life as a transient, vagrant, wandering ghost ultimately stand in contrast to other lives about which nothing

can be known, implying that these lives they live and imagine are no less real than some idealized, more-human world.

Thus, the final sentences of the novel, imaginative and contradictory as they are, can be read as a stylistic diagnosis of the social as process:

No one watching this woman smear her initials in the steam on her water glass with her first finger, or slip cellophane packets of oyster crackers into her handbag for the sea gulls, could know how her thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie. (219)

The negative/positive contradiction in these closing lines echoes that of the previous passage in the restaurant, and creates a sense of confusion that is left unresolved. Lucille does *not* listen, wait, or hope (negative) *for* specific people (positive), and yet this confusion is not unsettling or disturbing. In fact, confusion might not be the best word at all. The novel ends, less in confusion than in progress—under construction. Martha Ravits says that

the novel ends with Ruth in ‘that sad and outcast state of revelation’ where she can reflect on the difference between housekeeping and being turned out of the house to comment on materialistic society that falsifies the notion of female identity by equating female well-being with domestic life. (665)

However, what is so important about Ruth’s “outcast state” is that it is the state she and Sylvie have chosen. They could have conformed to their neighbors’ expectations, gone through the court system to stay together, or taken any number of other paths. But they choose instead to burn the house, cross the Fingerbone bridge, and wander the United States. Their choice not only highlights the distinction and enacts the critique Ravits

points out, but also constitutes the reconstruction of their mode of being, one that is no more and no less human, no more and no less manufactured than any other.

The novels I examine in this chapter have typically been read as postmodern insofar as they critique preexisting social categories as constructed, or artificial. However, such readings often fall short by failing to recognize the reconstructive agency wrapped up in such critiques, and thus miss out on the important revelation that the social is, in fact, a process. The writers themselves do not make this mistake. In the essay “Family” referenced earlier, Robinson recounts the evolution of the Western idea of the family that she challenges in her fiction. She traces the terrible working conditions during the industrial revolution, the forced labor of children, and other horrors of the working class, and then exclaims, “there is nothing to wonder at, that the ideal of mother and children at home, and father adequately paid to keep them from need, was a thing warmly desired, and that for generations social reform was intended to secure this object” (*The Death* 94). Although her novel *Housekeeping* undermines what has become the normalized vision of the family she describes in the essay, this subversion does not mean that the familiar social idea of the family is somehow unreal.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, is it not the very reality of such social categories and their material effects that inspires postmodernism’s critique? Are the effects of socially-constructed race, nation, gender themselves also constructed in the sense of being artificial? No! And yet, while we are quick to point out the concrete economic and political impact of these social categories, advocates and opponents of postmodernism alike are equally quick to point out that the injustice of these effects is heightened by the fact that it is brought about by narratives



and social structures that are themselves artificial. The objects that populate postmodern fiction reveal that our social constructions are no less real than the materials out of which they are built.

When the social categories in these two texts are revealed to be in-process assemblages as opposed to paint-by-number groupings or merely artificial classifications, we are enabled to see Tayo's healing, Ruth's and Sylvie's freedom, and Lucille's new family as products of a rearrangeable network of human and nonhuman actors. Furthermore, just as the calendars, steel chairs, coils of hair, balls of twine, and deer-hoof clackers operate as actors in the ongoing formation of social networks, Silko's and Robinson's novels themselves are also under construction. *Ceremony* ends at sunrise with a new day on the horizon. *Housekeeping* ends in an invited imagining and connection between narrator and reader, as Ruth instructs us to imagine Lucille not waiting and always for herself and Sylvie. These formal arrangements resonate with Rita Felski's assertion that postmodernism is not the "end" of anything (*Doing Time* 6). Instead, postmodernism's interest in the material represents the ultimate *en medias res* of everything. Postmodernism's resolute materialism renders it capable of remaking the social categories we often perceive as fixed. For this reason, in the next chapter I turn to postmodernism's interruption of the grand narratives of Enlightenment modernity in two novels that demonstrate how postmodern fiction avoids a steady slippage from social networks back into familiar social categories by foregrounding the precedence of inclination over otherness. Each of these texts, DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) and Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), is assembled around a

specific material object. These novels offer the opportunity to take a closer look at exactly how writers not only envision the social as a process but also structure narratives so as to accentuate the significance of nonhuman actors in the construction of the social. Because of the significance of material objects in the narrative arrangements of these two texts, we must also begin to consider postmodern narratives themselves, the novels as such, as actors in the formation of the social.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Theorists interested in the historical implications of postmodernism, such as Lyotard and Jameson, are interested in postmodernism as a critique of metanarratives (Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition*) and as an “imitation of dead styles” (Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*). Theorists interested in the aesthetic implications of postmodernism, such as Hutcheon, often argue that postmodernism lacks agency (*The Politics of Postmodernism*).

<sup>2</sup> The relationship between postmodernist and feminist criticism is a complex one. As early as 1984 Andreas Huyssen points out that “it is somewhat baffling that feminist criticism has so far largely stayed away from the postmodernism debate which is considered not to be pertinent to feminist concerns. The fact that to date only male critics have addressed the problem of modernity/postmodernity, however, does not mean that it does not concern women. I would argue – and here I am in full agreement with Craig Owens – that women’s art, literature and criticism are an important part of the postmodern culture of the 1970s and 1980s and indeed a measure of the vitality and energy of that culture” (“Mapping the Postmodern” 28). In Linda Hutcheon’s *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), as we have already seen, she argues that the disconnect between these two conversations exists because of postmodernism’s perceived lack of agency (168). In contrast to the state of the debate when Huyssen addressed it in 1984, in a 1992 issue of *boundary 2*, Linda Nicholson opens her theorization of feminism/postmodernism by observing that, “The discussion of the relation between feminism and postmodernism/poststructuralism has generated a surprising degree of intense feeling among feminists” (“Feminism and the Politics of Postmodernism” 53). And by the year 2000 this debate had built a substantial body of work as evidenced by Rita Felski’s argument in *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*: “Things have changed since 1988 when Meaghan Morris mourned the lack of serious engagement between feminism and postmodernism. There is now a substantial and mounting literature on this question” (4).

<sup>3</sup> In his theory of narrative as a means of structuring experience, David Herman conceptualizes such “storyworlds” as “mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate—or make a deictic shift—as they work to comprehend a narrative” (5). Calling on the work of Algirdas Julien Greimas in a later chapter, Herman goes on to point out that “actants are what enable language users to [...] build a manifested universe of meaning from the materials provided by the immanent universe of meaning” (121). To answer the question I have just raised regarding the stuff of postmodern networks and narratives, this chapter focuses on critique and construction out of “actants” at the level of the story in postmodern fiction.

<sup>4</sup> Both novels, for instance, are excerpted in Paula Geyh’s, Fred Leebron’s, and Andrew Levy’s *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology* (1997). Portions of Silko’s novel are included in the section “Revisiting History” while a few chapters from Robinson’s novel are included in the section “Revising Genre.” Both novels are positioned as postmodern by the editors in terms of their active investments in undercutting naturalized understandings of history and genre. The literary criticism surrounding each of these works also tends to focus on their respective demythologizing projects, as I discuss further along in the chapter.

<sup>5</sup> It should be pointed out that Vizenor views Larson’s reading of Native American Indian fiction as beholden to race as determinative of “the measures of tribal identities. The obscure notions of blood quantum, that arithmetic reduction of neat bloodlines, were dubious and uncertain measures of identities; so, in the end, he decided that the known ‘acceptance by one’s peers’ was a ‘more meaningful test of

Indianness” (*Manifest Manners* 80). Larson, is hemmed in by the very kinds of boundaries that this project seeks to trouble.

<sup>6</sup> See Spurgeon’s *Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier*, especially chapter 4 “Decolonizing Imperialism: Captivity Myths and the Postmodern World in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony*.”

<sup>7</sup> Alexie positions his Native protagonist, the ironically named John Smith, in the quintessential “between two worlds” position as he is torn from his young Native mother at birth and adopted by a white family in Seattle, Washington. Alexie ultimately invalidates this theorization of Native subjectivity by having Smith commit suicide at the novel’s conclusion. Hogan’s fictional Florida Taiga tribe barely boasts thirty living members, and her narrator/protagonist Omishto seems the stereotypical smart young Native woman who feels torn between the white world of education and the Native world of tradition. However, Hogan resists this easy bifurcation by constantly poking holes in each “world.” In the most obvious instance, white preservationists, Native traditionalists, and Natives who no longer follow tradition are all angry with Ama Eaton for shooting a protected Florida panther.

<sup>8</sup> I agree with Womack’s resistance to postmodernism as it has traditionally been defined, but would argue that a postmodernism grounded in the material might assuage Womack’s justified leering of this theory.

<sup>9</sup> Paula M. L. Moya defines the type of essentialism postmodernism seeks to avoid as “the notion that individuals or groups have an immutable and discoverable ‘essence’—a basic, unvariable, and presocial nature. As a theoretical concept, essentialism expresses itself through the tendency to see one social category (class, gender, race, sexuality, etc.) as determinate in the last instance for the cultural identity of the individual or group in question” (7). Craig Womack points out a gap in Moya’s and the broader new “postpositivist realist” reaction to postmodernism’s endless fictions by arguing that this reaction is “a version of postmodernism that describes much the same theoretical commitment as the old version, without any real theoretical difference but with a new theoretical jargon constituting its main distinctive feature” (“Theorizing” 355). The postpositive realist position is one that sees the value of postmodernism’s move away from foundationalism but is also leery of its inability to, as Womack expresses it, “make normative truth claims” (“Theorizing” 353). Womack argues that while the impulse of postpositive realists is promising, they “might be described as ‘having their cake and eating it too.’ They want to retain the theoretical sophistication of postmodernism in terms of looking at how history and culture give rise to ideas that are always mediated by human knowledge [...] while also insisting that truth claims can be judged *relatively* true or false...” (355).

<sup>10</sup> Latour’s distinction between the sociology of the social and the sociology of associations is helpful here as it further clarifies the distinction both Allen and I see between the different characters in *Ceremony*: “In most situations, we use ‘social’ to mean that which has already been assembled and acts as a whole, without being too picky on the precise nature of what has been gathered, bundled, and packaged together. When we say that ‘something is social’ or ‘has a social dimension,’ we mobilize one set of features that, so to speak, march in step together, even though it might be composed of radically different types of entities. This unproblematic use of the word is fine as long as we don’t confuse the sentence ‘Is social what goes together?’ with one that says, ‘social designates a particular kind of stuff.’ With the former we simply mean that we are dealing with a routine state of affairs whose binding together is the crucial aspect, while the second designates a sort of substance whose main feature lies in its differences with other types of materials. We imply that some assemblages are built out of social stuff instead of physical, biological, or economical blocks [...]” (43).

<sup>11</sup> Like Tayo, Betonie himself comes from a family in which social categories are not static, but fluid as he has a Navajo grandfather, Mexican grandmother, and lives on the outskirts of a Navajo reservation overlooking the white town of Gallup where he is ostracized by most everyone.

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Louis Owens's argument that the central lesson of *Ceremony* is "that through the dynamism, adaptability, and syncretism inherent in Native American cultures, both individuals and the cultures within which individuals find significance and identity are able to survive, grow, and evade the deadly traps of stasis and sterility" (92). Chadwick Allen's *Blood Narrative*, referenced earlier, includes a chapter titled "Blood/Land/Memory: Narrating Indigenous Identity in the American Indian Renaissance," in which he emphasizes the "changing cultural and historical contexts" that Tayo must interpret in the novel in order to experience healing (172). Allen goes on to draw parallels between Tayo's experiences and the literary aesthetic of writers such as Leslie Silko and James Welch, among others, whose "representations of pictographic traditions serve as metonyms for indigenous memory in the contemporary written text. They evoke the continuity of that memory across generations and the endurance of indigenous historical memory despite cultural change" (172).

<sup>13</sup> As we saw with Spurgeon earlier, many self-proclaimed postmodern readings of *Ceremony* tend to reify familiar social categories by misunderstanding Paula Gunn Allen's basic ideas about harmony versus human mechanism. In his book on Romantic theory and postmodernism Lou Caton calls on *The Sacred Hoop* as a foil against which to argue that novels like *Ceremony* can be most productively read in terms of the trope of polarity. Caton turns to Allen as critical opponent because she suggests that Tayo's sickness arises from a nonnative view of the world that results in a "separation from the ancient unity of person, ceremony, and land" (119). Caton's basic disagreement with Allen seems to come out of a dispute over the idea that Native cultures understand the world in holistic, organic terms while Western cultures understand the world in separatist, fragmented terms. Caton wants to find a similarity between these two views by arguing for a Western vision of unity in disunity. But the problem with his reliance on the binary of dualism and organicism is that such an approach misreads Allen's embrace of wholeness and resistance to dualism. Allen's and other critics' rejections of this brand of polarity does not arise out of some naïve ignorance of the fact that "cultural difference needs to be arbitrated within a field of commonality in order to exist as a coherent, albeit diverse, collection of works" (Caton 102). Instead, this juxtaposition of wholeness to separatism and dualism stems from a legitimate concern over how such views of the world tend to reduce opposing cultures to their lowest common denominators to identify both difference and similarity. Allen does not buy into critical positions like Caton's because such positions necessarily attempt to define the social collectives of Native peoples as substantive, and thus, static things. The view of the world Allen reads in *Ceremony* in *The Sacred Hoop* should not be understood in contrast to some perceived constructed view of the world because the holistic conception of the world that unfolds in the novel is much like the webs woven by Thought-Woman, the spider.

<sup>14</sup> In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar remind us that many nineteenth-century women writers were literally confined to their fathers' houses (i.e. Dickinson, Brontë, and Rosetti), as were some of their characters. In their preface, Gilbert and Gubar explain that, "the inspiration for this study arose from a gap in the study of women writers in terms of what seemed to then a "distinctively female literary tradition" in which they saw recurrent "Images of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors" (xi). My usage of "trifles" is intended as a reference to Susan Glaspell's famous play of that title in which two women's attention to small material objects considered to be trifles by the men in the drama ultimately lead them to solve a mystery the men cannot solve.

<sup>15</sup> Each of these critics foreground their analyses of the novel with the language of transience, wandering, vagrancy, and/or transcendence: Marcia Aldrich writes about "The Poetics of Transience," Anne-Marie Mallon about "Homelessness and Transcendence," Sonia Gernes about "Transcendent Women" in Robinson and Atwood. Paula Geyh argues that "settled" and "transient" are the two options available to women in the novel. And Maggie Galeshouse's essay is entitled "Their Own Private Idaho: Transience in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*." There are still other essays interested in these themes, but these five

are sufficient to demonstrate that an overwhelming percentage of attention devoted to the novel is dedicated to subverting social convention by way of focusing on the transience of the novel's female characters.

<sup>16</sup> In the preface and introduction to *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics*, Satya P. Mohanty articulates what he sees as the shortcomings and possibilities of postmodernism, defining the mode much in the way that critics from Howe to Hutcheon have: "What is specifically postmodernist, however, is not the critique of tradition itself—for such a critique was central to the Enlightenment project of modernity as well—but rather the more far-reaching claim that truth and rationality are always socially and discursively constructed" (xi). Mohanty goes on to juxtapose his own view his own thesis with the postmodern "skeptical stance and the constructivist theoretical view that underlies or accompanies it" (16), and then explains that "the postmodernist critique of knowledge is limited because it does not consider reasonable alternatives to the positivist view" (18). And finally, in his response to Althusser's brand of postmodernism in chapter 3, Mohanty explains that Althusser comes close to, but falls short of, a theory of postmodern agency. Mohanty brings us full circle back to Hutcheon's distinction between postmodernism and feminism based on postmodernism's lack of agency. Obviously, this chapter's interest in how postmodernism should be understood as offering complicitous critique toward critical construction stands in conflict with Hutcheon and Mohanty. But these important critics have also provided the answer to the challenge to postmodern agency by maintaining an interest in construction.

CHAPTER III  
NARRATING THE SOCIAL: FROM OTHERNESS  
TO INCLINATION

Nearly twenty years before Ihab Hassan asked whether postmodernism should be considered a social phenomenon or “perhaps even a mutation in Western humanism” (*Orpheus* 266), Leslie Fiedler had argued that the new generation associated with “post-Modernist” fiction was rising in protest to “that bourgeois-Protestant version of Humanism, with its view of man as justified by rationality, work, duty, vocation, maturity, success” (“Mutants” 511). Originally delivered as a lecture at Rutgers University, Fiedler’s oft-cited 1965 essay “The New Mutants” specifically analyzes “the effort of young men in England and the United States to assimilate into themselves (or even to assimilate themselves into) that otherness, that sum total of rejected psychic elements which the middle-class heirs of the Renaissance have identified with ‘woman’” (516). Although Fiedler’s early contribution focuses especially on the ways in which WASP males buck the Enlightenment narrative of their sex, this idea of differentiation from tradition through “otherness” begins to work its way into the larger discourse of postmodernism until it becomes a defining trait in postmodern theories of sociality. What Fiedler in 1965 calls a rejection of humanism, Lyotard in 1979 famously calls an “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv), and it is postmodernism’s incredulity toward hegemonic narratives of the social expressed through difference and otherness that has won the praise of even its staunchest critics. Fredric Jameson and Terry Eagleton (the

closest figures we might imagine to opponents of postmodernism—if postmodernism is even a position with the capacity to garner opponents) have claimed that postmodernism represents a “celebration of difference and differentiation” in which ideally “cultures around the world are placed in tolerant contact with each other in a kind of immense cultural pluralism” (Jameson “Cultures” 56), and that the enfranchisement of previously voiceless groups is the “trend’s most precious achievement” (Eagleton *Illusions* 121).

From Fiedler to Lyotard to Jameson and Eagleton, the celebration of difference that postmodernism is said to represent reaches its full expression in the idea of otherness, or what Appiah terms “the manufacture of Otherness” in his 1991 essay “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” For Appiah, as for Lyotard and others, it is Max Weber’s narrative of Enlightenment rationalization and its attendant commodity culture that sets the stage for the emergence of postmodernism and postcolonialism in the second half of the twentieth century. The important distinction between these two “posts-” is that where postmodernism reappropriates commodity culture’s multiplication of difference to challenge the hegemonic social imaginary of Enlightenment modernity, postcolonialism teaches us that “we are all already contaminated by each other [...] —the binarism of Self and Other—is the last of the shibboleths of the modernizers that we must learn to live without” (354). In other words, the rise of modern commodity culture showed us the need to define through distinction in order to clear a space in the marketplace, and postmodernism simply takes this idea of “the manufacture of otherness” to its absolute extreme as a means of critiquing the monolith of modernity. After all, how can we believe that we live in a world defined by



the unifying pervasion of reason and secularization when every day we witness the effects of authoritarian regimes and radical religious fundamentalisms? Given the undeniable proliferation of a vast array of different cultures, Appiah notes that “the beginning of postmodern wisdom is to ask whether Weberian rationalization is in fact what has occurred historically” (344). In his distinction between the postmodern and the postcolonial, Appiah begins to gesture toward the basic problem with postmodern theories of the social: the idea that cultures can be clearly defined through differentiation from one another on account of some immutable, foundational essence. It is this idea of difference, or otherness, that has been understood incompletely in postmodernism’s attempts to redress the hegemonic social imaginary of Enlightenment modernity.

As with the misreading of postmodernism’s potential for reconstructive agency discussed in the last chapter, there is an important gap between the ways in which postmodern fiction enacts the social and the way it has been theorized by critics. Eagleton looks back on the rise of postmodernism in *After Theory* to explain that on the path to postmodernism “whatever linked us – whatever was the *same* – was noxious. Difference was the new catch-cry” (46 original emphasis). In his insightful “Mapping the Postmodern,” Andreas Huyssen describes the postwar social imaginary as made up of “various forms of otherness [...] constitutive of postmodern culture” (50). However, as we saw in the novels of Silko and Robinson, setting cultures, races, and genders in opposition to one another necessarily requires that each category be understood as a definable substance and ignores its fluidity. That is, to conceive of the social as grounded in otherness is to assume that the entities being differentiated from one another are

individually autonomous, static, and substantive. And yet Tayo, for instance, is healed and reconciled with his people and his family in spite of what is perceived as a foundational difference between himself and other Lagunas (i.e. mixed blood), and finally able to remake his identity in cooperation with a host of human and nonhuman actors. In turning once again to nonhuman actors that populate DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) and Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991), this chapter asks what we might learn by moving away from otherness as foundational to the postmodern construction of the social. The objects in these texts reveal that postmodern fiction is marked by an intrinsic interest not solely in otherness but also—and perhaps more than one would think—in “inclination,” or in what French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy calls the *clinamen* of fundamentally relational beings toward one another in an “inoperative community” (*Inoperative* 3-4).<sup>1</sup>

For Nancy, there is a vital distinction between a social collective identified as a community and one identified as a society. A society is an organized (or operative) association of individuals, maintained through work, and a community is “the exposure of singularities” (30).<sup>2</sup> By “exposure of singularities” Nancy means that community is not the gathering of autonomous individuals under an operative structure. Rather, in building on Heidegger's idea of *Dasein*, Nancy envisions community as a kind of *being-with* or *being-in-common*. Thus, for Nancy, community is the very *clinamen* or inclination of singular beings toward one another, and, at base, these beings are relational, not individual (3-4). Inclination is not a novel concept for Nancy or for Western philosophy by any means. Its roots can be followed back at least as far as Lucretius's two-thousand-

year-old poem *On the Nature of Things*, in which the entire material universe is explained by the atom's power "to swerve from its normal path, plus its power to cling together with other atoms both like and unlike itself" (Copely xii). Stephen Greenblatt defines this "swerve" or, in Lucretius's Latin, this *clinamen*, as "an infinite number of atoms moving randomly through space, like dust motes in a sunbeam, colliding, hooking together, forming complex structures, breaking apart again, in a ceaseless process of creation and destruction" and later as "an unexpected, unpredictable movement of matter" (5, 7). Greenblatt's recent book, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (2011), charts the influence of this theory of matter throughout the European Renaissance, whereas Nancy culls it from Heidegger's later discussions of being.<sup>3</sup> The parallel theme in both treatments of the concept is that there is an unaccountable movement common to all matter that brings things into contact with one another. Without the *clinamen*, "swerve," or inclination of atoms falling through the void matter would never come into contact with other matter. There would be no difference because there would be no staging of difference. While postmodern fiction is certainly invested in valorizing difference, it is perhaps even more interested in the inclination of actors that make this difference possible.

What makes literary texts postmodern in terms of their view of the social, then, is not so much the fetishization of difference, as Eagleton posits, or the manufacture of otherness, as Appiah proposes, but the foregrounding of the inclination of what Nancy calls "singularities" or "singular beings." Postmodern writers such as DeLillo and Alvarez do not merely enact Nancy's idea of *clinamen*, but take it in a new direction by

asking us to include nonhuman actors in the realm of “singularities” that incline toward one another. Otherness has been misunderstood as foundational when it is actually only definable in the context of the inclination of actors toward one another in material formations. The obsession with otherness that has dominated the critical discourse of postmodernism arises, in part, out of a legitimate need to engage with the ethical implications of the differences we encounter when actors are exposed to one another, but these theories of otherness have become the foundation upon which our understanding of the postmodern is built. In the process, the inclination that precedes otherness has been pushed to the side and more often than not ignored altogether. If Silko and Robinson enable us to further reduce social categories that present themselves as lowest common denominators by highlighting the constituent material components of those categories, then the material domains of DeLillo’s and Alvarez’s novels help us see how it is that these actors incline toward one another in the first place. These texts suggest that when we widen our critical gaze to include nonhuman actors in the construction of the social, we can ultimately move away from a problematic reliance on otherness that dictates a view of the social as static substance.

Recasting otherness as part and parcel of inclination is especially important now at a time when astute criticism is being leveled at the preoccupation with difference postmodernism shares with two other important –isms: poststructuralism and multiculturalism. For instance, Rey Chow begins her recent analysis of critical theory by arguing that difference has become the ultimate foundation for most philosophies of identity:

In the increasingly globalized realm of theoretical discourse, a habitual move may be readily discerned in critical discussion regarding marginalized groups and non-Western cultures: the critic makes a gesture toward Western theory, but only in such a way as to advance the point that such theory is inadequate, negligent, and Eurocentric. As a consequence, what legitimates concern for the particular group, identity, or ethnic culture under discussion [...] is its historical, cultural, gendered difference, which becomes in terms of the theoretical strategies involved, the basis for the claim of opposition and resistance. (171)

Building on earlier critiques of postmodernism's interest in difference such as bell hooks's "Postmodern Blackness," as well as Chow's argument and others like it, critics such as Sue J. Kim have recently argued that "Otherness postmodernism, then, is the hegemonic idea that, by describing the anti-hegemonic in a formal way as difference, recuperates it back into the hegemony" and that "it fails to provide a concrete means to move beyond that sameness-difference binary" (22). Thus, postmodernism has finally been charged with committing the same crimes of Enlightenment modernity that it originally set out to fight. That is, in resisting the hegemonic social imaginary of Weberian rationalization, postmodernism has relied on heterogeneous narratives to the extent that it generates and perpetuates essentializing naturalizations of these different groups against some monolithic idea of sameness. But when we foreground the treatment of everyday objects in postmodern fiction, these texts uncover an inclination of various actors that ultimately *produces* the otherness that has been understood as foundational.

The basis for a more productive understanding of the inclination of postmodern otherness has been present all along in Appiah's 1991 essay on the two "posts-." Early on Appiah proposes that one key feature of modern commodity culture is the need to "clear a space in which one is distinguished from all other producers and products—and one

does this by the construction and marking of differences” (341). A little later he defines postmodernism as “a retheorization of the proliferation of distinctions that reflects the underlying dynamic of cultural modernity, the need to clear oneself a space” (346). Just as Hutcheon and others saw in postmodernism unlimited potential to critique familiar social categories but could not see the reconstructive agency wrapped up in that critique, critics have recognized postmodernism’s ability to challenge hegemony by focusing on otherness but missed out on the all-important idea that what postmodernism actually does is clear space for gathering, not differentiating, by revealing the social as a process. In *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy declares that a community is “neither a work to be produced, nor a lost communion, but rather [...] space itself” (19). And in *Reassembling the Social*, Latour, who repeatedly cautions us never to begin with what should be our result, proclaims that the social “is no more than an occasional spark generated by the shift, the shock, the slight displacement of other non-social phenomena” (36). Both Silko and Robinson move their characters around constantly to accomplish the interaction of human and nonhuman actors because without this *clinamen* and displacement there can be no social at all. Tayo goes to visit Betonie, follows him up into the mountains, makes his way home, and then chases the spotted cattle. Ruth and Sylvie are characterized as transient, vagrant, homeless, wandering, transcendent. The constant movement of actors that marks the social as a process necessitates open space through which they can incline toward one another, sometimes sticking together and sometimes breaking apart.

Whereas the last chapter started with human actors and mapped out their interactions with nonhuman actors to demonstrate the significance of both in remaking

the social, this chapter does the reverse. Both texts I examine in this chapter start with particular objects whose significance results in the inclination of actors and the reconstruction of human and nonhuman relations. DeLillo's magnum opus *Underworld* follows the trajectory of a famous baseball across nearly half a century as it circulates through the lives of numerous characters, clearing space for an inclination of human actors that defies the social as a static series of *a priori* categories. Thus, the novel ultimately demonstrates that community is developed out of common interactions and not in contrast to other "societies." Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* features a series of objects—culminating with a toy drum brought from America to the Dominican Republic—that can help us reconcile Nancy's theory of inclination with Latour's theory of the social as always constituted by work. Nancy relies on *clinamen*, or the inclination of actors, which he insists "cannot arise from the domain of *work*" (31), while Latour relies on work because "if you stop making and remaking the groups, you stop having groups," which he later refers to not as networks, but as "worknets" (*Reassembling* 34-35, 143). Alvarez illuminates and extends both approaches by focusing on the image of the hollow space contained by the toy drum, demonstrating that these two processes—inclination and work—are complementary. This reconciliation is essential to the novel's overall goal of spinning diverse communities out of common material experiences. Much like *Underworld* and *García Girls*, other texts in the postwar era utilize nonhuman actors as the sites around which to map the inclination of other actors. Jayne Anne Phillips's *Machine Dreams* (1984) connects actors across time and space as they interact with objects such as a radio and small wooden box. Nicholson Baker's

*Room Temperature* (1990) spans innumerable narrative worlds as the narrator spends the novel contemplating a mobile he has built for his infant child. The piano in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1987) draws an entire family together through conflict, but also introduces unfamiliar actors into the existing social formations in the drama. When we open up our approach to postmodern narrative to include inclination then what becomes clear is that these texts have the ability not only to demonstrate social categories as processes, but also to reveal how such categories emerge from a common material base.

### **The Inclination of Actors**

Originally published in the October 1992 issue of *Harper's*, DeLillo's "Pafko at the Wall" recounts the final game of the 1951 pennant race between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers, in which Bobby Thomson hits a walk-off home run to put the Giants in the World Series. The "Pafko" in the story's title is the Brooklyn Dodgers outfielder who watches as the home run ball sails over his head and into the grandstands of the ballpark at New York's Polo Grounds. When the story reappears five years later as the prologue to *Underworld*, however, it is retitled, "The Triumph of Death." This title is taken from a sixteenth-century painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder depicting a variety of violent and horrifying deaths in a war-torn landscape. Bruegel's masterpiece shows up in the story as FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover sits watching the pennant game and a reprint of the painting torn from a magazine floats down over him in multiple pieces while the crowd throws various items onto the field. Since the Bruegel reprint appears in both the 1992 and the 1997 versions of the story, why change the title? To complicate this



question further, the story was also republished as a novella under the original title, “Pafko at the Wall,” in October 2001 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Thomson’s homerun, whose reputation as “The Shot Heard Round the World” also serves as the novella’s subtitle. The most obvious answer to why DeLillo changes the title is also the most significant: the prologue serves a different purpose in relation to the novel than it does in the context of a periodical like *Harper’s* or as a novella.

Most of the critical attention paid to DeLillo’s retelling of this famous game has focused on the contrast between blissful postwar America and the looming Soviet threat covered up by the baseball game, or on baseball itself as a complicated allegory of American society. As John Duvall notes, “Pafko at the Wall” presents a problematized view of American society in the postwar era. Duvall asserts that, in the ballpark, DeLillo exposes but fails to transcend a faulty “series of ‘us-them’ binaries of the early 1950s,” especially that of race relations (286). In other words, DeLillo demystifies the mythic social categories of postwar America, but does not offer a means of moving beyond these myths. I agree with Duvall’s assessment of “Pafko at the Wall,” which resonates with Hutcheon’s notion of postmodernism as complicitous critique. However, in its rebirth as “The Triumph of Death,” DeLillo’s story of that monumental day in baseball history is only the beginning of a much longer work, and therefore, I would argue it must be reconsidered in light of its function in relation to the novel proper. In that context “The Triumph of Death” is perhaps most important to *Underworld* because it provides the object—a baseball—whose movement throughout the rest of the narrative reveals the inclination of actors in the formation of a social network. The movement of the baseball

throughout the text might be said to develop Lucretius's unaccountable swerve, the inclination of atoms, and Nancy's theory of the "inoperative community," but what it also accomplishes at least as convincingly is the remaking of relations between actors that cannot be explained by what Latour calls the "sociology of the social."<sup>4</sup> In other words, the inclination of various human and nonhuman actors around the baseball results in an association of actors that can only be understood in terms of how they are gathered together, not in terms of their fundamental differences or otherness.

In a 1997 interview with DeLillo, Gerald Howard declares that *Underworld* belongs on a "short list of books that [...] attempt to grapple with the subterranean history of postwar American life" (123). Howard places *Underworld* alongside novels such as William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (1955), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), to point out that a number of the most important texts to address the postwar era are "behemoths."

DeLillo's response to this observation is both telling and useful:

The novel is a very open form. It will accommodate large themes and whole landscapes of experience. The novel is here, the novel exists to give us a form that is fully equal to the sweeping realities of a given period. The novel expands, contracts, becomes essaylike, floats in pure consciousness—it gives the writer what he needs to produce a book that duplicates, a book that models the rich dense, and complex weave of actual experience. The novel goads the writer into surpassing himself. (Howard 124)

In the tumult of *Underworld's* sheer size and its exhibition of all the formal elements DeLillo mentions in his interview with Howard, the baseball acts as a constant force, enduring when other objects wane and connecting the disparate narratives that constitute

the novel. As the ball passes from one owner to another, its movement connects actors across space and time whose lives would never have overlapped otherwise.

This inclination results in a fluid network that stands in sharp contrast to the crowd contained within the walls of the Polo Grounds where the ball is first introduced. The crowd gathered in the ballpark of “Pafko at the Wall” is representative of the static and stratified categories of race, class, gender, occupation, and so on that we typically accept as constitutive of society. The Polo Grounds stadium is ringed by ticket booths and turnstiles, inhabited by announcers, fans, players, coaches, any number of autonomous individuals playing predetermined roles. Even the sidewalks and streets outside the stadium are worked by vendors and “scraggy men hustling buttons and caps” (12). There are security guards, police officers, symbols of law and order, “black kids and white kids up from the subways or off the local Harlem streets [...] a mick who shouts *Geronimo*” (12 original emphasis). Each of these individuals fits securely into a larger category, and the stratification of these categories forms the society of the ballpark. But as we have seen in the novels of Silko and Robinson, when we imagine any collective group as a lowest common denominator we obscure the agency of its constituent actors. As Nancy points out, “The community that becomes *a single* thing [...] necessarily loses the *in* of being-*in*-common. Or, it loses the *with* or the *together* that defines it. It yields its being-together to a being *of* togetherness” (xxxix original emphasis). When we imagine the social in terms of categories—black, white, Irish, Indian—then we lose sight of the “*in*,” the “*with*,” the movement or inclination of the actors that actually forms the social

itself. This obfuscation ultimately leads to the reification of these categories as the lowest common denominators of individual identity.

This reduction seems, at first, especially true in the case of Cotter Martin, one of the many “black kids” who leaps over the ticket turnstiles and steals his way into the game. The entire group is skipping school, and as Cotter evades Polo Grounds security guards he “runs up a shadowed ramp [...] Then you lose him in the crowd” (14). While in the crowded stands, Cotter is befriended by a middle-aged white man named Bill Waterson. Like Cotter, Bill is ducking his responsibilities for the day, and the two become fast friends. Every word and action is bathed in the ritual of America’s pastime, complete with what Bill calls the “law of manly conduct,” in which Cotter shares his peanuts with Bill, and Bill must reciprocate by buying the young man a soda (22). However, after Bobby Thomson hits the famous home run, there is a mad dash and struggle to retrieve the baseball. Cotter comes up with the object, and as he runs from the stadium he realizes that the arm he wrenched to win it was Bill’s. In the scenes that follow we see DeLillo performing what critics have called a demythologizing of American society in the romanticized afterglow of the postwar era as the jovial relationship Cotter and Bill form during the game falls apart on account of the baseball.<sup>5</sup> Bill follows Cotter through the streets, trying to persuade him to give up the ball. The man becomes steadily more aggressive toward the boy, not realizing that Cotter is leading him farther and farther into “unmixed Harlem” (57). It is only when Bill notices that Cotter is becoming cocky, showing off with the ball, that he realizes where he is and backs off. Bill’s slow but powerful realization of his surroundings acts as what we might

think of, appropriately, as a dramatic shift in home field advantage. Cotter skips home triumphantly, and “Pafko at the Wall” comes to an end. Thus, as Duvall has pointed out, DeLillo exposes the ballpark as an idealistic view of America-as-society, and depicts a problematized scene of, among other things, race relations in the 1950s.

When placed in the context of *Underworld*, however, “Pafko at the Wall” becomes “The Triumph of Death,” and much more than an exercise in demystification. While we might read the stand-alone “Pafko” as a fictional rendition of one of Roland Barthes’s insightful *Mythologies*, “The Triumph of Death” does not merely demythologize postwar American society, but as Nancy would stipulate, it literally interrupts this myth. Nancy distinguishes between demythologizing and interruption when he characterizes the former as a critique that ultimately “leaves the essence of myth untouched” while the latter recognizes itself as myth and is subsequently “cut off from its own meaning” (47, 52). By removing the ball from the Polo Grounds and unraveling the relationship between Cotter and Bill, DeLillo interrupts the romanticized myth of convivial race relations by demonstrating that the gap between white and black cannot simply be overcome through good feeling over peanuts and Coke at a baseball game, and then moving beyond that revelation to show both how it was made and how it can be remade. Bill beams at the young man in the stands, but later fumes as Cotter begins to feel safe in his own neighborhood and “holds the ball chest-high and turns it in his fingers, which isn’t easy when you’re running—he rotates the ball on its axis, spins it slowly over and around” (57). However, what makes the novel so important is what it does in the wake of interrupting this myth. DeLillo does not reduce the opposition

between Cotter and Bill to race. After shaking the older man, Cotter walks home through Harlem and at one point, “sees four guys from a local gang, the Alhambras, and he crosses the street to avoid them and then crosses back” (58). Cotter maneuvers to avoid the Alhambras just as he did to avoid Bill. His own father later steals the ball from him and sells it for himself. “The Triumph of Death” can be read as an interruption of myth because DeLillo is not content to expose the problems of black/white relations in the characters of Cotter and Bill. He goes on to show Cotter’s fear of other black characters and his mistreatment by his father, suggesting that race itself is not a monolith. But if race, among other social myths, is interrupted then how does DeLillo understand the phenomena that we talk about when we talk about race? Like any other collective, race is a matter of “being-*in*-common,” in unique ways, but these ways are constantly changing. The novel is therefore not merely interested in any preexisting category, but in the community that results from the inclination of its actors.

The network that gets constructed as we trace the movement of the ball and the inclination it engenders among various actors stands in stark contrast to the bedlam of the ballpark in the aftermath of Thomson’s famous homerun. As FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover sits in the stands and the crowd goes crazy, someone tears a two-page printing of Bruegel’s *The Triumph of Death* from the pages of a magazine and the two halves come floating down into Hoover’s lap. Hoover assembles the pieces to reveal “the meatblood colors and massed bodies, this is a census-taking of awful ways to die. He looks at the flaring sky in the deep distance out beyond the headlands on the left-hand page—Death elsewhere” (50). Hoover’s interpretation of the painting as a “census-taking” of death

speaks to the sociological and political implications of gathering a mass of individuals together in one location. He looks at the glossy pages and sees the crowd that surrounds him. The overwhelming triumph of death in the painting corresponds to the madness in the ballpark as races, classes, and generations clamor over the monumental souvenir. But as the ball leaves the Polo Grounds in Cotter Martin's hands the narrative leaves the ballpark behind, jumping more than forty years in time and jettisoning the ready-made microcosm of the society of the ballpark.

The structure of the narrative is roughly reverse chronological, a trait *Underworld* shares with Alvarez's *García Girls*. Divided into a prologue set in 1951, six main parts that work backwards from the narrative present of 1992 to the night following the famous pennant game in 1951, and an epilogue set in 1992, *Underworld* is essentially organized around revealing whether or not a baseball owned by protagonist Nick Shay in the novel's present is in fact the authentic "shot heard round the world" that Bobby Thomson blasted into the stands and Cotter Martin pulled from the fray. While the main parts of the narrative move back through time, there are three smaller sections devoted to Cotter Martin's father Manx at the end of parts one, three, and five that recount the initial sale of the ball. Manx's narratives cover the few hours left unaccounted for by the man from whom Nick purchases the ball. Although DeLillo organizes the narrative in reverse-chronological order to "create plot tensions that simply would disappear if one were to retell the story by reconstructing a conventional timeframe" (Duvall *Reader's* 25), I want to reconstruct the movement of the ball in chronological order as a way of emphasizing

the ball's movement through time and the social formations that result from its unpredictable "swerves."

Lest we forget the ball's role in the interruption of the social myths of the postwar U.S. evidenced by Cotter's confrontation with Bill and avoidance of the Alhambras, the ball is stolen from the boy by his own father on the very night of the game: "Manx steps into the room and sees the baseball almost at once. It is sitting in the open on the unused bed. This is what gets him every time. They obtain a valuable thing and don't even bother to hide it. Trust fairies to watch over their valuables" (149). Piecing together the three narrative sections devoted to Manx, we follow him out of the apartment, down into the street where the super accuses him of stealing shovels from the basement of the building, and over to the Polo Grounds where a line is already forming at the box office as fans wait to buy tickets to the upcoming World Series. DeLillo bookends each of Manx's sections in the novel with pages that are solid black both front and back. Manx is a man who views race as foundational, he is hemmed in by it on all sides. When brooding over how to approach the sale of the ball he reasons that he will not be successful if he approaches a black man:

black man's not gonna believe anything he says. Think I'm some fool running a penny hustle. Black man's gonna look him down with that saucy eye he's got for outrageous plots against his person. No. got to go white. Only way to go. Besides, the numbers mostly white, so it's the percentage play. (642)

However, in the exchange that results in the sale of the ball what takes precedence is not the fundamental otherness that Manx feels between himself and the white buyer, but the "cooperation" he encounters in the white man, Charles Wainwright Sr., who is looking



for an excuse to purchase a ball whose significance will be all but impossible to authenticate (647).

DeLillo privileges inclination over otherness by foregrounding the ways in which the two men seem to be of one mind as they talk about the ball in straightforward terms, both acknowledging that Charles has a much better chance of convincing anyone of its authenticity than Manx. Manx facilitates the sale by doing his best to anticipate and answer the potential objections to the ball's authenticity that Charles will inevitably encounter. He explains that his son convinced him of the ball's genuineness and that while Cotter might lie about skipping school or going to the dentist, he would not lie about this because, as Charles says helpfully, "'this is baseball' [...] And baseball. This counts.' Manx takes heart from the man's cooperation because he doesn't want to suffer another bringdown. But at the same time he doesn't want to think of Charlie as a sucker, a rube in a duffle coat, falling for an easy line" (647). Charles finishes Manx's sentences. There is a bond between them that precedes their seemingly *a priori* racial otherness, and that bond is baseball. Manx "calls him Charles now, for the social aspect, gentlemen drinkers at the club, and the two share a drink from Charles's flask" (650). Charles "Doesn't even wipe off the rim. Just flips the flask and drinks, too deep" (650). The fact that Charles puts his mouth on the flask after Manx and drinks only seems significant because of their racial difference, but ultimately even that difference is the product of their inclination, their movement toward one another and in relation to the ball. If Charles does not move toward Manx, take up the flask, and drink deeply, the weight of his gesture as a reaching across distance would not be so heavy. The difference would not

exist if they did not incline, move, swerve toward one another in the first place, like two of Lucretius's atoms clashing in the boundless void.

While some have argued that the ball is a mere commodity in this moment, that it “condense[s] and reif[ies] the game’s lore into something with exchange value rather than mythical value” and that, “myth has been replaced by commerce” (Fitzpatrick 150), such interpretations overlook the reconstructive agency of the ball itself. The ball is not merely symbolic in its existence like a hundred-dollar bill. When Charles Wainwright Sr. buys the ball from Manx Martin, the emphasis is not on the amount of money, which DeLillo describes as “A ten, two fives, another ten, two singles, a quarter, two nickels and a tiddlywinks dime,” but on the fact that Wainwright gives “every nickel in [his] pocket above and beyond” (652). The ball has not been commodified in the sense that it has a particular exchange value. Just the opposite is true; the ball can never be authenticated, and thus can only ever be worth everything (as in Wainwright’s case) and nothing at once. The ball is truly an invaluable object. DeLillo washes the ball clean of both its utility—as Charles Wainwright Sr. would certainly never use it to play catch with his son—and its exchange value—as its genuineness cannot be verified. In doing so he frees it from the human determination that makes the “thing” an “object” as we saw in the last chapter in Betonie’s explanations of the stories things contain.

The novel’s constant refutation of various forms of nostalgia reinforce this commitment to the social as a constant product, not a preexisting frame. In the narrative present of 1992, protagonist Nick Shay contacts a baseball memorabilia collector by the name of Marvin Lundy who is said by Nick’s coworker Brian Glassic to be in possession

of the famous ball. Brian visits Marvin Lundy impulsively while on a business trip and hears the entire convoluted history of the older man's lifelong quest to locate the "shot heard round the world." Lundy purchases the ball from the estate of a man named Rauch whose wife says she purchased it from the ex-wife of a man named Charles Wainwright Jr., who inherited the ball from his father. Lundy can trace the ball all the way back to the night of the pennant game, but not from Wainwright Sr. to Manx Martin, and thus not "to the ball making contact with Bobby Thomson's bat" (181). Brian returns home and tells Nick about Lundy. When Nick calls Marvin he can't quite articulate why he wants the ball. The narrative is focalized through Marvin's thoughts as he listens to Nick: "This was good. Marvin liked this. It was good to hear from someone who was not palpitating in his mind for the old Giants or the old New York" (191). Marvin's relief at Nick's lack of nostalgia is explained by his own search for the ball:

this was Marvin's exact status. For years he didn't know why he was chasing down exhausted objects. All that frantic passion for a baseball and he finally understood [...] it was some terror working deep beneath the skin that made him gather up things, amass possessions and effects. (191)

The unaccountable longing that both men feel for this baseball represents the inclination of actors toward one another, and it cannot be explained by some nostalgic desire for childhood summer afternoons, the smell of leather, or America's game on television. What is more important in the novel the relationships that get formed as a result of this inclination, as in the case of Manx Martin and Charles Wainwright Sr.

Marvin Lundy's own search for the ball takes him to Long Island, San Francisco, Texas, Detroit, Eastern Europe, and beyond in a frustrating and fruitless attempt to find a

man named Charles Wainwright Jr., last known to be in Greenland. Material objects are no respecters of geography, nation, race, or creed. When Marvin hits a dead end in his search for Wainwright Jr. and fails to trace the ball backwards through time, he tries instead to start from the ballpark and work up to Wainwright Jr. He amasses photographs of the crowd that were taken in 1951 during the mad scramble for Thomson's home run ball:

At one point Marvin hired a man who worked in a photo lab and had access to special equipment. They studied news photographs of the left-field stands at the Polo Grounds taken just after the ball went in. They looked at enlargements and enhancements. They went to photo agencies and burrowed in the archives. Marvin had people sneak him into newspaper morgues, into the wire services and the major magazines. (175)

Not only does Marvin's search take him around the world and into archives and morgues, but it also leads him to look at "a million photographs because this is the dot theory of reality, that all knowledge is available if you analyze the dots" (175). In Marvin's self-styled "dot theory" DeLillo explains the relationship of the thousands of individual dots that make up a photo to the photo as a whole. While the photo is significant as a totality, its existence as such does not negate the singularity of its constituent "dots."

Similarly, the social network that gets constructed around the movement of the baseball—that so far consists of Bobby Thomson, the bat, Ralph Branca, the turnstiles, Cotter Martin, Bill Waterson, peanuts, soda, Manx Martin, the shovels Manx is supposed to have stolen, the Wainwrights, the flask, Genevieve Rauch, Judson Rauch, Marvin Lundy, his vast collection, and all the people, places, and things these various characters encounter in their interactions with the ball—is the constant product of the inclination of

a host of human and nonhuman actors in relation to the movement of the baseball. Extending Marvin Lundy's "dot theory of reality," we might think here of photomosaics. A mosaic is "an image traditionally composed of small pieces of material," while a photomosaic is "a digital image made up of other digital images" (Michelone and Medel 58). For instance, a popular style of photomosaic is the picture of a famous historical figure made up of hundreds of smaller pictures, each depicting a specific moment in that person's life. As Marvin Lundy investigates pictures of the grandstands in the Polo Grounds during the scramble for the ball, he develops his "dot theory," which is a synecdochal metaphor for the larger network that gathers around the ball over the course of the entire narrative. The dot theory gives us a way of talking about the phenomena that social categories such as race and class have typically nominated by calling our attention away from the assemblage as a totality and toward the significance of the actors involved in the actual assembly process.

When each dot, or actor, is a mediator in the construction of the social, then even the most seemingly insignificant outliers can play a role in shaping the assembly because they do not exist outside the social. The inclination of all actors has an effect on the groupings that get made. As we track the ball forward in time from Charles Wainwright Sr. who leaves it to his son, we discover that the ball falls into the hands of Wainwright Jr.'s ex-wife, Susan, and eventually winds up in a family by the name of Rauch. The narrative focalizes through Lundy's memory again:

1. The mother of twins in what's that town.
2. The man who lived in a community of chemically sensitive people, they wore white cotton shifts and hung their mail on clotheslines.

3. The woman named Bliss, which he was younger than, Marvin was, and maybe could have, with eyes as nice as hers, done a little something, in Indianola, Miss.
4. The shock of lives unlike your own. Happy, healthy, lonely, lost. The one-eighth Indian. Lives that are blunt and unforeseen even when they're ordinary.
5. Who knew a Susan somebody who spoke about a baseball with a famous past. Marvin forgets the tribe. (317)

The list goes on and on to include “a hippie Christian cluster,” “the bone cancer kid in Utah,” “the woman with the chipped tooth,” and “the chemicals in the core of the ball that made the man run in place after breakfast every day” (317). But perhaps the most notable outlier to affect the construction of a social network around the ball is the serial killer whose actions ultimately bring the ball into Marvin Lundy’s possession. Without the demented deeds of this character who seems, at first glance, utterly cut off from the community of the baseball, Marvin would never find the ball, Brian would never learn of its existence, Nick would never call Marvin, the whole narrative would be different.

If a serial killer who never even touches the ball himself can change the course of the actor and thus of all the other actors in the novel, then how can any actor be a mere intermediary? DeLillo devotes a number of sections of the novel to Richard, a man known to the American public as the Texas Highway Killer, who shoots motorists while they drive their vehicles across Texas highways. Richard never comes into contact with the ball, he does not know anyone personally who does come into contact with the ball, he seems completely outside the social network being constructed by the inclination of a host of actors in relation to the ball. And yet, when recounting the breakthrough in his quest, Marvin Lundy explains that he had lost years in the 1970s looking for “Judson Jackson Johnson” until a woman named Genevieve Rauch contacts him out of the blue

and says that she was once in possession of the ball, but the lead goes nowhere. Then, one day, “A man’s driving along in his car, someone shoots him dead. Turns out the victim is the long-lost former husband of Genevieve Rauch. Turns out further his name is Juddy Rauch, Judson Rauch. So the two rivers meet. Took homicide to reveal the connection” (179). Lundy’s daughter goes on to explain how Marvin had gone to Deaf Smith County, Texas to hire a lawyer on behalf of Genevieve Rauch

and finally located the baseball sealed in a baggie and vouchered and numbered and stored in the property clerk’s office. Impounded by the police along with the body, the car, all the things in the car, of which this was one, crammed in a cardboard box filled with junky odds and ends. (180)

Thus, it is Richard, the serial murdering Texas Highway Killer, who finally brings the ball out of obscurity. While it is tempting to allow the disturbing otherness of this murderous character to heighten the importance of all actors in the formation of the social, as we follow Richard home from one of his many shootings in the novel, DeLillo uncovers an inclination that draws the killer to commit his terrible crimes.

Richard’s problem is not some inherent difference between himself and others. When alone he worries about a copy-cat crime in which someone else has been shot by a driver. He is an “early riser” who leaves “food for a stray cat” and cares for his aging and invalid parents (271-72). When we discover that he has purchased an electronic device to disguise his voice from “a mercenary magazine,” the narrator explains that “this was not a publication Richard normally perused. He was not a surveillance man or gun lover” (269). His problem seems to be rooted not in his essence but in his preoccupation with how others see him. He lives in constant fear of how others view him, so he avoids others

as much as possible. The only person he ever talks meaningfully with is a television news anchor named Sue Ann who “gave him the feeling he was taking shape as himself, coming into the shape he’d always been intended to take, the thing of who he really was” (269). Richard worries constantly about the category into which he fits. He repeatedly prefaces his statements to Sue Ann with phrases like, “let’s set the record straight,” and he worries over being incorrectly labeled a child who grew up in dysfunctional home with head trauma (215-217). He insists that he is not a “sniper” because he is not “an individual with a rifle working more or less long-range. You’re mobile here, you’re moving, you want to get as close to the situation as human possible without bringing the two vehicles into contact, whereby a paint mark might result” (217). Richard’s terrible actions are ultimately the result of his resistance to the inclination of actors that makes the social. He fears “contact,” so he gets as close as possible without actually touching others. Richard says to Sue Ann on national television that he singled her out to talk to because, as he explains,

I saw the interview you did where you stated you’d like to keep your career, you know, ongoing while you hopefully raise a family and I feel like this is a thing whereby the superstition has the responsibility to keep the position open, okay, because an individual should not be penalized for lifestyle type choices. (217-28)

He can see that identity is irreducible to mother, spouse, or news anchor, and he doesn’t want to be reduced to “head case” or “sniper.” His resistance to interacting with others distorts what little contact he does have. Even the social network that is constructed around the baseball is, in part, a product of Richard’s warped attempts to come into contact with others.



The ball connects literally every single one of the numerous narrative threads of the novel, from the prologue, to the six main parts devoted to Nick Shay's reverse-chronology, to the sections devoted to Manx, to the chapters set aside for Richard the Texas Highway Killer, to the epilogue in which the narrative voice briefly shifts to Nick's first-person perspective. The ball almost resembles a *deus ex machine* or the existential feather that floats around in Robert Zemeckis's *Forrest Gump* (1994). DeLillo himself says in an essay that writers sometimes stretch the bounds of believability:

It is almost inevitable that the fiction writer, dealing with this reality, will violate any number of codes and contracts. He will engineer a swerve from the usual arrangements that bind a figure in history to what has been reported, rumored, confirmed or solemnly chanted. It is fiction's role to imagine deeply. ("The Power of History" 5)

DeLillo engineers the many swerves of the baseball throughout *Underworld* to establish connections between a wide array of human and nonhuman actors. Some of these actors search fervently for the ball, while it fortuitously intersects with the lives of others. The ball sits in storage for years with the other things that occupied Judson Rauch's car when he was shot by Richard. All of these entities, from Nick Shay to Richard's voice altering device, ultimately incline toward one another in a unique configuration that would not be possible without the swerve of the ball. If Silko and Robinson reveal that the social is a process and not a substance, then DeLillo's baseball helps us see that this process cannot be explained by some "specific social ties revealing the hidden presence of some specific social forces" because "associations are made of ties which are themselves non-social" (Latour *Reassembling* 5, 8). In other words, it is the material actors, the humans and

nonhumans that account for the social through their inclinations toward one another, and these inclinations that account, in turn, for the social.

In an essay written following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, DeLillo reimagines the significance of memorable days like the one that took place at the Polo Grounds in 1951 through the lens of terror when he says that “For the next 50 years, people who were not in the area when the attacks occurred will claim to have been there. In time, some of them will believe it. Others will claim to have lost friends or relatives, although they did not” (“Ruins” 35). But what is most evocative of Thomson’s home run ball is DeLillo’s interest in the objects of September 11. After rattling off an entire paragraph of items like cell phones and box cutters, DeLillo says,

These are among the smaller objects and more marginal stories in the sifted ruins of the day. We need them, even the common tools of terrorists, to set against the massive spectacle that continues to seem unmanageable, too powerful a thing to set into our frame of practiced response. (“Ruins” 35)

These objects, much like the baseball in *Underworld*, serve as reminders that no actor is reducible to any single association or event. When we are willing to expand our social horizon to include an interrogation of the myriad actors that actually constitute the social, and move away from a conception of the social as irreducible categories that can be fundamentally distinguished from one another based on their inherent differences, then what becomes apparent is that those differences can be overcome because they are in fact products of a more elemental inclination common among all actors that is uncovered in *Underworld* and made the most of in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*.

### Locating the Stories In Things

The collections gathered by characters in *Ceremony* and *Housekeeping* demonstrate the reconstructive agency of nonhuman actors by foregrounding the stories that are “alive,” as Betonie says, in these things. When we read these novels with an attention to everyday things, we are better able to see how our social relations are always effects, results, outcomes. When we focus even more specifically on the movement of these objects, as DeLillo asks us to in *Underworld*, we are better able to understand how the social is formed through the mere inclination of actors toward one another. The fact of Charles Wainwright Sr.’s whiteness that seems significant when he drinks after Manx Martin, or of Tayo’s “mixed-blood” is no longer race, but the process of racialization. The clarity of gender against which Ruth and Sylvie are seen as strange in Lucille’s eyes becomes the process of gendering. It is the movement of the actors that accounts for their coming together and for the differences that are produced as a consequence. Alvarez’s first novel, *How The García Girls Lost Their Accents*, expands our understanding of the role of objects in the formation of the social by demonstrating how stories come to “live” in things in the first place. One character’s search for guavas, the legal paper on which she composes a ninth-grade speech, and a toy drum seem at first blush to accentuate the intersections of familiar social categories, especially nationality, gender, and age, but upon closer inspection these objects actually act as sites of inclination where various actors are brought into contact with one another in unexpected ways. These interactions are gathered into the history of the things themselves, into the spaces cleared by these

objects, and eventually become the literal source material for much of the narrator's story over the course of this complex novel.

*García Girls* follows the family of Carlos and Laura García from the Dominican Republic to the United States in the midst of the political turmoil that plagued the island throughout the long reign of Rafael Trujillo. In 1960, Carlos is implicated in a plot to unseat the Dominican dictator, and when two inspectors show up at the García house to question him a friend from the American Embassy is forced to intervene. The García family flees to the United States where the four young daughters, Carla, Sandra, Yolanda, and Sofía, learn English, grow up, attend stateside schools and universities, and settle themselves as adults. Throughout the years after their departure, the girls frequently visit their birthplace, but with each successive trip the disparity between life on the island and life in the states becomes more prominent. The novel tells this story in reverse-chronological order over the course of three major sections, each of which is subdivided into five smaller chapters. Each of these chapters begins with a title and a name or series of names that denotes which character or characters focalizes the chapter. The first section crawls back in time from 1989 to 1972, and includes four chapters narrated in third person and one in first person by Yolanda. The second section covers the years 1970-1960, and includes three chapters narrated in third person and two in first person: one seemingly by all the sisters together, and the other by Yolanda. The third section covers the years 1960-1956, and includes one chapter narrated half in third person and half in first person by Sofía, and four narrated in first person: two by Yolanda, one by Carla, and one by Sandra. The steady movement from a predominant use of third person

to a prevailing multiplicity of first-person narrations as the narrative moves back in time reflects the reducibility of the hegemonic social imaginary that seems to organize the world of adults to the heterogeneous inclination of various actors contained in an object as simple as a toy drum in the eyes of a young Yolanda.

Whereas I read against the reverse-chronological structure of *Underworld* to emphasize the baseball's movement forward through time, I want to follow Alvarez's reverse-chronology back in time to demonstrate how she organizes the novel by steadily tracing the entire narrative present back to a single thing, the toy drum. The danger in following the García girls back in time is that we might come to consider the novel purely a story of origins, a juxtaposition of Dominican Republic as homeland and the United States as foreign land. In fact, Catherine Romagnolo has investigated the complexity of Alvarez's "narrative beginning" alongside those of Toni Morrison in *Beloved* and Zora Neale Hurston in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.<sup>6</sup> Because the text is deeply invested in examining the Garcías' struggle with what their Tía Carmen calls "American ways," critics have often approached the text as an investigation of the complexities of bicultural, international, and hybridized experience. The earlier criticism especially echoes the binary language of multiculturalism. Jacqueline Stefanko, for instance, sees Alvarez and other Latina writers as "hybrid selves who cross and recross borders of language and culture [and] create hybrid texts in order to 'survive in diaspora,' to use Donna Haraway's term" (50). Maribel Ortiz-Márquez turns to Homi Bhabha to blur the lines between various binaries in the novel, such as that between the private and public sphere, but ultimately reasserts a sharp division between "that social reality which lies not at the

core of the text, but at its margins” (236). Other critics focus on language in the novel as the “borderline” on which “Alvarez situates her characters” (159), as Julie Barak has argued, and as the source of the sisters’ conflicts “with their bicultural surroundings,” according to Ricardo Castells (34).<sup>7</sup> Such approaches tend necessarily to begin where they should finally end because they rely on social categories such as nation and culture, and terms such as “hybrid” that unavoidably reinforce these categories as substances much in the way that many self-styled postmodern readings do with *Ceremony*.<sup>8</sup>

While many otherwise insightful readings remain beholden to the “between two worlds” narrative,<sup>9</sup> more recent investigations into Alvarez’s first novel have taken a decided turn toward showing how the text actually pushes beyond this reductive framework. Sarika Chandra convincingly claims that while older immigrant narratives depict immigrants as grappling with their identities in a United States culture that has the effect of homogenizing diverse individuals into oversimplified ethnic categories, “more contemporary narratives such as [...] Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) present immigrants who conduct similar negotiations but in a much more interconnected world” (832). Such critics typically employ the language of globalization or transnationalism as opposed to that of hybridity or multiculturalism. Katarzyna Marciniak, for instance, asserts that writers like Alvarez compose

characters who transgress the boundaries of established nationhood by moving across national borders, languages, cultures, and competing ideologies. In doing so, [...] they show how liminal identities, with their shifting subject positions, complicate the dichotomous hierarchy of citizen-legal subject/stranger-illegal other. (59)

The difference between much of the earlier and later criticism can be found in the move away from binaries and dichotomies and in the direction of “interconnectedness” and the “trans-” national, cultural, etc. Building on this evolving critical conversation, a materialist reading of *García Girls* can help realize the type of interpretation that Chandra, Marciniak, and others imagine as ideal. Chandra reasons that newer “immigrant/ethnic” texts like *García Girls* “should dispel the notion that a culturalist identity politics can, on its own, become a refuge from and provide critical resistance to the contemporary forces of globalization” (848). Chandra eschews the binary, dichotomous language of earlier readings, but ultimately relies on the somewhat nebulous “forces of globalization” to explain social changes that require the political intervention of novels like Alvarez’s.<sup>10</sup> In fact, such forces can be accounted for by the inclinations of the myriad human and nonhuman actors that move and swerve and cause other actors to do the same throughout Alvarez’s complex narrative, even a thing as simple as a guava.

The guavas that fill the foothills of the Dominican Republic construct class divisions specific to the culture, language, and nation of the Dominican Republic as the third García sister, Yolanda, borrows a little Datsun to go collecting the tropical fruits in the first and chronologically latest chapter of the novel. For Alvarez, class is not a preexistent category that organizes the lives of individuals, but a material process by which actors are constantly shuffled in relation to one another and in relation to a variety of things. In the United States the Garcías live what we might call a fairly stable middle-class life, but on the island they are members of the elite. In the narrative present of 1989, Yolanda has not lived permanently on the island for nearly three decades, and when she

expresses her desire to go pick guavas while on a visit to the Dominican Republic, her aunts' disagreement over the prospect serves as an inventory of the language, attitude, and things that constitute class. One aunt offers the use of a family car, another exclaims, "have you lost your mind? A Volvo in the interior with the way things are!" (9). Yolanda only breaks the tension by offering the even more laughable alternative of taking the bus: "A bus!" The whole group bursts out laughing. [...] "Can't you see it!? [Lucinda] laughs. 'Yoyo climbing into an old *camioneta* with all the *campesinos* and their fighting cocks and their goats and their pigs!'" (9). The name brand of the car, the language of the "interior," and the laughter all seem to designate an established line that Yolanda should not cross, but she leaves the protection of the compound in the morning in the less-impressive Datsun and makes her way into the hills where she stops at a small cantina. The woman who runs the cantina becomes "the long arm of [Yolanda's] family" and volunteers a young boy to gather the fruit for her: "The doña will get hot, her nice clothes will get all dirty. José will bring the doña as many guavas as she is wanting" (16). Before the woman can react, Yolanda gathers a whole troop of boys into the car and they set out on their expedition. They are successful and "Yolanda eats several right on the spot, relishing the slightly bumpy feel of the skin in her hand, devouring the crunchy, sweet white meat. The boys watch her" (17). There is a distance between them created by the guavas. The boys see guavas everyday; they are a commonplace and so their novelty to the doña produces an otherness between them evident in the way they stand back and watch her.



The guavas also gender, racialize, and nationalize Yolanda by producing a tangible tension between her and a group of older men who emerge from the grove after the Datsun blows a tire. Yolanda sends José to a local compound to get help, but before he returns the men walk out of the guava trees with machetes in their hands and ask if the señorita is all right. The narrator notes specifically that one of the men is “no taller than Yolanda,” seeming to intimate that the biological differences of sex are not so acute, but the difference in their genders becomes stark considering the fact that “anywhere else, Yolanda would find [his companion] extremely attractive, but here on a lonely road, with the sky growing darker by seconds, his good looks seem dangerous, a lure to catch her off guard” (20). She freezes with fear and the men take her silence for incomprehension: “The handsome one smiles knowingly. [...] ‘Americana,’ he says to the darker man, pointing to the car” (20). Her gender, light skin tone, and stateside upbringing are not only palpable, but produced in this moment, brought about by Yolanda’s search for a nostalgic snack. The chasm between her and the men is amplified when they replace the tire for her and she insists on paying them for their trouble. After overcoming their refusal she reaches for their hands: “The shorter man holds his back at first, as if not wanting to dirty her hand, but finally, after wiping it on the side of his pants, he gives it to Yolanda. The skin feels rough and dry like the bark of trees” (22). The man’s hand recalls the rough, “bumpy feel” of the guava skin and is juxtaposed with a Palmolive advertising poster illuminated by Yolanda’s headlights as she drives José back to the cantina. On the dish soap ad the “Palmolive woman’s skin gleams a rich white” (23). The contrast between the “rough” and “gleaming” skin is further exacerbated by the commodification

of leisure and color in an effort to sell a product that will ostensibly make one smooth and white. Thus, the ad actually manufactures this distinction in its effort to achieve a more singular goal: to have everyone share the common experience of buying the soap.

The guavas create the space in which these things and people interact, and while such differences may have been produced regardless, they could not have been manufactured in the same way. The point is that such associations require constant work to be maintained. Yolanda's gender, her affiliation with the United States, even the color of her skin must be developed in relation to others.<sup>11</sup> But even categories less tangible than gender, geography, and complexion are produced by the unaccountable movements of actors through space. The so-called "cultural" differences that mark the generational gap between the García girls and their parents, especially their father, are largely formed by the family's interaction with other actors, such as dolls for sale at an up-scale restaurant, a book celebrating the female body entitled *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, expectant parents in a maternity ward, and the spirit of the "good grey" poet, Walt Whitman materialized on the pages of "one of those innumerable pads of paper [Carlos] brought home from his office, compliments of some pharmaceutical company, advertising tranquilizers or antibiotics or skin cream" (134). Laura García uses these pads for her "inventions," but gives up after being scooped by the person who "made a million" designing suitcases with wheels (139-40). She only reenlists her "pencil and pad one last time" to help Yolanda compose the "Teacher's Day address at the school assembly" (141). The confrontation that results between Carlos, Laura, and Yolanda uncovers differences that have been manufactured between father, mother, and daughter.

The agency of the nonhuman actors in this scene is accentuated by the fact that it is Walt Whitman's influence on Yolanda's speech that most infuriates her father, yet it was Carlos who purchased the book of poetry for his daughter in the first place. Yolanda struggles with the speech-writing process and so turns to a book for inspiration. She reads the first lines of "Whitman's poems in an old book with an engraved cover her father had picked up in a thrift shop next to his office [...] The poet's words shocked and thrilled her" (142). The influence of Whitman's language is made evident not by Yolanda's performance of the speech for her father, the contents of the speech are withheld from us, but by Carlos's reaction:

In barely audible Spanish, as if secret microphones or informers were all about, he whispered to his wife, "You will permit her to read *that*?" Laura's eyebrows shot up, her mouth fell open. In the old country, any whisper of a challenge to authority could bring the secret police in their black V.W.'s. But this was America. People could say what they thought. "What is wrong with her speech?" Laura questioned him. "What ees wrrrong with her eh-speech? [...] I will tell you what is wrong. It show no gratitude. It is boastful. *I celebrate myself? The best student learns to destroy the teacher?* [...] That is insubordinate. It is improper. It is disrespecting of teachers— [...] As your father, I forbid you to make that eh-speech!" (145)

Yolanda's plagiarized words call our attention to the book of Whitman's poems for sure, but it is the ensuing conflict that illuminates the material. Carlos seizes the paper and rips it "once, twice, three, four, countless times" into shreds (146). Mother and daughter erupt with fury and anguish. Laura rages at her husband: "This is America, Papi, America! You are not in a savage country anymore" (146). Carlos's cultural context for thinking about authority and education is certainly different than Yolanda's, but the point is that this free-spirited Americanness is the product of a hundred and fifty years of poetry and a

couple hours of reappropriation on the pages of a legal pad meant to encourage the sale of pharmaceuticals. Gathering the shreds of paper in her hands, Yolanda screams “he broke it, he broke it” (146). Her speech is not only the words or ideas contained by the words, but the literal paper and ink, an object that can be broken. Yolanda’s “American ways,” as her aunt says at one point, do not render her fundamentally “other to her father” because Americanness, as mother and daughter imagine it, is a thing that can be torn into pieces, broken, read aloud, and plagiarized.

The guavas undermine entrenched visions of the social in Yolanda’s adulthood, and the torn speech enacts the role of the material in the eyes of a teenaged version of the same woman. As we follow the novel all the way back in time to its earliest moment, these two versions of the same woman seem to speak as one. In the final chapter, “The Drum,” Alvarez offers perhaps the most cogent and beautiful narration of how a single thing can contain innumerable stories and how the inclination of things and people ultimately constitutes the larger collectives we understand as social. The chapter opens with Yolanda’s recollection:

It was a drum Mamita brought back from a trip to New York, a magnificent drum, its sides bright red, criss-crossed by gold wire held down by gold button heads, its top and bottom white. [...] ‘Ah,’ I sighed, for in the hollow at the center, two drumsticks were stored. (275)

The drum provides young Yolanda with an entire day’s worth of entertainment. Late in the afternoon Yolanda discovers a litter of kittens in the coal shed and decides to adopt one, naming it “Schwarz” after the retailer where her grandmother purchased the drum. She drops the kitten into the hollow of the drum and commences to beat on the top

mercilessly. The kitten is dazed when Yolanda removes the top, and the “accusing sound of meow” it makes generates an odd combination of guilt and anger in the young girl: “I wanted to dunk it into the sink and make its meowing stop. Instead, I lifted the screen and threw the meowing ball out the window. I heard it land with a thud, saw it moments later, wobbling out from under the shadow of the house, meowing and stumbling forward” (288). The hollow of the drum has served as home to the drumsticks, to the kitten, and now to young Yolanda’s fear and guilt as she fastens the top in place, and the voice of the narration begins to shift and fly back through the narrative toward the future.

The narrative structure indicates that the space in between the sides, top, and bottom of the drum comes to contain the entire series of stories that make up the various chapters that Alvarez has followed back in time to this final moment. As Yolanda lies awake in bed that night, she is haunted by the mother cat, and as she explains in her narration, her guilt and the cat follow her for some years even after her family moves to the U.S. Over time, however,

The cat disappeared altogether. I saw snow. I solved the riddle of an outdoors made mostly of concrete in New York. My grandmother grew so old she could not remember who she was. I went away to school. I read books. You understand I am collapsing all time now so that it fits in what’s left in the hollow of my story? (289)

The story of the drum is the narrative space from which all of the other stories in the novel flow, and the drum itself is therefore the thing that contains all of these stories. After all, the hollow space of a drum is oddly enough the absence that produces the sound the drum makes when struck. This absence recalls Heidegger’s jug and how it is the

hollow space, the gathering, that makes the jug a thing. The narrative structure of *García Girls* is arranged in such a way as to lead us against a chronological current of time, back to its source in the story of the drum, or it might be more appropriate to say the story in the drum. All of the complex and nuanced relations of the novels earlier chapters can be traced back to the hollow space of the drum. Therefore, the space cleared at the heart of this novel ultimately reveals that communities arise out of common material experiences, not out of differentiation based on fundamental otherness.

Alvarez's emphasis on the "hollow" of Yolanda's story brings something to the remaking of the social that neither Nancy nor Latour can bring on their own. In his theory of the social, Nancy argues that community "cannot arise from the domain of *work*. One does not produce it, one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude" (31 original emphasis). Conversely, Latour maintains that "what we have lost—a fixed list of groups—we have regained because groupings have constantly to be made, or remade [...] if you stop making and remaking groups, you stop having groups. No reservoir of forces flowing from 'social forces' will help you" (34-35). Nancy says no work, Latour goes on to call the constantly made and remade groupings "worknets." Alvarez helps us negotiate this seeming antinomy through the hollow space of the drum. The drum must certainly be made, as Latour insists, but the hollow space itself cannot be made; it is a void. Nancy grasps "the modern experience of community as neither a work to be produced, nor a lost communion, but rather as space itself" (19). Latour also emphasizes space when he describes the social as "no more than an occasional spark generated by the shift, the shock, the slight displacement of other non-social phenomena"

(36). Alvarez's significant contribution to this conversation is her ability to reconcile non-work and work through the materiality of the drum itself. If, as I contend, the social is always the product that is in-process, then the toy drum is a perfect representation and enactment of the social. It represents the social in that its sides, top, bottom, strap, and sticks are certainly made, but the space it contains, the space that actually *produces* sound cannot be made because it is a void. The hollow is the space that ultimately gathers all of the manufactured components into a single sound that is forever the in-process product of the other actors. If you stop hitting the drum, you stop producing sound.

The drum also enacts the social because it is the object that serves as the source for the entirety of Yolanda's narrative. If we are following her back through time and we end with the drum, then the drum seems to be the thing that she remembers or thinks of that causes the entire series of complex stories to unfold in the first place. But it also enacts the social by breaking down the barrier between the novel itself and the world in which the novel intervenes. In other words, the drum creates a narrative moment that troubles the easily demarcated "worlds" of writer, text, reader.<sup>12</sup> *Underworld* also disturbs these boundaries, and both texts taken together seem to imagine a blurring of these lines as illustrative of the larger revelations about the social that flow from the inclinations of human and nonhuman actors throughout postmodern fiction. Yolanda's turn to the reader is the source of this complication: "You understand I am collapsing all time now so that it fits in what's left in the hollow of my story?" (289). Who exactly is the "you"? Situated as this sentence is in the center of the novel's last paragraph in which nearly every other sentence begins with a first-person singular pronoun, the odd "you"

stands at the heart of Yolanda's final narration, and the "you" appeals to her audience as if seeking our affirmation or perhaps even our cooperation in finishing the narrative. The end of the narrative is also the beginning of the story, however, because we have been reading back in time, so it appears that at the source of the narration lies a hollow space that is made by the cooperation of writer, text, and reader, and through which we incline toward one another in the production of the entire story.

DeLillo makes a similar move when he alters the narrative voice at the end of *Underworld* to a more sustained second-person narration than the brief sentences offered by Alvarez. The novel famously concludes with the one-word paragraph: "Peace." But the penultimate paragraph turns abruptly to the reader and bears quoting at length:

And you can glance out the window for a moment, distracted by the sound of small kids playing a made-up game in a neighbor's yard, some kind of kickball maybe, and they speak in your voice [...] and you try to imagine the word on the screen becoming a thing in the world, taking all its meanings, its sense of serenities and contentments out into the streets somehow, its whisper of reconciliation, a word extending itself ever outward, the tone of agreement or treaty, the tone of repose, the sense of mollifying silence, the tone of hail and farewell, a word that carries the sunlit ardor of an object deep in drenching noon, the argument of binding touch, but it's only a sequence of pulses on a dullish screen and all it can do is make you pensive—a word that spreads a longing through the raw sprawl of the city and out across the dreaming bourns and orchards to the solitary hills. (827)

This powerfully evocative stream of consciousness is one grammatical sentence that fuses reader, narrator, writer, and story. There is no world of the reader and world of the novel.<sup>13</sup> The two are one. Both DeLillo's and Alvarez's second-person appeals, in Roland Barthes's terms, "try to abolish (or at least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by



joining them in a single signifying practice” (162). Thus, at the heart of postmodernism we find a joining or inclination, not a disjunction or otherness. The baseball circulates through space revealing and creating the inclinations of previously unacknowledged and nonexistent social networks. The toy drum contains such a space, and gathers the myriad stories that result from such inclinations into a single thing, illuminating what it means to say, as Betonie does, that “things have stories alive inside them.”

Postmodernism’s reputation as a primarily playful, experimental, and self-reflexive aesthetic has historically led critics to focus on such formal devices as the second-person narration I examine in DeLillo and Alvarez, but the attention paid to form, the relationship between form and content, and language has overshadowed the reconstructive agency of material objects in postmodern fiction. For this reason the next chapter turns to perhaps one of the most canonical works of postmodern metafiction—Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*—and a rewriting of that story by a writer a few generations removed—Wallace’s “Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way.” These analyses hinge on an important question about the relationship between poststructuralism’s obsession with language and postmodernism’s perceived performance of that obsession that opens up new vistas in thinking about the political contributions of postmodern fiction. But these new vistas rely on the two basic insights that Silko, Robinson, DeLillo, and Alvarez have offered in their respective novels. First, the social is always a product of an ongoing process involving both human and nonhuman actors, as evidenced earlier by Tayo’s successful healing ceremony and Ruth and Sylvie’s transient capacity to leave Fingerbone. Second, the individual social connections that get forged between actors are

the results of their fundamental inclinations toward one another in the space cleared by the construction of the larger networks. With these two principles in mind as the basic components of postmodern materialism, Barth and Wallace can be reread in new ways that are irreducible to language as the basis of all knowledge, interaction, and experience in postmodern fiction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This notion of inclination, or *clinamen*, can be traced back at least to Lucretius, the Hellenic poet who expanded the atomic philosophy of Epicurus in his touchstone work *On the Nature of Things*. Lucretius explains that collisions between atoms occur due to unaccountable movements, or what he calls the “swerve” of atoms toward each other in space: “And if they did not swerve, they all would fall / downward like raindrops through the boundless void; / no clashes would occur, no blows befall / the atoms; nature would never have made a thing” (221-224). Thus, without the inclination of atoms toward one another, for Lucretius, there would be no world as we know it, let alone the vast and complex networks of subjects and objects that we understand as making and remaking various social groups.

<sup>2</sup> While this distinction between society and community can be traced back to Plato’s *Laws* and *Republic* and perhaps further, Ferdinand Tönnies’ classic work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Community and Society*) played a key role in popularizing theories of community in Germany and the West in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and following.

<sup>3</sup> See Christopher Fynsk’s helpful “Foreword” to *The Inoperative Community* pages xii-xiii.

<sup>4</sup> We will recall that for Latour, under the sociology of the social, society or the social order is a “domain of reality” distinct from “other domains such as economics, geography, biology, psychology, law, science, and politics” (*Reassembling* 3). This approach views the social as substance, phenomenon, source that can be used to illuminate other phenomena.

<sup>5</sup> This “demythologizing” is the subject of Duvall’s essay, “Baseball as Aesthetic Ideology: Cold War History, Race, and DeLillo’s ‘Pafko at the Wall’” referenced earlier. Also see Donald J. Greiner’s “John Updike, Don DeLillo, and the Sustaining Power of Myth.” But, as I discuss in the introduction and first chapter, this “spirit of criticism” (Howe 429), has been cast as characteristic of postmodern fiction on the whole (see Hutcheon’s *The Politics of Postmodernism*; Maltby’s *Dissident Postmodernists*; and even Felski’s “Suspicious Minds”). Not all critics read DeLillo’s retelling of the 1951 pennant game as an exposure of myth, as John Duvall does, or as an interruption of myth, as I do. Donald J. Greiner, for example, argues that “The point is not that myth fosters forgetfulness but that myth offers renewal” (108). Greiner calls on “The Power of History” to suggest that in *Underworld* DeLillo uses “Thomson’s home run as a feat of strength and skill that both mythologizes a moment in history and forges unity among the living” (109).

<sup>6</sup> Romagnolo argues that “texts such as Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*, to name just a few, highlight the interwoven signification of conceptual and formal beginnings” (184). Romagnolo’s goal in investigating narrative beginnings is especially important in a novel like Alvarez’s where the chronological beginning can literally be found in the novel’s end, and the beginning of the novel is, as she argues “discursive.” That is, the beginning of Alvarez’s novel is not the literal beginning of the story, but only a beginning at the level of narrative discourse.

<sup>7</sup> See also Joan M. Hoffman’s essay “‘She Wants to Be Called Yolanda Now’: Identity, Language, and the Third Sister in *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*”; Juan Pablo Rivera’s “Language Allergy: Seduction and Second Languages in *How the García Girls Lost The Accents*”; Manuela Matas Llorente’s “And Why Did the García Girls Lose Their Accents? Language, Identity and the Immigrant Experience in Julia Alvarez’s *How the García Girls Lost The Accents*.”

<sup>8</sup> Recall Sara Spurgeon's *Exploding the Western: Myths of Empire on the Postmodern Frontier* and Lou Caton's *Reading American Novels and Multicultural Aesthetics: Romancing the Postmodern Novel* that both discuss Tayo's identity in terms of the clash and hybridization of Native and nonnative cultures.

<sup>9</sup> William Luis argues that "Yolanda is caught between two worlds, the Hispanic and the North American ones" (846). See "A Search for Identity in Julia Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*."

<sup>10</sup> Here we should bear in mind Latour's most elemental argument in *Reassembling the Social*, name that "the social is not some glue that could fix everything including what other glues cannot fix; it is *what* is glued together by many other types of connectors" (5). And as later wonders about the use of the term "social forces": "When I begin to ask naïve questions about what is really meant by social explanation, I am told not to take the existence of social forces 'literally,' since no reasonable sociologists ever claimed that they could really *substitute* society for the object it explains" (103 original emphasis).

<sup>11</sup> The men are clearly discomfited at the thought of being compensated by a "lady in distress." The time she spends geographically in the United States affects her countenance, her bearing, her ability to speak fluent Spanish. Her sister Sandi wonders at a young age whether Egyptian mummies would emerge from their wrappings with "dark Egyptian" skin or if their skin would have "turned pale after such long bondage—like American skin under all these heavy clothes for the winter that was just starting" (172). Each of these markers is a product of traditions that must be upheld, geographical displacement, and exposure to the sun.

<sup>12</sup> Postmodernism's blurring of the lines between form and content—its self-aware appeal to the world of the reader as something not wholly separate from the world of the characters—sets it apart from modernism's experimentalism. In her seminal essay "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag argues against modern modes of interpreting literary texts as they have created a gap between form and content, "based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content," which "makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories" (10). She goes on to point out that this critical malaise is especially the situation in American literature as well as criticism: "Interpretation runs rampant here in those arts with a feeble and negligible avant-garde: fiction and drama. Most American novelists and playwrights are really either journalists or gentlemen sociologists and psychologists. They are writing the literary equivalent of program music. And so rudimentary, uninspired, and stagnant has been the sense of what might be done with form in fiction and drama that even when the content isn't simply information, news, it is still peculiarly visible, handier, more exposed. To the extent that novels and plays (in America), unlike poetry and painting and music, don't reflect any interesting concern with changes in their form, these arts remain prone to assault by interpretation" (10-11). Sontag's essay was first published in *Evergreen Review* in 1964, just five years after Irving Howe tied the emergence of "post-modern fiction" to the rise of an American mass culture that rejected the "familiar social categories" implicit in modernist fiction. And just three years later in 1967, John Barth's "The Literature of Exhaustion" would make an attempt at describing this new postmodern literary aesthetic, an aesthetic that, in seeking to defend itself from the "assault by interpretation," developed a form-content relationship that has rendered it especially effective as both a transporter and transformer of social narratives and networks.

<sup>13</sup> The novel, in particular, becomes a style-obsessed mode under postmodernism, and by that I mean a form that is not only concerned with experimentation in voice, focalization, or theme, but more interestingly with examining itself as a form. In "The Literature of Exhaustion," Barth addresses the idea that "narrative literature generally, if not the printed word altogether, has by this hour of the world just about shot its bolt," by suggesting that a new generation of avant-garde writers has sprung up to revitalize narrative by poking and prodding at the form itself in addition to taking on important themes and ideas (71). In other words, the form and content have become a single, inseparable entity. Barth characterizes his own work as representative of that group of texts described by Howe and Sontag as "novels which imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of Author" (72). It is this self-obsession with

form, with style, with what Barth calls the “technical,” as inseparable from some perceived content or theme that renders postmodern fiction especially well-suited to demonstrate the material construction of our social networks and narratives and to perform as a material actor in the construction of those networks and narratives. It takes time for significant aesthetic shifts to come into view, of course, but Howe sees the postmodern turn coming in 1959, and by Ihab Hassan’s first edition of *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* in 1971, a host of postmodern fiction writers seems readily identifiable: “In recent American fiction, its votaries include Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon, James Purdy, J. P. Donleavy, Terry Southern, Thomas Berger, Donald Barthelme, Ishmael Reed, Richard Brautigan, and Raymond Federman, among others” (254). Novels by these writers, alongside the emerging work of authors such as Leslie Silko, Marilynne Robinson, and Don DeLillo can only now truly be approached in the critical fullness of time, and understood as experimenting with form not simply for the sake of experimentation, but to call attention to fiction itself as an influential actor in the formation of cultural narratives.

CHAPTER IV  
WRITING THE SOCIAL: FROM POSTSTRUCTURALISM  
TO POSTMODERNISM

The literature most often identified as postmodern has taken on many names over the last half century, including metafiction, surfiction, the literature of exhaustion, and the literature of silence. Although such monikers can often distract from the texts themselves, they all point in some way to the prominent trend of making writing itself the subject of postmodern narrative. Just as these fictional forms began to build momentum in the late 1960s and early 1970s, two influential waves washed over literary studies. The first, often referred to as the “linguistic turn,” is most thoroughly examined in Richard Rorty’s 1967 collection of the same name in which he defines his topic as “the view that philosophical problems are problems which may be solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language, or by understanding more about the language we presently use” (3). The second, poststructuralism, made its way from France to the United States via the work of Jacques Derrida and then Paul de Man, teaching us that the world is constituted by language and that the sign is a “structure of difference.” Each of these modes of thought relies heavily on the scholarship of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and imagines not only writing but society at large as semiotic systems in which individual elements derive their identities or meanings from their places within the system.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham explains the significance of both the linguistic turn and poststructuralism to postmodernism when he suggests that “for many postmodernists and

fellow travelers, the defining discovery of the era was that language determines or structures society rather than the other way around” (13). However, as early as 1985, critics such as Andreas Huyssen were raising questions about the relationship between poststructuralism and literary postmodernism. In his pivotal essay “Mapping the Postmodern” Huyssen acknowledges an overlap between poststructuralism and postwar literature but questions “the way in which this impact is automatically evaluated in the U.S. as postmodern and thus sucked into the orbit of the kind of critical discourse that emphasizes radical rupture and discontinuity” (37). Yet by 1991 Paul Maltby is able to foreground his insightful *Dissident Postmodernists* by providing an overview of “key issues which currently inform discussions about postmodern art, culture, and society,” perhaps the most important of which is that the postmodern artist “seeks to demonstrate that reality as perceived does not speak for itself but is always signified” and that art, “like all discourses, [...] is understood to *constitute* its object of study” (4-5 original emphasis).

Although the critical discourse may seem to have swept any potential disjunction between postmodernism and poststructuralism under the theoretical rug—after all, not even Huyssen disputes some connection between the two—the rift has resurfaced periodically. In fact, a mere fifteen pages after his articulation of postmodernism as an aesthetic that imagines language as the structural determiner of society, Maltby parenthetically states that

the concepts of structuralism/post-structuralism have undoubtedly been of value in articulating the linguistic-philosophical concerns of postmodernist writers, but we should not necessarily assume that these writers were structuralists/post-

structuralists *avant la lettre*. The precise connections—theoretical and temporal—between post-Saussurean theory and postmodernism need to be researched. (20)

Harpham synthesizes much of the ensuing research eleven years later in *Language Alone: The Critical Fetish of Modernity*, where he points out that “Saussure is ritually invoked by the thinkers of postmodernity as the genius who first articulated the two principles on which postmodernism is founded, the system without a center, and differences without positivity” (28). However, critics working in conversation with Huyssen occasionally continue to complicate the connection between the Saussurean-influenced poststructuralism and postmodernism. Marianne DeKoven, for instance, sees “poststructuralism not as postmodern but rather as the epitome of modernist thought and language,” although it certainly plays “a key role in initiating postmodernism [...] by theorizing its multiplicities and indeterminacies, and by critiquing the governing hierarchical dualisms of modernity” (52). Building on the work of Huyssen and DeKoven, I would agree that there is a certain slippage between poststructuralism and postmodernism. However, as Harpham has indicated, the vast majority of postmodernism’s critical discourse is overwhelmingly preoccupied with poststructuralism and thus with language. Thus, my goal so far has been to ground my theory of postmodern materialism in the reconstructive agency and inclination of human and nonhuman actors with minimal reference to poststructuralism. Now that this foundation has been established I want to turn to a few texts that overtly call our attention to linguistic play and reread them in this way to see what a non-linguistic-centered analysis can reveal.



The results are surprising in the context of postmodern literary criticism, but not so surprising in the context of this study. When we are willing to expand our approach to postmodern fiction beyond the linguistic realm to include the material objects of everyday life, what becomes clear is that all actors great and small function as what Latour calls “mediators” instead of as “intermediaries.” For Latour, an intermediary is an actor that “transports meaning or force without transformation,” whereas a mediator “cannot be counted as just one” (*Reassembling* 39). Halfway through *Reassembling the Social* Latour composes a dialogue between an imaginary student and professor in which the two go back and forth about whether or not Actor-Network-Theory (Latour’s theory of the social as what is gathered as opposed to a substance) is applicable to the student’s field of organizational studies. At one point the student exclaims in exasperation that his work is about “finding the hidden structure that explains the behavior of those agents you thought were doing something but in fact are simply placeholders for something else.” The professor responds: “So you are a structuralist! You’ve finally come out of the closet. Placeholders, isn’t that what you call actors?” (153). The professor reformulates this initial response a little later when he says, “either you have actors who realize potentialities and thus are not actors at all, or you describe actors who are rendering virtualities actual” (155). Reading the material domain of postmodern fiction as populated with “actors who are rendering virtualities actual” reveals that sometimes in spite of themselves these texts imagine the social as what Latour calls a “worknet” in which “it’s the work, and the movement, and the flow, and the changes that should be stressed” (143). The benefit of this approach is that if all actors count for something then

rearranging even the most quotidian object can have a potentially serious impact on the social.

The narrative structures of the texts I have already examined are strong examples of the constant work required to sustain the social and the potential effects of its remaking. Silko's *Ceremony* literally ends with "Sunrise," a new day for Tayo, while Robinson's *Housekeeping* winds down as its narrator Ruth asks us to imagine how she and Sylvie might one day just miss out on reuniting with her sister Lucille who sits in a restaurant "not" waiting for them. Similarly, DeLillo's *Underworld* wraps up in a state of ongoing imagination and a blessing of peace, and the narrative of Alvarez's *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* closes at the literal beginning of the story which has no ending. Each of these narratives embraces the openness of construction, assembly, and remaking in which the actors themselves continually fashion and refashion the relations that affect their day-to-day experiences. The postmodern indeterminacy DeKoven references is a product of the open-ended flux of continual movement and change. Rather than representing a mere enactment of poststructuralist language play, as we have so often been told, postmodern fiction's focus on the role of nonhuman actors materializes the social to account for the ongoing formation, reformation, and transformation of our relations. The texts I turn to in this chapter share the narrative open-endedness of the novels I address in the earlier chapters, and they also overtly call our attention to non-linguistic elements of postmodernism despite, or sometimes even because of, their preoccupations with language.

Along with Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Robert Coover's *A Night at the Movies, or You Must Remember This* (1987), and many others, John Barth's classic work of metafiction *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) has been a staple in discussions of postmodernism's self-reflexive wheel-spinning over the course of the last four decades. Although the book seems to have passed its critical prime, there have been a few recent critics, such as William Solomon, who have begun to point out that Barth has more to offer than a fictional meditation on fiction.<sup>1</sup> I extend this conversation by focusing on the ever-increasing presence of material objects in the Ambrose cycle of stories, culminating in Barth's emphasis on a "name-coin" in the collection's title story. Perhaps the most notable reappearance of Barth's famous story does not occur in the pages of literary criticism but in the final installment of David Foster Wallace's first collection of short fiction *Girl With Curious Hair* (1989). In what amounts to a novella entitled "Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way," Wallace rewrites "Lost in the Funhouse," casting Barth's protagonist Ambrose as a professor of creative writing at East Chesapeake Trade School in Baltimore, Maryland. But in reimagining Barth's metafictional funhouse, Wallace writes an arrow into the heart of his story, a material object whose presence cannot be reduced to the realm of the linguistic and whose unceasing trajectory implies a Zeno's paradox of the social as constant process and product. Reading these two stories side-by-side reveals a material dimension to postmodern fiction echoed in "Here and There," an earlier story in *Girl With Curious Hair*. "Here and There," like *Lost in the Funhouse* and "Westward," withholds closure and features human and nonhuman actors working in cooperation and

opposition to demonstrate the utter flux of our in-process existence. The interaction of objects in each of these stories ultimately reveals not a preoccupation with language, but a fascination with the significance of the material. Barth accentuates this significance by using material objects to reimagine his protagonist's family unit, while Wallace revises romantic love. In both cases, connections between characters that seem to hinge on language play are finally reduced to the more mundane things that constitute those relations, and are then rearranged to bring the characters to moments of personal revelation.

### **Words and Things**

In the "Author's Note" to *Lost in the Funhouse* Barth calls his unique collection a "series" of stories "meant to be received 'all at once'" (ix). Consisting of fourteen stories in total, the series opens with a "Frame-Tale," before moving into six stories that bounce back and forth between inventive narrative experiments and a sequenced, straightforward account of the birth, early childhood, and coming-of-age of a character named Ambrose that culminates with the book's title story. The final seven stories comprise an entertainingly self-reflexive meditation on the complex relationship between artist, text, subject matter, and audience, focusing especially on the process of generating fiction. The second half of the series comes to fruition in Barth's rewriting of a handful of figures and events from ancient Greek mythology that has received much critical attention. From the experimental "Frame-Tale," to the blurring of the lines between author, narrator, and audience, Barth's funhouse of fiction embraces the mediating influence of its people, things, and words in the ever-changing construction of the social, echoed even in the

series' subtitle: "Fiction for print, tape, live voice." Barth also explains in the "Author's Note" that some stories

take the printed medium for granted but lose or gain nothing in oral recitation," while others make "somewhat separate but equally valid senses in several media: print, monophonic recorded authorial voice, stereophonic ditto in dialogue with itself, live authorial voice, live ditto in dialogue with monophonic ditto aforementioned, and live ditto interlocutory with stereophonic et cetera. (ix-x)

In fact, Barth's earliest explanations of these stories were not solely written, but delivered live on a reading tour.

Throughout the year before *Funhouse* was published in 1968, Barth spent time on the road reading selections from his earlier novels in various public forums. In *The Friday Book* he includes some short introductory remarks originally prepared when he decided to introduce a few excerpts from *Lost in the Funhouse* into the set list for these readings. Barth explains that in all of the pieces, "for better or worse, the process of narration becomes the content of the narrative, to some degree and in various ways; or the form or medium has metaphorical value and dramatical relevance. The medium really is part of the message." He goes on to say that most of the stories "exploit, one way or another, ambiguities of language and narrative view point" (79). In other words, *Lost in the Funhouse* takes writing itself as its subject but also as its object of inquiry. Thus, it should be no surprise that the vast majority of critical attention paid to Barth's experiment has zeroed in on its playful structure and its preoccupation with the power of language to construct the world in which we live. Although my own materialist reading builds on the three most common approaches to *Lost in the Funhouse*, it also differs

substantially by asking what the text may ultimately be interested in beyond language itself and how these less overtly linguistic interests might enrich our reading of the text.

Two basic approaches have dominated the conversation surrounding *Lost in the Funhouse*, and each of these readings, in some way, revolves around Barth's obsession with language in general and writing in particular. Much of the early criticism focuses on Barth's rewriting of both classical and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century narratives. Charles Altieri, for instance, proposes that for Barth, "reader, writer, and material remain moving about in a closed system which is nonetheless in continual motion and offering, on its uninterrupted surface, an infinite field of possible recognitions and interrelationships" and that this mode takes its cue from "Ovid's *Metamorphoses* where for the first time a writer clearly accepted and turned to his own purposes the field for free play created by the utter fictiveness of the myths he inherited" (32). Carol Kyle adopts Northrop Frye's idea of anatomy to read *Funhouse* as a rewriting of eighteenth-century experiments such as *Tristram Shandy* and nineteenth-century American adolescent novels such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, concluding that, in the tradition of the American novel, Barth's "funhouse (the novel itself) replaces the wilderness in which one got lost to find oneself" (40).

Perhaps best represented by critics such as Christopher Morris, Jerome Klinkowitz, and the exemplary artist-critic Raymond Federman, the other prominent approach to *Funhouse* focuses on Barth's manipulation of and play with language as a complication of the relationship between words and things. Morris argues that "the

funhouse world resembles the universally neurotic one described by the French post-structuralist Jacques Lacan” in which

the Moebius strip becomes a symbol of the paradox by providing an image which is simultaneously one and two and also asserts that the signifiers which compose it have no connection with anything outside themselves (*i.e.* the ‘signified’ is nothing at all). (70)

With regard to writing specifically, Klinkowitz points out that “for Barth, it seems, fiction should forever be an imitation of an action, and not an action itself” (14). Federman situates Barth amongst a host of writers who demonstrate that “the real world is now inside language, and can only be recreated by language” and who reveal that “words and things—*LES MOTS ET LES CHOSES*, as Michel Foucault so well demonstrated—no longer stick to each other, because language too is an autonomous reality” (*Critifiction* 13). Each of these critical approaches, from Altieri to Federman, is invested in the languaging process—in writing—as a determiner of all knowledge.

A third approach has emerged in which a few critics have begun to challenge the conclusions of these earlier readings on the grounds that they inevitably result in the denial of “any dimension beyond language” (Woolley 460). Deborah Woolley recounts the spirit of contemporary criticism that has grown up around the work of writers such as Barth: “The ‘text’ heroically foregoes the old securities of presence—signification, thematic unity, totalizing form—and accepts the existentialist challenge to confront the lack of a center at the heart of language and to dwell in that void” (460). She says of Barth in particular that his fiction is often cited as an “example of the ‘empty’ postmodern ‘text’” (463). Woolley’s argument is that while postmodern fiction writ large

may very well seem “preoccupied with the deterioration of language in general and of narrative forms in particular,” it “does not follow that self-reflexive fiction [...] is devoid of ‘presence’” (465). Similarly, Max Schulz has contended that while *Funhouse* may appear to be “the ultimate instance of metafiction forever adrift in the mirrored reflections of its own and its literary predecessors’ words, forever imitating ‘its own processes,’ there is a pattern discernible that questions and inverts, if it does not outright reject or deny, what critics superficially have taken Barth to represent” (10). Both of these critics insist that Barth is, in fact, breathing life back into language and into the Western literary tradition. While Woolley and Schulz continue to rely on post-Saussurean *langue*, their insightful dissatisfaction with the idea of Barth’s playfulness as solely linguistic, or as offering an abstract poststructuralist critique as an end in itself, opens the door for a reading of Barth that is not primarily beholden to language games.

If we work from the material domain of Barth’s Ambrose cycle of stories, the funhouse of fiction might indeed seem to “outright reject [and] deny what critics have taken Barth to represent” because it deflates even a cultural semiotics that does *not* create an impassable gap between words and things. At the end of the introductory remarks to his first public readings from *Funhouse* that I referenced earlier, Barth says the subject of literature is, in the words of Aristotle, “human life, its happiness and its misery,” which is why

we object to the word *experimental*. It suggests cold exercises in technique, and technique in art, we all know, has the same importance as technique in love: Heartless skill has its appeal; so does heartfelt ineptitude; but what we want is passionate virtuosity. If these pieces aren’t also *moving*, then the experiment is



unsuccessful, and their author is lost in the funhouse indeed. (79 original emphasis)

The point here is that Barth does not imagine the funhouse itself as the symbolic state of the world. The funhouse is not the point. Instead, he envisions the work of both writer and reader as seeking out cracks in this system. Rather than a mere demonstration that the funhouse of language is all that is the case, to borrow a phrase, Barth seems, at the very least, to be poking holes in the funhouse walls, leaving the back door open for an interpretation that might encompass language as one element in a larger network of human and nonhuman actors.

As we turn to the text itself, Barth's opening "Frame-Tale" might seem an immediate obstacle to the argument for *Funhouse* as a movement away from a linguistic, textual, poststructuralist reading and toward a materialist approach. The "tale" is actually a Moebius strip the narrator instructs us to physically cut out of the book, twist into a circle, and fasten end to end. The resultant text endlessly reads, "ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN" (1-2). However, while the Moebius strip is certainly a circuitous language game, an overtly closed system, I would point out that it comes to us unclosed. That is, in order for the strip of paper to become a true Moebius strip, it must be literally cut from the text by the reader. We do the closing; we trap ourselves in the game. The only way to close this system is to remove it from the book, and even then some might object that "ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN" does not constitute a narrative at all.<sup>2</sup> Although Max Schulz, among others, has argued that the "Frame-Tale" represents one of two "binary support

system[s]” in the novel that “confirm the hold on Barth’s imagination of a searching skeptical faith in the central tradition of storytelling” (6), the material circumstances through which the actual Moebius strip is produced suggest that Barth is at least as interested in the rupture of such binaries and systems since his narrator asks the reader to excise a physical portion of the text. The Moebius strip acts as a material obstacle to our reading whose instructions, if followed, render the reader complicit in the composition of her own cultural myths as she literally enacts the endless cycle of the idyllic fairy tale-opening, “Once upon a time.” What seems like a language game becomes a material interruption in the text that, whether intended or not, calls our attention away from the words and toward the paper, a pair of scissors, and perhaps some masking tape. Throughout the rest of the series, Barth often supplements more traditional narrative techniques with material disruptions that break the chain of social signification, especially in the stories about a young boy named Ambrose which prominently feature nonhuman actors.

Material objects play an ever-increasing role across the Ambrose cycle of stories that constitutes the first half of *Funhouse*. As the presence of these objects becomes more and more conspicuous, Barth’s interest in what gets related—rather than in the idea of relationality itself—uncovers a trail of things that connect actors alongside, or sometimes in the resounding absence of, language. The stories “Ambrose His Mark,” “Water-Message,” and the title story, “Lost in the Funhouse,” all chart the life of Ambrose, a baby born into a strange family who grows into a contemplative teenager. As we follow Ambrose from his birth in “Ambrose His Mark” to his early adolescence in “Lost in the

Funhouse,” we also follow Barth’s movement from an interrogation of signs, symbols, and other hidden structures to a description of the various actors that constantly poke holes in such systems and come together to make and remake networks defined by movement, change, and metamorphosis. Reading these stories with an eye toward the material reveals that Barth steadily moves from an overt preoccupation with language as primary determiner of our experience to a more problematized view of the preeminence of language.

“Ambrose His Mark” is largely invested in exploring the gap between signifier and signified that we typically imagine as the cornerstone of language play in postmodern metafiction. However, each textual moment that seems dominated by the linguistic also lends itself to a materialist reading that can expand our interpretation. The story is narrated by Ambrose himself as he looks back on his early childhood. Our good faith as readers is immediately challenged when Ambrose explains the “hectic circumstances” of his own birth, but what is important is that the infant goes many months without a proper name (14). His family refers to him sometimes as “*Honig*” and other times as “Christine,” all the while he is alternately ignored and impulsively smothered by his flighty mother Andrea. The final decision to name the young child Ambrose is a byproduct of the main action of the story, which is devoted to a dispute between Ambrose’s Grandfather and a bee-keeping neighbor named Willy Erdmann. The two elderly men are in a contest to woo a swarm of bees to their respective hives. The swarm arrives one Sunday morning as Andrea, often prone to breast feeding her child in a very public manner, lies in the backyard hammock with her little *Honig*. The bees alight on Andrea’s breast, covering

her and the baby. The older men each attempt to lure the bees, and the scene erupts when the bees go wild. The men fight and are eventually separated by congregants from the church across the street amidst shouted insults including Erdmann's remark that the baby has "no more father'n a drone bee" (29). In the aftermath, Aunt Rosa points out that the baby's birthmark resembles a bee, and the family decides that the mark is a naming-sign.

The ensuing debate over what to name the child finds Barth doing his best to close the gap between signifier and signified, but continuing to rely on the linguistic sign as fundamental building block of identity. After Aunt Rosa exclaims that the baby's birthmark resembles a bee, Uncle Konrad spends the afternoon consulting *The Book of Knowledge*, whereby he comes up with "a number of historical parallels to [the child's] experiences in the hammock" (32). The history of Western thought turns up Plato, Sophocles, Xenophon, and Saint Ambrose as potential namesakes who all were said to have swarms of bees alight on their mouths as children and then grew up to become wise speakers. Andrea detests the first three names, but is fond of the fourth, and so Ambrose explains: "the conversation turned to other matters, but thenceforward I was called Saint Ambrose, in jest, as often as *Honig*, and Ambrose by degrees became my name" (34). *Honig*, the German equivalent of the English "honey," signifies that the child is literally honey, the object. After the bee incident Aunt Rosa remarks, "All the time he was our *Honig*, that's what drew the bees" (32). Thus, the child is the thing, the object that draws the swarm. This moniker stands in contrast to "Christine," Andrea's desired name for a potential baby girl based on her adoration for Greta Garbo in the 1930 film *Anna Christie*. When Aunt Rosa refers to the child as "our *Honig*" he is literally honey drawing

the swarm, while “Christine” is a tribute, a reminder of something, or in this case someone, else. “Ambrose” is a combination of these two name-signs; it is at once the ambrosia or honey, and, simultaneously, a tribute to the great thinkers and history of the Western tradition, both a thing and a name. Barth’s joining of thing and name in the character of Ambrose troubles the relationship between the material and the linguistic more generally. Is Ambrose literally the honey that draws the bees, or is he the reincarnated Plato or Xenophon, a symbol of wisdom? Ambrose meditates on his complicated relationship with his name at the end of the story: “Vanity frets about his name, Pride vaunts it, Knowledge retches at its sound, Understanding sighs; all live outside it, knowing well that I and my sign are neither one nor quite two” (34). The sign is immaterial, separate from the person: “Yet only give it voice: whisper ‘Ambrose,’ as at rare times certain people have—see what-all leaves off to answer!” (34).

Ambrose’s invitation to “see what-all leaves off to answer” when a sign is spoken is indicative of the slight opening Barth leaves for us to consider the story from a perspective not wholly dominated by language. The invitation is not to see what the answer is, but to see “what-all” does the answering. And if we proceed to whisper “Ambrose,” to consider his name and the process of his naming, then what we may seem to find at first is a host of independent language systems that constitute and maintain static social categories. For instance, in an early discussion regarding Andrea’s procrastination in naming her son, Uncle Konrad declares that “the American Indians [...] had the right idea. ‘They never named a boy right off. What they did, they watched to find out who he was. They’d look for the right sign to tell them what to call him’” (17).

As they wait for the swarm to arrive later on, Uncle Konrad continues to wax philosophical on how other cultures have imagined the family's present situation:

A swarm on the house was thought by the Austrians to augur good fortune, by the Romans to warn of ill, and by the Greeks to herald strangers; that in Switzerland a swarm on a dry twig presaged the death of someone in the family, et cetera—but before ever he had got to the Bretons and Transylvanians his wife was his only auditor. (22)

In each of these educational asides, Uncle Konrad's illuminations are dependent upon the interpretation of signs unique to a particular nation or culture, insinuating that each of these collectives would provide a different approach to thinking about signs because of some inherent essence that constitutes their social existence. Thus, we might whisper "Ambrose" and see how each of these groupings might *leave off to answer*.

However, if we turn from signs, turn from language and consider other elements of the story, such as the bees, the scented stick used to attract the bees, the shotgun Willy Erdmann brings to the quarrel, then all we can see is the gathering of various actors irrespective of the ways in which they might "leave off to answer" when hearing Ambrose's name. This assembling becomes especially noticeable as the situation between Grandfather and Erdmann reaches its climax and Ambrose's family is brought into contact with the local Methodist congregation. Ambrose explains earlier that "ours was a family mired in apostasy [...] none of us went to church" (22-23). Although the house of worship stands just across the street, Uncle Konrad faithfully attends Bible class, and Grandfather "had lettered, gratis, *In Remembrance of Me* on the oak communion table," the family is cut off from the congregation. Perhaps it is because

Ambrose's mother nurses him in public "oblivious to the frowns of passing Christians" (23). Whatever the reason, Ambrose makes clear that the family is outside of Grace as he narrates the action in the church conterminously with the conflict between Grandfather and Erdmann: "in Grace meanwhile the service had proceeded despite shotgun-blast and clang of pans, which however were acknowledged with small stirs and meetings of the eyes" (27). When the violence erupts and the bees swarm with Ambrose's mother in their midst, Aunt Rosa runs across the street and bursts into the church shrieking, "First-degree murder!" (28). In a flash, a delegation of lay-leaders is in the family's backyard while Aunt Rosa and baby Ambrose are taken to shelter in the parsonage. Joe Voegler, the local blacksmith, leads the intervention and both the family and the congregation are thoroughly mingled together in one roiling mass. The bees, clanging pans, and shotgun blast create the conflict between the older men that results in the fusion of the congregation and the family. Rosa and baby Ambrose are in the church parsonage, the lay-leaders are in the family's backyard along with Erdmann, and the doctor comes to the house to attend to Andrea who is stung in the altercation. The community gets constructed in this wild sequence of events ultimately defies the seemingly clear social lines that once divided Ambrose's family from the families in the church.

While these actors, the bees in particular, may seem too overtly symbolic, and thus not distant enough from language to stretch the bounds of typical linguistic readings of this metafictional story, the next installment of the cycle provides us with a glass bottle whose mundanity stands in stark contrast to the overtly representational letter it contains. "Water-Message" illustrates the significance of the material through the shattered

remains of a glass bottle, as Ambrose and his friend Perse tag along with some older boys in the formation of a club called the Occult Order of the Sphinx. The boys have a clubhouse out in the woods along the Eastern Shore tidewater, but even though Ambrose came up with the name of the Order, the older boys won't let him come into the clubhouse and participate in their secret meetings. Ambrose is a precocious and obviously odd young boy who counters the threats of bullies and older boys by making fun of himself and playing word games to confuse and distract his tormenters. Much like his naming of the Occult Order of the Sphinx, Ambrose has come up with mythic names for a number of local places "after reading through *The Book of Knowledge*," the recurring book that also appears in "Ambrose His Mark" (41). As the story nears its end, Ambrose and Perse are both banished from the clubhouse by the older boys and forced to settle for exploring the tidewater's edge. Not wanting to appear as outcast as Perse, Ambrose pretends to be communicating with the older boys back at the Den through a series of intricate hand signs, but Perse does not believe this ruse, saying "There ain't no sign," calling Ambrose's bluff (54). However, when Ambrose feigns to be receiving communications from the older boys instructing him and Perse to go farther up the beach, Perse follows along. Their exclusion from the Order has pushed Ambrose to develop his own sign system from which he can exclude Perse and thus feel special himself.

Ambrose's invented language comes to seem hollow in contrast to the object Perse pulls from the water as the boys trudge the shoreline. The bottle is clear glass and recalls Sylvie's can collection in *Housekeeping* because its label has been scraped off, "all but some white strips where the glue was thickest" (55). In the excitement Perse



“forg[ets] to be cynical” exclaiming “Where in the *world* do you think it come from?”

(55 original emphasis). Ambrose also forgets his many troubles and sees only that

the sea-wreathed bottle was an emblem. Westward it lay, to westward, where the tide ran from East Dorset. Past the river and the Bay, from continents beyond, this messenger had come. Borne by currents as yet uncharted, nosed by fishes as yet unnamed, it had bobbed for ages beneath strange stars. Then out of the oceans it had strayed; past cape and cove, black can, red nun, the word had wandered willy-nilly to his threshold. (55)

The bottle seems no more than a means of conveyance for the message it contains. It is an “emblem,” after all, connecting continents, unnamed fish, stars, and Ambrose. To reduce the bottle to a mere object of delivery, however, is to miss out on the more complex nature of the relationship between the bottle as a thing, in Heidegger’s, Silko’s, and Alvarez’s sense, and the message as part and parcel of the thing. The boys remove the cap and try to retrieve the note from the bottle, but it refuses to come out. They first try shaking the bottle, then they try a stick, but finally Perse shouts, “For pity’s sake bust it!” (55). The breaking of the bottle might seem to signify its subordination to the message, but Barth frustrates that interpretation by rendering the message devoid of content.

The empty note can certainly be read as a meditation on the arbitrary nature of the sign, but it can also point us back to the void in the bottle that has been destroyed. It takes three violent swings before Ambrose is able to shatter the bottle. Perse retrieves the note, but Ambrose promptly takes it from him and unfolds it:

On a top line was penned in deep red ink:

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

On the next-to-bottom:

YOURS TRULY

Apart from the salutation and the closing the note is blank, no message, no name. Perse has run off to throw oyster shells at Ambrose, and as Ambrose shifts the note to his left hand to better fire projectiles in retaliation he thinks to himself that “those shiny bits in the paper’s texture were splinters of wood pulp. Often as he’d seen them in the leaves of cheap tablets, he had not thitherto embraced that fact” (57). At the absent center of language lies a void constituted by the materiality of wood pulp. Far from being the structural determiner of all knowledge and far from constituting the material world we encounter through our senses, language is part and parcel of the material, made out of the material. The bottle must be broken to get at the message, and when the message is empty, splinters of wood pulp constitute its essence. The void of language can convey no meaning, but the void of the bottle can convey the message itself. Ambrose does not stop to ponder the missing words, but marvels at the novelty of something as mundane as the fact that paper is made from trees.

The letter’s open-endedness, apart from the basic form of salutation and close, has led some to conclude that “the message consists in the fact of its occurrence” (Woolley 476), and that “the content of a message is irrelevant in comparison with the importance of the act of writing that message” (Krier 114). Ultimately, there is no message at all. The message fails in its mission where the bottle succeeds. The bottle’s job was to carry the message; the message’s job was to convey a communication through language. Even in its destruction the bottle accomplishes its purpose. The sparkling shards of glass that litter

the water's edge materialize the impossibility of language alone as the foundation for organizing our understanding of the world and its various connections across continents, currents, capes, and coves. Whereas "Ambrose His Mark" begins this work by making the referent into a sign (Ambrose is "the *honig*" that attracts the bees), "Water-Message" reveals that language itself is wrapped up in and contained by the material. While Barth continues to rely on some type of recognizable form in the salutation and complimentary closing of the letter, there is a movement here toward openness in the broken bottle that is mirrored in the intersection of Ambrose's family and the Grace Methodist congregation in "Ambrose His Mark" and also in the perhaps undigested representation of the family's housekeeper Hattie in "Water-Message."

Hattie's overtly racialized presence in "Water-Message" can be read generously or ungenerously, but any interpretation must account for the way in which she constitutes the family as vitally as does Uncle Konrad, Andrea, or Ambrose himself.<sup>3</sup> Before the discovery of the bottle, Ambrose evades bullies on his way home from school by imitating his father's limp in order to earn scornful laughter as opposed to violent beatings. Andrea insists that the boys who would pick on her son are not brave, and as Ambrose is just about to defend this notion of masculinity, "colored Hattie walked in then, snapping gum, to ask what wanted ironing" (44). Immediately, her inquiry highlights that it is a "what" that wants ironing and not a "who," as if to say that the shirts themselves call to be ironed and not Ambrose's mother. Hattie's question nuances the hierarchical relationship between employer and employee while simultaneously assigning an agency to things. Furthermore, because of her husband's addiction to gambling on

horses, “when vanilla-fudge Hattie was in the kitchen, Mother’s afternoon programs went by the board” as Hattie co-opts the radio to listen to the race broadcasts from “Bowie to Pimlico” (44). But it is the music that Hattie listens to in between the races that “affected Ambrose strongly: it was not at all of a stripe with what they played on Fitch Bandwagon or national Barn Dance; this between races was classical music” (44-45). Andrea does not dispute Hattie’s right to the radio dial; the housekeeper seems just as entitled to the frequency as does her employer. The implicit danger here is that we might reify race as a static, preexisting category about which literature can tell us something. However, as we will also see in the next story of the cycle, Barth does not rely solely on the racialization of characters to interrupt the family’s everyday operations. Instead, what is important is how the material objects in the story illuminate a commonality where difference and hierarchy seem natural. Hattie’s control over the radio gestures toward the enfranchising possibilities of a materialist reading that resurfaces in the title story, “Lost in the Funhouse,” as Ambrose’s family travels to the beach accompanied by a neighbor girl named Magda.

“Lost in the Funhouse” is packed full of the quotidian items of everyday life. The story follows a now-thirteen-year-old Ambrose on a family trip to Ocean City, Maryland with his father, mother, Uncle Karl, brother Peter, and their neighbor Magda. Magda’s presence, much like Hattie’s in “Water-Message,” signals the interruption of the nuclear family, but it is the increased presence of nonhuman actors that draws our attention to the larger significance of the social as a process. Material objects overpopulate the world of this story: “Under the boardwalk, matchbook covers, grainy other things” (79); “*El*

*Producto* cigar butts, treasured with Lucky Strike cigarette stubs, Coca-Cola caps, gritty turds, cardboard lollipop sticks, matchbook covers” (80); “the world winks at him through its objects, grabs grinning at his coat” (88); and most importantly, Barth introduces a “name-coin” that serves as a central motif throughout the story. A boardwalk and amusement park staple, the name-coin is explained by the presence of “a machine that stamped your name around a white-metal coin with a star in the middle: A \_\_\_\_\_” (85). While this object might seem to symbolize Ambrose’s ultimate induction into the language system by literally rendering his name currency—and what system could be more purely abstract and relational with no outside referents—the fact is the ticket-woman rejects the coin as payment for entrance into the boardwalk’s funhouse. The name-coin is not valid currency.

Yet Ambrose certainly does gain access to the funhouse, and it is the funhouse that has drawn the most critical attention to Barth’s postmodern narrative as a metafictional meditation on language and narration as the determiners of our lived experience. Christopher Morris describes Ambrose’s tour of the funhouse as a “gradual confrontation with the absent center of language” (73). Because Ambrose never escapes the funhouse but instead takes “a wrong turn, stray[s] into the pass *wherein he lingers yet*” (97), Morris suggests that Barth is illustrating the semiotic nature of language as both linguistic and cultural reality. In his analysis of Ambrose running across a couple having sex under the boardwalk prior to entering the funhouse, Morris proposes that “the meaning of the act is inseparable from the recollected signs of it which, in themselves are empty” (74). Although she moves away from the rhetoric of emptiness, Deborah Woolley

echoes Morris's perspective: "As the self-reflexive language undermines language's referential function, it undermines our sense of the narrator as person" (472). This revelation is the culmination of the first seven stories in the series that have followed Ambrose from conception and birth to adolescence. "At the same time," says Max Schulz, "they self-reflexively rehearse the questioning awareness and insistence of this fictional character that he is the progenitor and author of his own story" (7). However, have we considered that perhaps Barth's very point in stranding Ambrose in the funhouse is to break the metafictional cycle of writer—author—text—reader—word—thing—character—narrator? After all, while Ambrose seems to "linger yet" in the realm of the funhouse, the rest of his family, along with Magda, make their escape, and Ambrose himself has seen cracks in the funhouse walls.

While the critical conversation has justifiably tended to focus on Ambrose at the end of the story, Barth actually leaves us with two narrative arcs to follow: Ambrose's and his family's. Ambrose's story is well known: "He wishes he had never entered the funhouse. But he has. Then he wishes he were dead. But he's not. Therefore he will construct funhouses for others and be their secret operator—though he would rather be among the lovers for whom funhouses are designed" (97). But why have we not given an equal amount of attention to Ambrose's family, who at the end of the story is "going home" (97). Why have we lingered in the funhouse with Ambrose while his family leaves Ocean City behind? While there may be no satisfactory answer to such a question, what seems at least as important is the series of constructions of the social that have taken place over the course of the three stories and that have led Ambrose to this moment. The

bees amalgamate Ambrose's family with the congregants in Grace Methodist church, the glass bottle connects Ambrose and Perse with distant geographies, and the name-coin creates the narrative conflict that renders Ambrose a stranger to himself. Ambrose unknowingly loses the name-coin upon entrance to the funhouse and then later recovers it, believing it to belong to someone else despite the fact that it is imprinted with his own name: AMBROSE.

If the funhouse is a metafictional metaphor for language as so many have claimed, then Barth is not embracing the funhouse but exposing it as a farcical trap for those who get caught up in searching for some hidden structure to explain everything, sometimes in spite of themselves. The structures that Barth is interested in are constantly being made, not out of language, but out of the material circumstances of everyday life. As the family travels to Ocean City, the narrator reminisces about similar trips taken by Ambrose's father when he was his son's age. On these excursions, "many families from the same neighborhood used to travel together, with dependent relatives and often with Negro servants; [...] everyone shared everyone else's Maryland fried chicken, Virginia ham, deviled eggs, potato salad, beaten biscuits, iced tea" (73). This image of a vast and sprawling social network is contrasted with that of the narrative present in which, "the journey is made by automobile—more comfortably and quickly though without the extra fun though without the *camaraderie* of a general excursion. It's all part of the deterioration of American life, their father declares" (73 original emphasis). The father's comment about the deterioration of American life certainly implies a whole or unified American life that is now crumbling apart, but the material circumstances imply

construction, not demolition. The combination of the automobile and the lack of shared items leads to a different model of American life, one in which neighborhood families, relatives, and servants live in much more compartmentalized relation to one another. The seemingly unself-conscious reference to “Negro servants” may also stand as witness to the in-process nature of the social here as the technological advancements that accompany the proliferation of the automobile have perhaps rendered the services of such employees unnecessary. At the very least, the fact that Magda seems to have replaced Hattie as the non-biological family member in between “Water-Message” and “Lost in the Funhouse” demonstrates that the social is changing.

Lest we fail to give Barth what credit he is due for reimagining the social through his references to characters of color, we must examine one of the story’s possible endings in which Ambrose teams up and perhaps falls in love with another person lost in the dark funhouse who might turn out to be both a “Negro” and “a girl” (87). At the end of the story when Ambrose envisions himself among the other members of his family as they go home, he imagines his Uncle Karl teasing him “over the fact that the comrade with whom he’d fought his way shoulder to shoulder through the funhouse had turned out to be a blind Negro girl—to their mutual discomfort, as they’d opened their souls” (97). William Solomon has argued convincingly that this

second and less sexually charged fantasy of racial commingling may be more politically dangerous, more unthinkable in regard to historical norms than the first. [...] The former could be considered simply a part of growing into white manhood, domination of an attractive Other a means of gaining control over oneself. In contrast, the latter, insofar as it rejects power as the basis of a biracial friendship, strikes a blow against social convention in a manner roughly consistent with the ambitions of the civil rights movement. (489)



What is equally as important as the potential deconstruction of social convention here, however, is the fact that the attendant construction of some social configuration that is not beholden to the familiar category of race is merely imaginary for Ambrose because of his role as an intermediary. In other words, Ambrose's entrapment in the funhouse of language ultimately renders Solomon's ideal interpretation of the story unrealized in practice. When approached from this direction, "Lost in the Funhouse" can be read as a warning against a language-obsessed reading of postmodern fiction. If we generously buy Barth's "blow against social convention" as a critique of whiteness in Solomon's sense, then we must also accept that this blow is ultimately not delivered, for Ambrose is indeed lost in the funhouse. However, regardless of this possible shortcoming, Barth's story does lend itself to the enfranchising possibilities that attend the changes that have taken place in the world of the narrative from the time that Ambrose's father was a boy to the present. At the very least, it can be argued that Barth emphasizes Ambrose's helpless state at the end of the story to warn us away from the funhouse of language.

The continual presence of unfinished sentences in the story is a sore reminder of this helplessness, and points us back to how Manx Martin and Charles Wainwright Sr. are able to finish each other's thoughts in DeLillo's *Underworld*. Throughout the story, the narrator repeatedly begins descriptions but fails to finish them: "The smell of Uncle Karl's cigar smoke reminded one of" (74). The period that follows "of" signals the grammatical end of the sentence, but the thought is left up to the reader to complete. At the root of this game lies an acknowledgment that although the smell of Uncle Karl's

cigar smoke might remind us all of something slightly different, the things of which we are reminded are ultimately inconsequential in comparison with the differences themselves. But are our unique reminiscences not borne out of a common material experience with the smell of cigar smoke? Whereas Barth's language game leaves the sentences incomplete, DeLillo enables his characters to finish one another's statements because the common experiences are materialized in the baseball. Thus, if we recall Barth's pronouncement in his introductory remarks from the earliest readings of these stories, then we are left with no other way to interpret the presence of the funhouse of language than as a misguided lens through which to view the world rather than as a representation of the world itself: "If these pieces aren't also *moving*, then the experiment is unsuccessful, and their author is lost in the funhouse indeed" (*The Friday Book* 79 original emphasis).

Barth's reticence at the thought of being "lost in the funhouse indeed" betrays his dissatisfaction with endless language play, and perhaps more importantly shows that the funhouse is not necessarily the state of things. Charting the ever-growing presence of the material from the bees and shotgun blasts of "Ambrose His Mark," to the bottle and wood-pulp paper of "Water-Message," and finally its overabundance in the lists and name-coin of "Lost in the Funhouse" reveals the cracks in the funhouse walls, or as the narrator says of Ambrose, "He'd found a crack of light—not a door, it turned out, but a seam between the plywood wall panels" (87). Although this metafictional marvel has been critically recycled as an enactment of the reality of the poststructural funhouse of language as determiner of our social structures, Wallace's rewriting of the story points us

toward the possibilities of a non-linguistic reading of postmodern fiction that is able to account for the world by attending to the materiality of everyday experience.

### **Things and People**

The final story in Wallace's 1989 collection *Girl With Curious Hair* is actually a lengthy novella entitled "Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way." Wallace's very title can be read as a reconsideration of Barth's story in that it seems to suggest no matter how much time we spend lost in the funhouse parsing language, "linguistic turns," and various structuralisms, the empire that such philosophies spin out of marches on. Because the characters in the novel travel westward from Maryland to Illinois—perhaps recalling the trajectory of Ambrose's bottle (westward it lay, to westward)—we might even interpret this story from the very start as illustrative of the course of Manifest Destiny that persists in stretching across the United States in the late-twentieth century, albeit in the ever-new and various forms of the commercial age. The westward course of empire may even break the geographical boundaries of the United States as the looming specter that haunts this story is the McDonald's corporation that currently claims over thirty thousand franchises worldwide.

Taking the opening line from "Lost in the Funhouse" as an epigraph, the novella revisits the sights and sounds of Barth's classic metafictional story en route to what James Rother calls a "sendup-*cum*-homage that is nearly six times as long as its source text" (218). The story spins itself out of the creative writing workshop taught by Professor Ambrose at East Chesapeake Tradeschool, and much like Barth's Ambrose and

his family in “Lost in the Funhouse,” Wallace’s main characters, D.L. Eberhardt, Mark Nechtr, and Tom Sternberg embark on a journey to a fantastical destination:

the scheduled Reunion of everyone who has ever been in a McDonald’s commercial, arranged by J.D. Steelritter Advertising and featuring a party to end all parties, a spectacular collective Reunion commercial, the ribbon-cutting revelation of the new Funhouse franchises’ flagship discotheque. (235)

D.L., a self-proclaimed postmodernist, and Mark, a trust fund college student with a heart of gold, seem an unlikely romantic pairing. They are polar opposites in nearly every way, and yet when Mark witnesses D.L. fleeing the scene after writing something nasty about Professor Ambrose on the chalkboard one day prior to workshop, he does not rat her out, and somehow a connection is forged between the two. D.L. claims to be—but is in fact not—pregnant, and thus Mark marries her out of a sense of noble obligation and accompanies D.L. on the reunion journey, along with Tom Sternberg, a fellow commercial alum and friend of D.L. Through a series of unlikely events interlaced with various characters’ memories, narrations, and narrative interjections reminiscent of those in Barth’s story, the group arrives in Illinois where they are to be picked up and transported to the reunion by advertising mogul J.D. Steelritter and his hapless son DeHaven, another unlikely pair. But the Central Illinois Airport barely marks the halfway point in the journey, much less the narrative. The story bogs down, along with DeHaven’s car, before the group ever arrives at its destination, marked by huge golden arches that the characters can see towering over the endless cornfields of the American Midwest.

The novella-as-rewrite of Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse" has been the primary focus of the few studies of "Westward," but critics tend to disagree as to Wallace's feelings toward the so-called "first generation" postmodern writers such as Barth, Robert Coover, and Thomas Pynchon. As mentioned earlier, James Rother reads "Westward" as both tribute and critique. Paul Giles proposes that "Wallace's story suggests that Barth's notion of ironic reflexivity has become thoroughly institutionalized, as much a syndicated brand as McDonald's itself" (331). Other critics have recognized in Wallace's Professor Ambrose a fictional version of Barth himself, "presented as the foremost theorist of postmodernism in *Westward* – which draws heavily on Barth's seminal story 'Lost in the Funhouse' in order to unmask the often shallow strategies of metafiction" (Staes 468). In one of the few book-length treatments of Wallace's work, Marshall Boswell says outright that "*Westward* should be read as a metafictional critique of metafiction that seeks to demolish even metafiction's own claim to imperious self-consciousness" (104). Across this diverse range of perspectives on Wallace's relation to Barth the common ground appears to be that the novella sees the early metafiction of Barth and his cohorts as coming up empty. Boswell characterizes this critique as Wallace entering the "prison house of postmodern self-reflexivity" while maintaining a firm hold on "the world of the real, the world outside the text, that is, the text's transcendent referent" (112). Rather than continue to depend upon the binary opposition of world to text, inside to outside, a materialist reading reveals that Wallace asks us to embrace the paradoxical conflation of inner and outer embodied in the presence of an arrow given to Mark Nechtr as a gift.

Initially given to Mark as a wedding present by his former YWCA archery coach, the woman who also took his virginity, the Dexter Aluminum Target Arrow materially prevents Mark, D.L., and Tom from meeting up with Steelritter and DeHaven on time when they arrive at Central Illinois Airport: “The LordAloft pilot, a Polynesian in a just bitching three-piece and mirrored glasses, wouldn’t allow Mark’s disassembled bow or quiver on the helicopter. [...] Target arrows are deadly weapons, after all” (248). The circulation of this object throughout the novella uncovers a Zeno’s paradox between text and world in which we never seem to get outside the text, but at the same time we obviously do, just as Zeno’s arrow never hits the target, but, of course, it does. There is an insurmountable gap between text and world, yet we surmount it every day; empire is merely the product of language and yet the Native peoples that we most associate with the bow and arrow are living on fractionated plots of land across the United States. Barth’s Ambrose is hopelessly trapped forever within the confines of the funhouse, yet the alternate versions of the story place him in the car with his family on the way home being teased by his Uncle Karl for coming through the funhouse “shoulder to shoulder” with “a blind Negro girl.” Mark, D.L., Tom, Steelritter, and DeHaven never arrive at the reunion, yet they do arrive. Barth most explicitly enacts this paradox at the end of “Funhouse” when Ambrose accepts his fate and yet purposes to “construct funhouses for others” (97). At its most fundamental level, the funhouse is something that is made, constructed, assembled, and can thus be remade, reconstructed, and reassembled. Wallace’s story, much like Barth’s metafictional funhouse, is not merely a meditation on

language, but an exploration of how communities assemble themselves out of common experiences with material things.

While it might seem a stretch to assume that Wallace is directly engaging with the critical overlap between poststructuralism and postmodernism, he makes much of the fact that D.L. self-identifies as a postmodernist: “she actually went around *calling* herself a postmodernist. No matter *where* you are, you Don’t Do This” (234 original emphasis). Wallace has Professor Ambrose, Barth’s fictional incarnation, condemn this style by characterizing it as having a “certain ‘Look-Mom-no-hands quality’” (234). Wallace associates the infinitely playful poststructuralist experimentation with language with those who claim to be postmodern, but he dissociates his Barthean character from that crowd. Whereas Barth was trying to get at the essence of narration to explore the ultimate connections and ruptures between things, people, and words, Wallace represents those who follow in his footsteps for the sake of some abstract idea of the artist as “coldly fertile” (234). In other words, Wallace’s gripe seems to be with the critical conversation surrounding “Lost in the Funhouse” not with the story itself because Barth is not invested in the infinite deferral of meaning, but in the material interruption of what we take for granted as familiar social categories. Barth’s bees, bottles, matchbooks, and name-coins construct communities, and Wallace follows suit, shooting Mark Nechtr’s arrow through the heart of the story to create a trajectory whose wake gathers an odd band of travelers into one really odd collective.

Much like the texts examined in the earlier chapters, and much like *Lost in the Funhouse*, “Westward” makes a narrative move toward openness and process

foreshadowed in the presence and movement of material items. This openness might also be understood as a correlation rather than a separation between the world and the text. As Mark, D.L. and Tom stand in the rental car line after being refused passage on the LordAloft helicopter on account of the arrow, Mark does his best to conceal the arrow under his shirt. After a little while, he removes the object so that he can sit down, and commences to play table-top games with it: “Mark idly flips his arrow up and over and down and into the lounge’s round table, where the razor-sharp Dexter target-tip sticks” (273). Tom comes along and tries the trick, but winds up sending the arrow into a fellow-diner’s dessert. The man whose dessert has been ruined is enraged, and the woman eating with him, one of the flight attendants, has her clothes stained by the incident. It turns out, however, that this woman, Magda, is also on her way to the Reunion, and hours later, when they’ve all finally met up with Steelritter and DeHaven and are packed into DeHaven’s car on their way to the Reunion, Mark realizes that he doesn’t have his arrow, only to be reassured by Magda that she has put it in her carry-on. The narrator muses:

The thing cannot be lost. Even shot it at the sea once. Off an old wharf. Except it *floated*, though, glinting; hung in the water by its cedar knock; come in on the sluggish tide within hours. And Mark had waited for it. On the crumbled wharf that smelled of fish. The fact that the arrow can’t disappear is both a comfort and a worry. It makes Nechtr feel special, true. But from special it’s not very far to Alone. (308)

Reminiscent of the bottle that a young Ambrose finds on the tidewater’s edge, the arrow makes its way to shore across the hours and tides. The arrow refuses to cooperate with Tom. The thing obediently flips end-over-end and sticks in the table top for Mark, but in Tom’s hands it nearly causes a fight. The object’s agency in this moment is important in



two ways. First, it has the power to decline the group a ride on the helicopter. Second, it does not make itself amenable to all human actors equally.

The arrow is not what it seems to be, and its properties defy human determination. The narrator of “Westward” explains this defiance in relation to the practice of target shooting:

As you stand shoulder-first across thirty orthogonal meters between you and the red thing that encloses the gold chroma, [...] the point of your arrow, at full draw, is somewhere between three and nine centimeters to the left of the true straight line to the bull’s-eye, even though the arrow’s nock, fucked by the string, is *on* that line. The bow gets in the way, see. So logically it seems like if your sight and aim are truly true, the arrow should always land just to the left of target-center [...] But the straight-aimed and so off-angled target arrow will stab the center, right in the heart, every time. It is an archer’s law that makes no sense. (294)

The narrator says that the explanation for this unaccountable phenomenon “lies in what happens to the well-aimed arrow when it’s released; what happens *while it’s traveling* to the waiting target” (294 original emphasis). Taking Mark’s arrow itself as an important actor in the interaction of other actors in the story, we find that it has already played a role in bringing Magda together with Mark, D.L., and Tom Sternberg when Tom’s foiled attempt to flip the arrow lands it in the dessert that stains Magda’s dress, but its work is not done. Because of their missed helicopter flight, the three original travelers, along with their new companion, end up being transported to the Reunion in the personal car of DeHaven Steelritter, along with his father J.D.

As with Barth’s broken bottle in “Water-Message,” the means of conveyance here, DeHaven’s car, plays a significant part in helping us understand how the assembled nature of social aggregates also implies their capacity to be remade. Barth’s glass bottle is

shattered into pieces, DeHaven's car is assembled out of "parts": "I built this baby from scratch. It's not technically an anything" (298). When D.L. refuses to ride in anything but a Datsun, J.D. Steelritter compromises: "'Tell you what, Eberhardt [...] we write DATSUN in the shameful no-pride dust on the kid's rear window, here' [...] It both relieved Sternberg and gave him the creeps. 'An instant Datsun?'" (298). Unlike the Datsun in Alvarez's novel, DeHaven's car cannot be easily placed on the hierarchical scale of automobile brands that provides a clear-cut sense of what social class the driver occupies. D.L.'s problematic, yet characteristic, refusal to ride in anything but a Datsun marks her as a "postmodernist" prisoner to language games. But the fact that DeHaven's car isn't "technically an anything" means that this imprisonment does not correspond to the material order of things in the world of the story. The "instant Datsun" is an amalgamated means of conveying the group that is constantly falling apart and being rebuilt out of different parts. Thus, when the car eventually bogs down in the Illinois mud a few short miles from the Reunion site, the narrator says with still thirty pages left to go, "This is pretty much the climax of the whole journey, by the way, pending arrival" (345). The arrow and car have brought us to the "*while its traveling*" of the narrative, the literal rising action that Wallace treats as the climax of the story in Freitagian terms.

Much has been made of Barth's inclusion of a literal Freitag's Triangle in the text of "Lost in the Funhouse."<sup>4</sup> As "Lost in the Funhouse" spins out of control, Barth's narrator explains, "A long time ago we should have passed the apex of Freitag's Triangle and made brief work of the *dénouement*; the plot doesn't rise by meaningful steps but winds upon itself, digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires" (96). Similarly,

as DeHaven's car fails to reach its goal and instead "digresses, retreats, hesitates, sighs, collapses, expires," the abusive father who has demeaned and bullied him throughout the story seems to soften toward his son, and D.L. "can tell DeHaven Steelritter and J.D. love each other, deep down, and this affects her" (345). The arrow does not arrive at its target, the group does not make it to the reunion within the bounds of the narrative, but do we not arrive anywhere at all? We arrive in-process as DeHaven seeks assistance from a local farmer to pull the car out of the mud, thus growing the strange little community again by one, well two if we count the horse the farmer brings to help extract the "instant Datsun." What Wallace privileges in this simultaneously penultimate and ultimate moment of his narrative is the very fact of process. At the end of *Housekeeping*, Lucille does "not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie" (219). The ragtag band of travelers in Wallace's novella does not arrive, does not enjoy the reunion, "but in time, they'll arrive at what's been built" (372).

Even the possibility of this eventual arrival is interrupted by the narrator's insertion of the story that a struggling Mark finally writes for Professor Ambrose's workshop. Mark's protagonist, Dave, is convicted of murdering his wife even though she stabs herself in the neck with an arrow. Dave is both guilty and not guilty, or as the narrator explains, he is "guilty of being Not Guilty" (360). As we flash back and forth between Mark's story and Wallace's, it becomes clear that things, people, and words do not float in endless chains of signification, but constantly change and transform as they interact. The wheels of DeHaven's car spin in the Illinois mud, and the narrator turns explicitly to the reader, much as Alvarez's and DeLillo's narrators do, and says, "So trust

me: we will arrive. Cross my heart. Stick a needle. To tell the truth, we might already be there. [...] But the wheel! Bound by nothing, the Goodyear spins and spins, has lost its ringing hub” (373). This exclamation might seem indicative of the linguistic system with no center that literary and cultural critics maintain lies at the heart of postmodernism. However, the loss of the hub “has disclosed a radial’s spokes,” and the narrator prepares us to “hold rapt for that impossible delay, that best interruption: that moment in all radial time when something unseen inside the blur of spokes seems to sputter, catch, and spin against the spin” (373). When the center is not missing but broken, the infinite reaching tendrils of the individual spokes sprawl out of radial time and erode any inner/outer binary by refusing that inevitable “Not only...but also,” that Latour decries as perpetuating the false distinction between subjective and objective reality in which “objectivity is always on the other side of the fence” (145).

Wallace completely abandons this fence in an earlier story from *Girl With Curious Hair* by entirely erasing the gap between subjective and objective through his conflation of story and narrative discourse.<sup>5</sup> Among the earliest pieces of fiction Wallace ever published, the story “Here and There” does not contain any narration. That is, there is not a single word in the story that is outside of quotation marks. Thus, there is literally nothing outside the story, no narration, no commentary. Furthermore, the entire story is a session of so-called “fiction therapy” in which the protagonist Bruce, a brilliant MIT graduate in electrical engineering, recounts the dissolution of his relationship with a young woman by speaking in both his own voice and his ex-girlfriend’s voice in an attempt, as his therapist says, “to construct an instance in which for once your interests

are to be subordinated to those of another” (153). However, what may seem at first like the ultimate incarnation of Derrida’s *il n’y a pas de hors-texte* is, in fact, something else. Rather than making all the world into an abstract and semiotic text, Wallace materializes all textual constructions by focusing on a stove at the story’s end that contains all of Bruce’s fears and anxieties, much like the toy drum at the end of *García Girls* contains all the narrative threads of the novel. It should come as no surprise that the second story of Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*, the “Night-Sea Journey” of a sperm fertilizing an egg, also takes place entirely in the world of direct discourse. In the world of “Here and There” there is only story, only action; there is no separate world of narration. Bruce finds himself spiraling down into the labyrinth of language only to have the semiosis of the system disrupted by the stubbornness of a 1960s electric stove.

Similar to the way in which the Möebius strip in Barth’s “Frame-Tale” requires the material intervention of the reader in order to complete its work, “Here and There” asks us to piece its story together without the help of any narrative discourse. Throughout the story we follow Bruce’s obsession with the erosion of language as a “correlative” system. Bruce explains, “Words as fulfillers of the function of signification in artistic communication will wither like the rules of form before them. Meaning will be clean” (155). He describes his ideal vision of the language-meaning-system as “the icy beauty of the perfect signification of fabricated nonverbal symbols and their relation through agreed-on rules” (167). As he goes on to recreate the dissolution of his romantic relationship in the fiction therapy session, Bruce recalls a trip he takes to his aunt’s and uncle’s house in Maine, where he begins to feel a separation between his emotions and

the source of those emotions, which he describes as “something outside” himself. He explains that he is overcome with

an urge to ‘write it all out,’ to confront the past and present as a community of signs, but this requires a special distance I seem to have left behind. For a few days I exercise instead—go for long, shambling runs in jeans and sneakers, move some heavy mechanical clutter out of my uncle’s backyard. (165-66)

Instead of turning to language, or to the people who seem to draw their very breath from language, Bruce turns to physical activity, to manual labor and material experience.

In fact, Bruce seems to see no marked difference between things and people in his attempts to understand himself, but his valuation of the material renders all things intermediaries, not mediating actors. He calls his brother Leonard on the phone and gives an “involved and scrupulously fair edition” of his break up, and subsequent unhappiness. Leonard insists that, like their mother, Bruce suffers from “an unhappy and basically silly desire to be perfect” the fulfillment of which would ultimately render a person’s life boring (166). When Bruce responds that being boring is an imperfection and “would by definition be impossible for a perfect person,” Leonard retorts that his brother has “always enjoyed playing games with words in order to dodge the real meanings of things” which Bruce thinks “segues with suspicious neatness into [his] intuitions about the impending death of lexical utterance” (166). Bruce’s therapist counters that Leonard was simply trying to point out the impossibility of perfection, but Bruce retorts: “There is no shortage of things that are perfect for the function that defines them. Peano’s axioms. A chameleon’s coat. A Turing Machine” (167). The therapist points out, “Those aren’t persons,” but Bruce insists, “No one has ever argued persuasively that that has anything

to do with it. My professors stopped trying” (166-67). For Bruce, all human and nonhuman entities are mere placeholders in “systems of information and energy-transfer” (154). In his language-dominated world, actors do not count for more than just one, and thus the possibility for remaking the social cannot be realized.

Bruce is the ultimate Ambrose teetering on the edge of an earth-shattering revelation in his subsequent encounter with his Aunt’s stove. The interruption of Bruce’s theory of the “icy beauty of the perfect signification” occurs as the result of what Brown has called, “the suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power” (“Thing Theory” 3). As Bruce waits for his uncle to get home from work one day, his aunt asks him to take a look at their old stove because it is not working properly. She needs to get some chili heated up for lunch, but also needs to prepare for a quiz in the French class she’s taking at the local university. With an electrical engineering degree from MIT, fixing an electric stove shouldn’t be that complicated, but Bruce quickly makes a mess of the stove’s wiring. He understands the workings of the circuits, jacks, and burners, but has never “personally bound a system of wire” (170). Instead, he explains

the work that interests me is done with a pencil and a sheet of paper. Rarely even a calculator. At the cutting edge of electrical engineering, almost everything interesting is resolvable via the manipulation of variables. I’ve never once been stumped on an exam. Ever. And I appear to have broken this miserable piece-of-shit stove. (170)

Bruce’s frustration is grounded in his lack of assurance about what he can and cannot know. He cannot adjust for all the variables necessary to fix the stove without

information that is unavailable to him, in part, because of the age of the appliance. He laments, “There is *no way to know* without data on the resistance ratios in the metal composition of the burners” (170-71 original emphasis). The therapist interjects: “You’re unable to fix an electric stove?” The stove resists Bruce’s ideal world in which all things, people, and words count for just one, where we are all intermediaries. This stove, a relic of the Kennedy era as Bruce is often reminded, is comprised of numbers, systems, and functions, and should be a sure fix. Instead, the gap Bruce has created between word and world renders him not only unable to mend the stove, but also oddly fearful of the thing itself.

This fear is an important crack in the walls of Bruce’s personal funhouse of signification as his frustration gives way to fright: “Suddenly the inside of this stove is the very last place on earth I want to be. I begin to be frightened of the stove” (171). This fear drives Bruce to begin behaving strangely, putting on a performance that only multiplies his agitation: “I rattle a screwdriver against the inside of the stove so my aunt thinks I’m doing something. I get more and more frightened” (171). At this point we experience a lightning-paced exchange between Bruce, his imagining of his ex-girlfriend’s voice, and the therapist in which Bruce’s fascination with the systematization of knowledge through signification finally crumbles altogether in the face of his fear. He explains, “I’m so scared behind this dirty old stove I can’t breathe. I rattle tools” (171). The ultimate merger of knowledge and experience, word and world, subjective and objective takes place as Bruce’s aunt kneels down next to him “to lay her hand on [his] shoulder,” and he concludes “I’m afraid of absolutely everything there is” (172). More



than just a fracture in his theory of the world, Wallace characterizes this fear as an invitation to the world. The final line of the story belongs to the therapist, who responds to Bruce's fearful confession with the simple phrase, "Then welcome" (172). Thus, the shattering of Bruce's attempts to treat all words, things, and even people as mere placeholders in the galaxy of his life simultaneously constitutes his entrance into what it means to be in the world.

Bruce's fear in "Here and There" recalls the opening sentences from "Lost in the Funhouse," the first of which Wallace employs as an epigraph to "Westward": "For whom is the funhouse fun? Perhaps for lovers. For Ambrose it is *a place of fear and confusion*" (*Funhouse* 72 original emphasis). In "Lost in the Funhouse" Ambrose gets turned around and caught up in the funhouse and spends his time telling stories and looking for the cracks in the walls he ran across earlier in his journey. D.L. Eberhardt, Mark Nechtr, and the rest of the gang in "Westward" are all bogged down in Wallace's purposefully unending rewriting of Barth. Finally, in "Here and There," Bruce is mired in the "icy beauty of the perfect signification" (167). What becomes apparent if we read each of these stories in light of Barth's question, "For whom is the funhouse fun?" and in light of the possible answer, "perhaps for lovers," is that none of the main characters featured in these stories are lovers. Instead, like Ambrose, they are all either fearful, or confused, or both. The funhouse can be fun for lovers because lovers have a form of relation that is not dependent on the funhouse. They do not come to the funhouse for the sake of the funhouse itself, but to heighten the effects of their already-existing relationships. Barth's narrator explains Ambrose's realization of this fact as he scrambles

along the floor of the funhouse: “shamefaced he saw that to get through expeditiously was not the point” (92). For lovers, the funhouse represents an opportunity to perform their love in new ways, but for those who focus on the amusement itself, the funhouse represents an endless preoccupation with the funhouse.

At the risk of overstating the case, I think Barth’s seminal story can be read as a cautionary tale against approaching fiction, society, love, or fear as ends in themselves. To do so is to cut the Mobius strip from the “Frame-Tale” and spend the rest of our lives riding its circuitous contours as opposed to acknowledging the reconstructive possibilities it represents. Wallace’s rewriting of “Lost in the Funhouse,” then, is a critical correction to the misreading of Barth as a sage who demonstrates that language is all that is the case, when, in fact, what makes writers such as Barth, Silko, DeLillo, Robinson, Alvarez, and Wallace postmodern, are the ways in which they view language as one component of experience alongside others. If, as Barth suggests and Wallace echoes, the funhouse is fun for lovers, then the final lines of “Westward” are especially significant:

See this thing. See inside what spins without purchase. Close your eye.  
 Absolutely no salesmen will call. Relax. Lie back. I want nothing from you. Lie  
 back. Relax. Quality soil washes right out. Lie back. Open. Face directions. Look.  
 Listen. Use ears I’d be proud to call our own. Listen to the silence behind the  
 engines’ noise. Jesus, Sweets, *listen*. Hear it? It’s a love song. For whom? You are  
 loved. (373)

Wallace, like both DeLillo and Alvarez, makes an appeal to the reader, opening his narrative to us, and explains that we are loved. If we will only recognize our status as lovers, then we will also come to understand that the funhouse can be fun for us, not as an end in itself as it is for the fearful and confused such as Ambrose and Bruce, but as one

component of our experience, one means of adding dimensions to our in-process lives as lovers. Wallace ends “Here and There” with the word “welcome” because realizing the mediating properties of material actors like the stove is only the first step toward a reimagining of the social itself.

When the funhouse of language becomes one component in a larger network comprised of a vast array of human and nonhuman actors, and we expand our readings of postmodern fiction to include the material objects of everyday life, then metafiction, surfiction, the literature of exhaustion, the literature of silence can render “the solid objects of today into the fluid states where their connections with humans may make sense” (*Reassembling* 82). Or as Latour goes on to say, we may come to understand that “objects are never assembled together to form some other realm anyhow [...] even as textual entities, objects overflow their makers, intermediaries become mediators” (85). This revelation has serious ramifications for the study of literature, certainly, but perhaps even more so for what the study of literature can tell us about the social. If all actors, whether human or nonhuman, are best understood as mediators then we can actively redress the various forms of disenfranchisement that manifest themselves in the marginalization of specific communities based on static definitions of the social. That is, if Barth can call our attention to the process of racialization in 1968 in the characters of Hattie and the “Negro servants,” then what can be accomplished in the wake of this revelation? Perhaps we can see relations with new eyes and valorize actors themselves as makers of “everything, including their own frames, their own theories, their own contexts, their own metaphysics, even their own ontologies” (*Reassembling* 147). Thus,

disenfranchisement and marginalization cannot be blamed on some ambiguous scapegoat such as the social structure or the social system since such ethereal ties do not exist. Instead, the responsibility lies with identifiable actors who have constantly made and remade their frames of relation to procure such treatment of groups of actors whose collectiveness is also the ongoing product of construction.

With this insight in mind, the next chapter examines two texts that map a series of successful and unsuccessful remakings of the social in relation to the same kind of object. As three characters in Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) develop an unexpected community as a result of one's search for a ring, two characters from recognizably fixed social categories in Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) demonstrate the construction and dissolution of a network as they become fast friends and then alienated strangers, also in relation to a ring. The ring that plays such a central role in each of these texts forms a literal link between other actors, but this link can be infinitely reforged to allow for the connection of previously unrelated actors. The inclinations of actors in each of these novels demonstrates postmodern fiction's unwillingness to set aside questions of the material to focus on questions of knowledge, and this constant attention to "what is there" as opposed to "how we know" enacts the central idea of Wallace's stories by demonstrating that the way we talk about the social is only one component in the larger process of its construction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In his essay “Secret Integrations: Black Humor and the Critique of Whiteness,” Solomon argues that Barth is invested in demonstrating “the way racialized acts of impersonation can help facilitate the construction of heterosexual identities” (486). This argument about Barth is situated within a larger framework in which Solomon suggests that an examination of black humor during the civil rights era uncovers an anticipation of a more contemporary interest in the idea of self-fashioning.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, for instance, in his “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” suggests that a narrative is made up of the representation of at least two events, and in *Unlikely Stories*, Brian Richardson argues that these events must even be related causally.

<sup>3</sup> In his depiction of Hattie, Barth walks a precarious line between perpetuating what Toni Morrison understands as the “Africanist presence” in American literature in *Playing in the Dark* and what William Solomon reads as a subtle critique of whiteness in his analysis of Barth’s title story, “Lost in the Funhouse.” See Solomon’s “Secret Integrations: Black Humor and the Critique of Whiteness,” pages 484-89.

<sup>4</sup> See Woolley’s “Empty ‘Text,’ Fecund Voice: Self-Reflexivity in Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*” (471); Morris’s “Barth and Lacan: The World of the Moebius Strip” (73); Kyle’s “The Unity of Anatomy: The Structure of Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse*” (40).

<sup>5</sup> I am following the direction of Jonathan Culler in “Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative” from *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, in which he problematizes the conventional narratological distinction between story and discourse by suggesting that there is only discourse. However, I am doing so under the rubric of my own argument that complicates our understanding of discourse in poststructural terms.

CHAPTER V  
REMAKING THE SOCIAL: FROM HOW WE KNOW  
TO WHAT IS THERE

In the mid-1990s, when the critical discourse of postmodernism was at the climax of its popularity, influence, and relevance, the cultural studies journal *Social Text* published a special issue devoted to the “Science Wars.” Editor Andrew Ross explains in his introduction that although the sciences have been represented as monopolizing the market on rationality, a closer look at their ties to governments, big business, and political organizations necessitates inquiry into the “ideology of objectivity and truth [...] defenders of the faith are being rallied around” (6). Ross goes on to compare resistance to this scrutiny on the part of some scientists to that of traditionalists in the humanities who dig in their heels at the thought of “curricular displacements of T. S. Eliot by Toni Morrison” (8). What Ross did not know as he penned this introduction was that one of the articles the editors had chosen to include was intended to undercut their intellectual mission. About a month after the issue was released, one of the contributors, physicist Alan Sokal, published a statement in the journal *Lingua Franca* in which he confessed that his contribution was “nonsense,” “a spoof,” and “egregious” (62-63). Sokal explains that he wanted to see if “a leading North American journal of cultural studies [would] publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors’ ideological preconceptions” (62). He then provides numerous examples of factual inaccuracies, ludicrous claims, and unsupported conclusions in his article,

characterizing the *Social Text* crowd and their ilk as examples of “the intellectual arrogance of Theory—postmodernist *literary* theory, that is—carried to its logical extreme” (63 original emphasis). Two important questions motivate Sokal’s objections to postmodernism as a theoretical approach: “Is it now dogma in cultural studies that there exists no external world? Or that there exists an external world but science obtains no knowledge of it?” (62). Sokal’s questions uncover a disjunction between theories of existence and theories of knowledge that has plagued discussions of postmodernism and led to its characterization as abstract and immaterial, uninterested in the “real” world.

High-theory happenings such as the Sokal affair may seem to have mercifully faded from our critical horizon, but I recall our attention to this singular battle in the so-called “culture wars” because it is representative of a misreading of postmodernism in general and postmodern fiction in particular, which has perpetuated what Rita Felski calls the practice of “suspicious reading” as the only legitimate mode of interpretation. In conversation with other literary scholars such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Stephen Best, and Sharon Marcus, Felski points out that our current critical frame of mind is “one of wariness, vigilance, and distrust” toward the text (216). Building on Paul Ricoeur’s coinage of a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” she argues that suspicious reading “is not just an intellectual exercise in demystification but also a distinctive style and sensibility with its own specific pleasures” (216).<sup>1</sup> The element of Felski’s diagnosis of literary critique most immediately relevant to postmodern fiction is her assertion that there are some texts, for example those often classified as “postmodern metafiction,” that lend themselves especially well to certain modes of suspicious reading in which it seems “we do not need

to be suspicious of the text [...] because it is already doing the work of suspicion for us, because it is engaged in the negative work of subverting the self-evident, challenging the commonplace, relentlessly questioning *idées fixes* and *idées reçues*” (217). Thus, postmodernism is often understood as suspicious or dismissive of “objective realities” because it seems to be questioning the foundations of being and thinking that many see as indisputably obvious. The misunderstanding here can be traced back to the discussion of epistemology and ontology that has dominated theories of postmodern fiction since the late 1980s.<sup>2</sup> Rather than merely retreading an old argument, I want to revisit it with a materialist bent: what happens when we shift our focus from questions of how we know to questions about what is there?

In a recent essay entitled “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?” Latour contends that the willingness to build entire structures of thinking on what are widely accepted as “matters of fact” is to “muddle[] entirely the question, What is there? With the question, How do we know it?” (244). Alan Sokal justifies his “modest (though admittedly uncontrolled) experiment” as necessary to expose “a particular kind of nonsense and sloppy thinking: one that denies the existence of objective realities, or (when challenged) admits their existence but downplays their practical relevance” (63). Sokal confuses questions of “what is there” with questions of “how we know it” as he continues,

At its best, a journal like *Social Text* raises important issues that no scientist should ignore—questions, for example, about how corporate and government funding influence scientific work. Unfortunately, epistemic relativism does little to further the discussion of these matters. (63)



Sokal's indictment of postmodernism on a count of "epistemic relativism" for the supposed crime of denying the existence and practical relevance of "objective realities" is tantamount to accusing a thief of perjury; the charge does not fit the crime. But the *Social Text* editors do not capitalize on this confusion. Instead, they make it clear that the "postmodern, social constructionist, [and] anti-foundational critiques of positivism" are old hat in their field and in no way conflict with the "existence of facts, objective realities, and gravitational forces" (Ross et al. 56). Both Sokal's and the editors' willingness to bracket the existence of "objective realities" so that they can forge ahead arguing in support of their respective theories *about* that reality can be read as symptomatic of a more problematic trend: the desire to focus our critical insight on the pleasures of debunking and demystifying existing social structures instead of on the possibilities of reassembling and remaking the social.

When we bracket "objective realities" we hastily accept that, yes, the world is real and accessible, and turn our attention away from the materiality of what is there in favor of focusing on theories of knowledge. When this displacement becomes convention the capacity to rearrange what is there gets obscured by the new ultimate reality of whose epistemology is most accurate. In other words, when we approach the material world as a given and spend our critical capital on epistemological inquiry, we overlook the ways in which "what is there" constantly shapes "how we know." Despite a discursive tradition that emphasizes the ontological over the epistemological, we have already seen how postmodernism is often represented as the apotheosis of epistemological demystification. Beginning with the assumptions inherent in such an approach, it is no wonder that smart

people like Alan Sokal cry foul when “postmodernist *literary* theory” constantly seems to come up empty. Comparing the demythologizing work of the critic to that of a detective, Felski observes that “the critic shares the detective’s desire to track down and bring to light obscured patterns of causality—in this context, the social forces that underpin and motivate the symptomatic tensions and contradictions of the literary text” (225). But what if postmodern fiction does not set out to bring “social forces” to light? What if postmodern critique does not imagine the social as a substance or force at all, but as a continuous gathering of human and nonhuman actors into various assemblies? What if the social, and our knowledge of the social, is constantly in process and not the mere object of “epistemic relativism” as Sokal would have it? Postmodern fiction does not set out to expose the power structures that form social relations, instead as Latour claims, “power, like society, is the final result of a process and not a reservoir, a stock, or a capital that will automatically provide explanation” (*Reassembling* 64). Or, as Ian Hacking synthesizes Foucault’s writing on power, “when Foucault wrote of power, he did not usually have in mind the power exerted upon us by a discernible agent or authority or system. It is rather we who participate in anonymous, unowned arrangements that he called power” (3). This chapter, then, is devoted to analyses of texts that own up to such arrangements and that also highlight the dangers of failing to do so.

Such analyses are made possible by postmodern fiction’s unwillingness to bracket “objective reality” through its commitment to the material domain of everyday life. When we bracket the material world in favor of endless epistemological inquiry, we get bogged down by the very social categories that postmodern fiction refashions into social

networks that are revealed as constantly in-process. When we approach any text or task through the lens of race, class, nation, gender, we may come out on the other side with a different configuration of these categories, but we will still inevitably end up with the same categories. On the other hand, when we turn our attention to the myriad human and nonhuman actors, and especially the material objects of postmodern fiction, what becomes clear is that postmodernism's gaze is fixed on the "external world" with an eye toward understanding how the networks that constitute our physical existence also shape our knowledge of the world itself. Just as importantly, this fiction demonstrates the plasticity of these material networks. Thus, rather than starting with the familiar social categories that have typically dominated discussions of Morrison's *Jazz* (1992) and Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003), I begin with the most important material objects that populate the worlds of these texts and work up to the larger communities through which Morrison's characters reconstruct race as racialization and Lethem's characters fail reimagine class in the face of gentrification.

Before I can move into the foregrounding and analysis of Morrison's and Lethem's particular texts and objects, the influence of the familiar social categories I so desperately want to avoid starting with necessitates at least a very brief treatment. In his seminal work on race and fiction, *Being and Race*—which, it should be noted, takes as its epigraph this line from French dramatist and essayist Prosper Mérimée: "In fiction there must be a theoretical basis to the most minute details. Even a single glove must have its theory"—Charles Johnson says of race and much of the literary tradition of the United States that "whites in this history act; blacks can only react" (7). Johnson traces the Afro-

American literary lineage from the poetry of Phillis Wheatley and the personal narrative of Gustavus Vassa, through William Wells Brown's first novel, to the stories of Charles Chesnutt, the creative explosion of the Harlem Renaissance, and the full force and aftershocks of the Black Arts Movement. He summarizes by pointing out that black writers' concern with meaning and life in literature

has led to the creation of various racial ideologies for the African experience. [...] There is an almost point-by-point correspondence among esthetics, social theory, and the conception of humanity here; but let us come down to cases: the problem with all this is that it is ideology. While ideology may create a fascinating vision of the universe, and also fascinating literary movements, it closes off the free investigation of phenomena. (26)

With his finger on the pulse of the very problem I examine in this study, Johnson has called our attention to the circuitous difficulty of starting with race as a frame for understanding the social. However, by treating both a black and a white writer's representations of race in this chapter I do not pretend to ignore the vast and serious implications of this marker in American literary history. Neither do I minimize race itself as a marker by asserting that it is "merely" constructed. Rather, recalling the argument I make in the first chapter regarding the significance of not theorizing "constructed" as synonymous with artificial, this chapter demonstrates that a remaking of the social is possible, even taking into account the weight of a marker such as race. The social is malleable not because these markers are constructed and thus somehow fake or unreal, but because every actor that constitutes these categories is important. When every actor matters, the rearrangement of even the most everyday objects can lead to a remaking of

the larger social network, although the resulting configurations may not always prove liberatory or ideal.

Both Morrison's *Jazz* and Lethem's *Fortress* feature rings among their most prominent material actors with the capacity to remake social relations among human actors. Much like the link of chain given to Ralph Ellison's unnamed protagonist in *Invisible Man* (1952), these rings serve as literal links between various characters in Morrison's and Lethem's novels.<sup>3</sup> The basic difference between the characterizations of the material agency of the rings is that Morrison's opal ring uncovers and enacts the possibilities of a material construction of the social, while Lethem's silver ring offers the promise of remaking but allows that promise to go unfulfilled. Although I look briefly at other material objects in each text, I focus predominantly on the rings because of the thematic connections they uncover between the two novels. More specifically, the rings in each text serve as links between characters that might not otherwise have been joined. Both Morrison and Lethem are invested in rewriting the social parameters drawn by race and class when we use these familiar social categories as foundational building blocks in our construction of the social. However, where Morrison's characters are able to assemble a new version of the social that adapts and redefines understandings of race and class across time, Lethem's characters succumb to the boundaries of these familiar social categories even in the face of the material potential of social reconstruction. A notable number of other works of postmodern fiction also chart the trajectories of unique material actors to generate social collectives that accomplish similar revelations as those found in Morrison and Lethem. Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World* (1993) and Jonathan

Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) are organized around searches for a diamond and a key, respectively, and these quests ultimately lead characters to construct social networks across lines of race, nation, and ethnicity. Foer's first novel, *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), even features a ring as a vital link in connecting the various historical narratives present in the novel. Tim O'Brien's classic *The Things They Carried* (1990) not only provides copious lists of objects that are used to cobble communities together on the fly, but also tracks a small pebble carried by one soldier throughout his tenure in Vietnam. There is perhaps no other writer of the postwar and post-Cold War era as attuned to the materiality of our everyday existence as Morrison. *Jazz*, the middle book in a trilogy bookended by *Beloved* (1987) and *Paradise* (1997), features a ring stolen by a mother and given as a gift to a daughter that reveals our propensity for bracketing the world while simultaneously refusing to allow us to do so.

### **The Possibilities of What Is There**

The late Billy Taylor, an iconic musician, educator, and activist, describes jazz music as "spontaneous composition," implying the constant and immediate assembly and reassembly of recognizable components into ever-new configurations. In a lecture given at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Taylor elaborates, arguing that "most people have a wrong idea of what improvisation is. Improvisation is spontaneous composition, and in order to compose spontaneously you have to have some sense of form. You have to have a sense of content. You have to know the language that you're using" ("What is Jazz Music?"). If we take Miles Davis's rendition of the stunning "Autumn Leaves" as a case study, then what we find in the typical jazz composition is

the performance of a familiar melody by Davis on the trumpet, followed by a series of improvisations of this melody played on the piano and saxophone until Davis cuts back in, returning to the original melody. Thus, the heart of any jazz number is the spontaneous reassembly of the various components of the central melody into new configurations. This understanding of jazz music provides an illuminating rationale for the title Morrison chooses for *Jazz*, which Marcel Cornis-Pope has described as “interested in re-creating rather than merely representing black experience” (235). The unique structure of jazz music resonates with the materialist approach to postwar fiction because of its investment in the making and remaking of the familiar. Jazz improvisation spontaneously composes—meaning literally that it gathers in the moment—notes that have typically been connected in familiar configurations into arrangements ranging from the eerily similar to the utterly unrecognizable. The mathematically endless possibilities of this form highlight the value of its in-processness, and uncover its flexibility to account for unexpected changes. Although Morrison does not mention jazz anywhere inside the covers of *Jazz*, the novel’s interest in its own material construction and in the material actors that populate its pages suggests a commitment to spontaneous composition that can be read as representative of the material remaking of the social we have seen in a variety of texts that have often been described as postmodern.

In an interview given the year after she published *Jazz*, Morrison says of the novel that she “put the whole plot on the first page. In fact, in the first edition the plot was on the cover, so that a person in a bookstore could read the cover and know right away what the book was about” (“Toni Morrison” 109). In the span of the first five sentences

Morrison's enigmatic narrator does, indeed, give away the book's central conflict as well as its resolution:

Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going. When the woman, her name is Violet, went to the funeral to see the girl and to cut her dead face they threw her to the floor and out of the church.  
(3)

The early revelation of the narrative's driving events and entities frees Morrison to construct a jazz-inspired meditation on the historical complexities that have set this plot in motion. The novel is resolutely historical and structurally "jazz-like," as Morrison herself has said ("Toni Morrison" 110), because like any good jazz number it supplies us with the basic melody up front and then proceeds to improvise on that melody, offering a variety of renditions and perspectives from different instruments and voices before finally returning to the original melody which we then hear with new ears. *Jazz* begins with the tragic story of Joe Trace, his wife Violet Trace, and Dorcas Manfred, moves on through a series of historical retellings of key moments in these characters' lives, and ends after Dorcas's death with the new trio of Joe Trace, Violet Trace, and Dorcas's friend Felice. However, what is significant about the return to what sounds like the original melody at the end of the novel in which Felice has simply replaced Dorcas in the triangular relationship with Joe and Violet is that the intervening improvisations have had a profound effect on this familiar story; they have, in fact, changed the tune, revealing the transformative power of historical reconstruction. But what has been overlooked in readings of this complex narrative is the essential role of material objects in the success



of its composition, and of one object in particular: an opal ring given to Dorcas's friend Felice by her mother.

Nearly every reading of *Jazz* focuses to some extent on the novel's mysterious narrator. From the opening to the closing sentences of the book, this narrator speaks directly to us, calling attention to her/him/itself while simultaneously resisting identification. The first sentence reads: "Sth, I know that woman" (3). The "Sth" should be familiar to anyone who has ever attempted to capture someone's attention in a moment of secrecy, and in this moment it seems the narrator is about to share a secret with us about "that woman" she/he/it knows. The oft-cited final sentences read: "You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now" (229). Thus, the novel is framed by a voice addressing the reader, but the body of the text provides little unambiguous evidence as to the nature of this voice. Shirley Ann Stave has reasoned that, perhaps like many other characters in the book who have populated the waves of the Great Migration, "the narrator herself appears to be yet another rural immigrant seduced by the City" (65). Like Stave, Cornis-Pope also suspects a "female voice" (264). Eusebio Rodrigues argues that the narrator is the "thunder goddess" (261). Paula Eckard has offered the compelling argument that the narrator is jazz itself or the embodiment of this eclectic form (13-14). Caroline Rody's insightful reading of *Jazz* in the larger context of the trilogy it comprises with *Beloved* and *Paradise* leads her to assert that "the narrative voice of *Jazz* seems to inherit the ghostlike presence, the here-but-not-here, human-but-not-human quality of [*Beloved*'s] ghost" (624). Morrison herself, in an interview with *Belle Lettres*, has said "the voice is the voice of a talking

book,” in other words, the book itself is its own narrator (“Toni Morrison” 42). I will return to the implications of the book itself as narrator following my analysis of the ring as central in the remaking of the social world of the novel, but suffice it to say for now that Morrison’s own perception of the novel, the material thing as narrator, suggests that its complex and jazz-like structure can only be gathered into a coherent narrative, or song, by the material remaking of its central melody. By this I simply mean that the improvisations on the story Morrison provides up front can only successfully remake the love triangle because of the presence of the ring.

The narrative structure itself is, at times, difficult to follow, much like any jazz improvisation of a familiar tune. Jürgen Grandt observes that most readings of the novel have focused on its “narrative structure and language” (305). Grandt offers his own analysis of the devastating love triangle between Joe, Violet, and Dorcas as the “the melody on which the disembodied first-person narrative voice improvises a story, or several stories, constantly adding, revising, inventing, shifting back and forth among various characters, going back in time as far as antebellum Virginia” (304). Connecting the enigmatic narrative voice to the organization of the text itself, Andrew Scheiber explains that the “first-person narrator, whose melismatic flourishes make time stop and double back on itself as giddily as a Louis Armstrong solo, gives literary form to the music of the novel’s title” (471-72). Caroline Brown characterizes the text as, “Nonchronological, melodic, emotionally slippery, repetitious, sometimes irrational, and filled with contradictions,” and continues, arguing that “what results is that the written text, though excluded from the arena of the musical due to its very silence, mimics the

most fundamental element of jazz: its abstraction” (632). Extending this conversation, what I want to point out is that in any jazz composition it is the familiarity of the central melody that renders the improvisations abstract. In other words, the assemblages that take place in the midst of what Billy Taylor calls jazz music’s “spontaneous composition,” only strike us as new, unfamiliar, or difficult to follow because they are being made on the spot, and remade in contrast to the original melody. Nancy Peterson is helpful here as she reveals that the narrative revisions of Golden Gray’s story, one of the novel’s many narrative threads, are not examples of the narrator’s willingness “to overlook Golden Gray’s faults,” but that the “commitment to looking again brings more details into the picture, which pose[s] new contradictions, and thus her former narrative can no longer offer neat evaluations” (212). Peterson’s insight is so poignant here because it enables us to see that the novel’s desire to constantly make and remake historical moments is intended to complicate our understanding of the present. However, if we continue to rely on human actors alone, on the social categories the novel seems at first to be problematizing, then we lose sight of the material means by which Morrison envisions the remaking of our social world.

Morrison chooses an opal ring as the object around which her band of narratives rallies to move from its complicated weave of improvisations back into the central story of the novel. After Dorcas’s funeral, her friend Felice goes to the Traces’ home in search of an opal ring she had loaned the dead woman. Felice strikes up a friendship with Joe and Violet, and they invite her back for dinner on another occasion. As the novel winds down Joe, Violet, and Felice are cultivating a friendship that does not seem destined to

end in the way that we might suspect given Joe's track record with Dorcas. In fact, as Peterson has pointed out, "Violet, Joe, and Felice do not reenact the lover's triangle that previously led to tragedy. They instead make possible a future for themselves" (214). Peterson even remarks on the ring, noting that "Felice initially comes to the Traces' apartment to get some help in recovering the opal ring from her mother that she had lent to Dorcas and to tell Joe not to be so broken up about Dorcas" (214). What I want to emphasize here is the centrality of the ring as an actor in the remaking of the story's central melody. Lest we overlook the significance of the return to the triangular relationship that was laid out at the novel's beginning, Morrison insists in her "Art of Fiction" interview with the *Paris Review* that "the jazz-like structure wasn't a secondary thing for me—it was the *raison d'être* of the book" ("Toni Morrison" 110). Without Felice's need to search for the ring, she does not ascend the steps of Joe's and Violet's building, she does not inquire after her ring, she is not invited inside, or questioned, or engaged in conversation, or asked to return. The characters do not "make possible a future for themselves," as Peterson has so eloquently stated, without Felice's search for this singular object. Thus, we must trace the circulation of this object to understand Morrison's "jazz-like" structure, and further, to move away for a while from questions of "how do we know" to focus on questions of "what is there." But in order to conceptualize the weight of the work the ring accomplishes we must attend, briefly, to the complex variety of narrative improvisations that separate the initial and final melodies.

Divided into ten sections or chapters dedicated to revising history, *Jazz* opens in 1920s Harlem with Joe and Violet Trace's marriage on the rocks. Morrison's novel

shares its historical preoccupation with a number of other important postwar novels such as E.L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* (1975), Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), and Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994). What sets *Jazz* apart is that much has been made of the odd fact that for a historical novel, it does not have much to say about the Jazz Age or Harlem Renaissance at all (Grandt 304; Peterson 201). Andrew Schreiber points to Alice Manfred's suspicion of the "lowdown music" she hears in the city (478), and there are other points of contact such as the setting of Joe's and Violet's apartment on Lenox Avenue, a prominent street in literary representations of Harlem that shows up in explicitly musical stories such as James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues." Ultimately, however, I must agree with Peterson that the novel "offers for full view almost none of the artistic, cultural, or political milestones that African Americans achieved in those years" (201). Perhaps that is because the jazz of the novel's title is not only the jazz age of the 1920s in the United States, but also, as numerous critics have explained, the aesthetic approach of the novel itself. While the present action of the first three and last three sections is set primarily in 1926, the heart of the novel (sections 4-7) ranges as far back as the antebellum South as Morrison's unique narrator traces the complicated branches of the family trees that ultimately produce Joe and Violet Trace.

Perhaps the most representative example of the narrative improvisation of *Jazz*'s structure can be found in the narrative thread devoted to the young, racially-mixed man Violet's slave, then ex-slave grandmother, True Belle has helped raise. Midway through the novel the young man, Golden Gray, discovers that his father is a black man and goes in search of Henry Lestory, known locally in Virginia as Hunter's Hunter. Golden's

arrival at Lestory's home is narrated at least three times from three different perspectives. The first is from the point of view of Golden himself as he looks around the property and sees a rider on a horse who turns out to be a young man who works for Lestory: "Might you be related to Lestory? Henry LesTroy or whatever his name is? The rider doesn't blink. 'No, sir. Vienna. Be back direcklin'" (149). A few pages later the same scene is narrated from the young man's point of view: "He would have said, 'Morning,' although it wasn't, but he thought the man lurching down the steps was white and not to be spoken to without leave" (155). Finally, we see through Lestory's eyes upon his return home: "When Henry Lestory [...] got back and saw the buggy and the beautiful horse tied near his stall, he was instantly alarmed" (168). Golden Gray's narrative thread is so important to the larger fabric of the novel because it connects Joe's and Violet's threads in ways that only the reader can see as we know that Golden was raised, in part, by Violet's grandmother, and that he picks up a wild woman who smashes her head against a tree branch on his way to Lestory's house. This wild woman, it would appear, is Joe Trace's mother. Joe and Violet are connected even in ways that they do not understand, and so as the score turns away from its historical improvisations and back toward the central melody in the 1920s it can be no accident that Morrison uses an everyday object like the ring to gather up the various threads that have been purposefully unraveled over the course of the novel's four middle sections.

The ring enters the narrative abruptly and without any contextual explanation when the narration is handed over for a time to Felice. Felice explains that she grew up in her grandmother's house as both of her parents worked in the neighboring town of

Tuxedo and spent most of their time there and on trains between her grandmother's home and their boss's home: "When they'd come home, they'd kiss me and give me things, like my opal ring" (198). This moment marks the first mention of the ring in the entire novel, and then a few pages later when recounting the local gossip about Violet Trace, Felice says of the talkers, "They're wrong about her. I went to look for my ring and there is nothing crazy about her at all" (202). Felice's story of the ring unfolds awkwardly, with her first mentioning the thing out of nowhere, and then implying that the ring has been lost, and only then diving backwards into the object's complicated history. Immediately following her declaration of Violet's sanity, Felice exclaims, "I know my mother stole that ring," and proceeds to recount how the ring came into her possession as a gift from her mother following an embarrassing incident at Tiffany's. Felice and her mother visit the store to pick up a package for Felice's mother's boss, and as they wait they look at a velvet tray filled with rings, trying some of them on. After a moment a man comes over and shakes his head. Felice's mother explains, "I'm waiting for a package for Mrs. Nicolson," and the man smiles and responds, "of course. It's just policy. We have to be careful" (202-203). Although Felice cannot say definitively that the ring is stolen, when her mother presents her with an identical piece the next morning saying her boss lady had given it to her, Felice reaffirms her suspicions, "Maybe they made lots of them, but I know my mother took it from the velvet tray" (203). Who could blame Felice's mother? She is an honest, hard-working woman doing her best for her children, someone who gives "quarters she finds on the seat to conductors on the trolley," someone "so honest she makes people laugh" (215). The clerk's suspicion seems so damaging and deadly

because it is reproduced in Felice, who sees her mother's act as a kind of valor imposed upon her by the degradation of racial prejudice.

The ring might easily be read as a symbol that enacts a critique of race in the Tiffany's jewelry department. However, when we bracket the material and continue to treat the social as a familiar category we end up with the same old "hermeneutics of suspicion" that Felski and others associate with a very particular literary and critical mode, a mode that I claim much postmodern fiction moves beyond. In other words, if we pay less attention to the ring itself than we do to the social categories we take for granted in this exchange, such as race and class, then of course we end up with a critique of race because we treat both whiteness and blackness as recognizable markers whose definitions are clear and undisputed. But when we refuse to bracket "what is there" in favor of spinning our wheels endlessly over "how we know it," Morrison's ring becomes an actor among actors in the larger remaking of a social network that does not ignore the existence of differences that have typically been defined as racial, but that also does not draw its parameters solely from those differences. When we focus on the ring itself rather than on the abstract systems of relation it might critique, we can follow the assembly of a community that both resembles and remakes the triangular relationship between Joe, Violet, and Dorcas in a new configuration that does not have to end in death. This remaking of the social is immediately obvious once we value the ring equally with the human actors in terms of the novel's narrative progression. What is less obvious, perhaps, is the new way of seeing herself in the context of her larger social world that the ring creates for Felice.



There is no question that Morrison places herself and her work squarely in the lineage of African American literature and history: “a very large part of my own literary heritage is the autobiography. In this country the print origins of black literature (as distinguished from the oral origins) were slave narratives” (“The Site of Memory” 103). Notably, however, one significant aspect of Morrison’s fiction is its investment in the living, breathing, fluidity of that tradition, its adaptability, strength, endurance, and utter resistance to stasis. Felice’s search for the ring highlights this element of Morrison’s work as the object reveals to Felice that the various actors, both human and nonhuman, that constitute her social world can be reconfigured in such a way so as to change the dynamic of her understanding of race by no longer imagining blackness and whiteness as oppositional forces. This revelation comes to Felice in the contrast between how she imagines her mother and Violet would each interact with the opal ring. During her initial visit to the Traces’ apartment to look for the ring, Violet invites Felice to return some night to eat a catfish dinner with them, and Felice agrees although she does not truly plan to come back the next Friday. The following Thursday she decides to go after recalling the way Violet had talked about the “me” inside herself during her previous visit: “The way she said it. Not like the ‘me’ was some tough somebody she had put together for a show. But like, like somebody she favored and could count on. A secret somebody you didn’t have to feel sorry for or have to fight for” (210). Felice then contrasts this “somebody” with the honest “somebody” who would return lost quarters on the trolley and yet who needed to “steal a ring to get back at whitepeople and then lie and say it was a present from them” (210). The contrast Morrison establishes here between two African

American women in relation to the same material object speaks to the complex heterogeneity that often gets papered over when we fail to account for how society is held together and focus instead on using society to explain some other phenomenon. Whether or not Violet would ever steal a ring is secondary to the fact that Felice cannot imagine her doing it to get back at white people, much less turning around and saying that it was a gift from white people. Violet's identity, her "me," comes from within herself, whereas Felice's mother seems to define herself in juxtaposition to the white people whose lives she haunts.

Felice's imagining of the ring as the central object that shows up the contrast between her mother and Violet Trace calls our attention away from oversimplified racial narratives in which the ring must be a symbol of Felice's mother's actions. Felice says that her mother dared "to do something like that to get back at the whiteman who thought she was stealing even when she wasn't" (215). If we allow the text to do the work of suspicion for us, as Felski would say of deconstructive modes of reading, then what we end up with is a black woman who fulfills the inevitable stereotype of thief that the white man imposes upon her through his own suspicion when she would never in her life have stolen that ring for any other reason. However, if we follow the ring itself then we come to realize that Felice's mother's actions are merely one response. Thus, the shift that the material object makes possible by contrasting the mother's vindictive theft with Violet's imagined response complicates the impulse to characterize "black people" as a unified category that can be used to make sense of other phenomenon. For this reason Morrison also repeatedly uses the category "whitepeople" throughout the novel to throw into relief

the cultural tendency in the United States to speak of “black people” as a hegemonic group and “white people” as a heterogeneous group. The hypocrisy of these categories is palpable in this novel, but the ring blazes a trail through all such taxonomies, connecting the “whiteman” clerk in Tiffany’s with Felice and her mother, who invokes her own white boss as the giver of this gift. The thing is then loaned to Dorcas to impress her new love interest Acton, and is buried with Dorcas following her murder at the hands of Joe Trace. The missing ring finally pulls Felice into the gravitational field of the Traces, and its absence at the novel’s end is transformed into a presence by the burgeoning network its circulation has established between Joe, Violet, and Felice.

Morrison’s movement away from recognizable narratives of the social and away from capital “H” history in favor of “jazz-like” narratives of the local and in-progress is indicative of her resistance to the all-encompassing versions of history that result in the inevitable. In other words, if we simply accept the existence of black and white as identifiable, knowable, and static categories, then of course the ring is there to critique our understanding of racial identity in 1920s America. However, if we refuse to bracket “what is there,” in this case the ring, and look at the material world that Morrison crafts in the novel, then what becomes apparent is that Morrison avoids, as Peterson has argued, “creating a master narrative in which there is no space to articulate any local narratives that run counter to it” (209). Peterson goes on to claim that the problem with such “master narratives” is that the outcome is already decided “and so individual players are unimportant except as they contribute to this final already-determined conclusion” (209). This argument connects back to the emphasis on postmodern fiction’s resistance to

systematicity and embrace of the network model in the previous chapter in conversation with Latour's point that all actors in a closed system count for just one. Thus, Peterson's reading of Morrison's narrative and historical structure provides a theoretical framework that my emphasis on the material presence of the ring serves to flesh out and render even more practicable when considered in the context of the ring's importance.

While the ring is the object that gathers Joe, Violet, and Felice into a new social configuration, any discussion of the material in relation to *Jazz* must include at least a caveat for the book itself. After all, it is the book that gathers all of the disparate narrative threads together into a unified, yet polyphonic composition. Earlier I referenced Morrison's characterization of the book itself as the narrator of *Jazz*. What are we to make of the physical text as a narrator? What are the implications of a thing that speaks to us? We must first acknowledge that Morrison's self-proclaimed talking book marks a single waypoint in a much longer tradition treated at length by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his seminal study *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*, which provides helpful context for reading *Jazz* in the larger trajectory of African American literature.<sup>4</sup> We might also consider the psychoanalytic theory of object relations that originates with Sigmund Freud, evolves through the work of Melanie Klein, and has even been offered explicitly as a lens for reading *Jazz*.<sup>5</sup> However, the weakness of this approach is its dedication to the immaterial space between writer and reader. A materialist reading, on the other hand, emphasizes the significance of the book as an actor in erasing the gap, or at least minimizing the distance, between writer, reader, and text as a useful means of shifting our theory of reading away from a binary between sociality

and materiality. Tracking a shift from the social/material binary treats the social and material both as parts and products of one another. As Latour observes, “when any state of affairs is split into one material component to which is added as an appendix a social one, one thing is sure: this is an artificial division imposed by the disciplinary disputes, not by any empirical requirement” (83). By making the book itself the narrator of its own story, Morrison creates a material object that is also a social object. Rather than deepening the divide between material and social, this complex narrative voice is a thing we can hold in our hands, look at, listen to, read aloud. Erasing the distinction between the social and the material demonstrates that the novel and its various relational networks are living, breathing organisms that are constantly being made and can thus be remade to account for changes in their material environments.

Much like the ring contained within the novel, the novel itself gathers familiar actors, both human and nonhuman, into new assemblies and thus operates much like Heidegger’s famous jug referenced in earlier chapters. Heidegger distinguishes between the jug as “object” and the jug as “thing” by pointing out that the jug is an object when it is only seen as the product of making, and can be considered a thing when it is self-supporting. Latour rereads Heidegger’s classic distinction between “thing” and “object” by arguing that the philosopher’s

handmade jug can be a thing, while the industrially made can of Coke remains an object. While the latter is abandoned to the empty mastery of science and technology, only the former, cradled in the respectful idiom of art, craftsmanship, and poetry, could deploy and gather its rich set of connections. (“Why Has Critique” 233)

Following Latour, what if we were to do away with this differentiation? What if we were to view Morrison's novel, not as a produced object or a self-sufficient thing? Instead, what if the book is a thing just like the ring is a thing? In other words, what if we were to stop constantly separating our understanding of the world into the two oversimplified categories of "the world" and "our perception of the world"? *Jazz* overtly invites the erasure of this binary, and in some ways makes this question possible in its recursivity and historical rewriting. The book itself, like the ring, is also a thing that re-creates and regathers the narrative threads of history into a unique fabric of social connectivity as Joe, Violet, and Felice dance together in the 'Traces' apartment, utterly un beholden to the Joe-Violet-Dorcas triangle that resulted in death and tragedy. Thus, when the novel ends by speaking to us about Joe, Violet, and Felice we are also being gathered into the narrative remaking of a history that includes the fictional world of the novel and the world in which we sit reading it

But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and that being chosen to wait is the reason I can. If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now. (229)

The ring has remade the social world in which Joe, Violet, and Felice live and operate, but it has also extended that network beyond the pages of the book by pulling the reader into the very same orbit. Just as the narrator "know[s] that woman" we are also known.

If *Jazz* is literally a jazz composition, then what we know about that musical form suggests the novel is fundamentally invested in recollecting a variety of familiar sounds, events, and entities into ever-unique combinations. This aesthetic makes possible both the

unthinkable and the mundane, but its seemingly endless configurations are always the product of available and recognizable materials. Now I want to stretch the limits of interpretation by tracing the object Morrison employs toward the end of her narrative into another text. Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* is certainly not overtly influenced by Morrison's *Jazz* in any discernible way, and yet the points of contact between the two books are overwhelming. Music is also a significant presence in *Fortress* as Lethem's protagonist is a young white boy named Dylan who befriends a young black boy named Mingus and grows up to become a freelance music writer for *Rolling Stone*. The novel also features a ring that has stumped reviewers and critics alike in their treatments of the text. The challenge this ring poses to our bifurcations of what is reality and what is fantasy sheds new light on Morrison's historical rememory and social remaking by demonstrating just how damaging the failure to remake the social can be.

### **The Unfulfilled Promise of How We Know**

*The Fortress of Solitude*, Lethem's most ambitious, messy, and sprawling novel, is divided into two halves by a short middle section of liner notes written by the novel's protagonist, Dylan Ebdus, to commemorate a box set of CDs capturing the life's work of his best friend's father. The first half of the novel, "Underberg," is set in the 1970s and narrated in a third person omniscient voice that follows Dylan in his evolving friendship with fellow stickball-playing, graffiti-tagging, comic book-loving, Dean Street hero Mingus Rude. Dylan and Mingus come from two very different families. Dylan's parents, especially his mother, are social progressives who see themselves as helping to integrate a minority community by moving in to the Gowanus neighborhood of Brooklyn, and

especially Dean Street, which is dominated by African American and Puerto Rican residents. However, Isabel Vendle, the aristocratic matriarch of the neighborhood, envisions the Ebduses as the first white building block in a gentrification project that will convert Gowanus into the swank “Boerum Hill” of her dreams. Mingus’s parents have recently divorced, and he has come to Gowanus with his father, Barrett Rude Jr., a former R & B soul singer and icon with the group The Subtle Distinctions. After a stint in prison, Barrett Rude Sr. also joins the household. Dylan’s and Mingus’s friendship is worked out in the street games they play with other kids on the block, and solidified on the walls, billboards, and train cars of Brooklyn as they share the graffiti tag “Dose.” Mingus constantly vouches for Dylan and lends him the ultimate credibility by allowing him the use of the tag when Dylan fails to come up with an alter ego of his own

It’s a happy solution for both. The black kid gets to see his tag spread farther [...] What’s in it for the white kid? Well, he’s been allowed to merge his identity in this way with the black kid’s, to lose his funkymusicwhiteboy geekdom in the illusion that he and his friend Mingus Rude are both Dose, no more and no less. (136)

Lethem’s experiment with race, gentrification, class, and history reaches its apotheosis in the small silver ring given to Dylan by a black derelict.

The ring empowers Dylan with the magic of flight, which he then shares with Mingus through the object of the ring, paying his friend back for “Dose” with the superhero figure “Aeroman.” In a novel characterized by its “realist commitments” (Lethem “Art of Fiction” 61), the presence of the ring disrupts the entire world of the story for characters and readers alike. In *The Fortress of Solitude*, however, even the



fantastic powers inherent in the ring, and in the superhero the boys become, cannot prevent the erosion of their relationship in the face of the stormy realities of race, class, education, and drugs. By the end of “Underberg” Dylan’s mother has left, his father continues to work like a monk in the attic, and Dylan has finished his secondary school career at a selective high school without the objections of his mother who was always so proud to have her son be one of “only three white children in the whole [public] school” (23). On his way to Camden, “the most expensive college in America” (270), Dylan stops by Mingus’s house back in the old neighborhood and buys back a bunch of comics from his friend who needs the money to support a drug habit. This moment in the novel marks a clear contrast in the trajectories of the two characters as Dylan also buys the ring back from Mingus, who ends up shouting Dylan out of the house as he intervenes in what becomes a violent exchange between his father and grandfather. Following the liner notes memorializing Barrett Rude Jr.’s time as lead vocalist for The Subtle Distinctions, the novel undergoes a drastic change in voice as the second half, “Prisonaires,” is narrated in first-person by Dylan, and catches up with Dylan in his present life as a freelance music journalist with a black girlfriend to mark the maintenance of his street credibility that made him such a success at the upper-crust Camden College before he dropped out. The novel culminates in Dylan’s unsuccessful attempt to use the ring to break Mingus out of prison, where he has been serving “good time” without being “written up in years” (488). In the end, Dylan lives and moves in the free world, while Mingus remains incarcerated. The ring is passed off to another imprisoned childhood friend/enemy, Robert Woolfolk,

who kills himself trying to make an escape, and the closing juxtaposition between Dylan and Mingus seems to signal the inevitability of the social forces of race and class.

In response to a similar question about the organization of the novel in two different interviews, Lethem says that “at the start I meant to write a book of two halves” (“Art of Fiction” 61), and that

in the first half of the book, though the characters are suffering, there’s a golden glow that makes everything okay. Whereas the feeling in adulthood, in the second section, is that nothing is okay. In the last part of the book, everyone seems so estranged and inconsolable that you want to make them go back to the way they were. But rescue is impossible. (*Conversations* 95-96)

The novel as a whole seems poised to take on the social themes of racial and class inequities. Yet if we turn from race and class as substantive, definable categories that serve as our foundation of the world of the novel, and turn instead to the material domain of the perfect slate for sidewalk games, the malleable rubber of the spaldeen ball, the silver contours of the ring given to Dylan, then a new vista opens briefly. The problem that most immediately seems to stand in the way of such a materialist reading is Lethem’s convoluted representation of the ring. Is the ring actually magical? Do the boys truly fly, become invisible, and swim like fish under water? What we decide to do with the ring has a significant impact on how we read the text as a whole, but also on how we understand the networks of relation that are attempted but ultimately doomed to failure in the world of the novel.

The reviews of Lethem’s novel are reminiscent of the various interpretations of Morrison’s enigmatic narrator and representative of the critical confusion surrounding

what to do with the ring in relation to the rest of the book. In the pages of *Time*, Lev Grossman almost dismissively mentions the “magic ring that intermittently” gives the boys superpowers as a “risky element of magical realism” (77). Like Grossman, Jason Picone reads the ring as a mere literary convention that might seem at first to violate the “book’s ground rules,” but ultimately does not because of *Fortress*’s underlying commitment to the fantastic (27). Whereas Grossman and Picone rely on the genre of magical realism to explain the phenomenon of the ring, A. O. Scott, writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, reads the ring as a metaphor symbolic of the book’s nearly allegorical message: “the ring may, then, seem like a distraction or a crutch, a bit of game playing to soothe the novelist’s well-established postmodernist allergy to realism [...] I prefer to think of it as a sign of utopian possibility” (7). Peter Bradshaw’s entertaining reading in Britain’s *New Statesman* explicitly moves away from both the language of magical realism and from Scott’s metaphorical reading as he recalls his initial discovery of the ring’s magic powers: “I absorbed this only after much rereading and goggling and eye-knuckling, so casually does Lethem introduce the revelation, in a storyline that often seems ancillary to the rest of the novel [...] I found myself gasping: ‘Is it a metaphor? Is it delusion? No, it’s really happening!’” (52). But it is Michiko Kakutani’s “White Kid, In a Black World” in the *New York Times* that goes the furthest in separating the narrative of the ring from the rest of the novel by branding it as “Coover-esque allegor[y] and high jinks” and as “a vestige of the postmodernist techniques” Lethem employs in earlier works (“Books of the Times”). She characterizes the passages devoted to the ring as

“awkward interludes” and “cutesy pyrotechnics” (“Books of the Times”). Much as it does for the characters in the novel, the ring seems to pose a problem for readers.

Reviewers’ disparate reactions to the ring are echoed in the few critical treatments of the novel that have sprung up in the relatively short time since its publication in 2003. Contextualizing *Fortress* in the larger lineage of the comic-book novel, Marc Singer argues that

the sudden popularity and cultural legitimacy of the comic book has granted novelists more latitude to reference superheroes, but it has not altered this reductively metaphoric reading, resulting in an unfortunate irony: Many of these novels are far less sophisticated in their modes of signification and their narrative structure than the comics they purport to represent. (276)

Without a single reference to the ring that transforms Dylan and Mingus into Aeroman, Singer dwells in the world of metaphor, arguing, “Lethem renders the impossible feat of becoming the flying superhero Aeroman and the mundane occurrence of pubescent sexual awakening as equally mysterious, equally prone to create private new selves that supplant old ones” (276). Matt Godbey’s reading of gentrification as a symptom of the novel’s treatment of race, class, and authenticity places *Fortress* squarely in a “canon of contemporary works that include literature, movies, newspapers, magazines, and other popular cultural mediums” that he identifies as “the fiction of gentrification” (132). Focusing on Dylan’s romanticization of black culture and experience as his means of distancing himself from the gentrification of his childhood neighborhood, Godbey’s illuminating analysis resonates with Kakutani’s review in that it would prefer to ignore the ring altogether. Although he charts Dylan’s and Mingus’s diverging trajectories over

the course of the novel to explain how Dylan is granted “a sense of agency denied Mingus and other Gowanus residents,” Godbey, like Singer, never mentions the ring (146). Each of these critics offers insightful readings of the novel that focus on the Dylan/Mingus relationship to illuminate how the realities of adulthood dismantle childhood superhero metaphors (Singer 277), and on how white urbanites envision the consequences of gentrification as a product of their own alienation rather than as a product of the racialization of others (Godbey 147). However, like the new future made possible at the end of Morrison’s *Jazz*, these revelations are ultimately impossible without the materiality of the ring.

Kakutani’s review, along with Singer’s and Godbey’s critical analyses, raises the important question: how would the novel be different without the magic ring? What if Lethem had simply composed a straightforward narrative in which we follow the burgeoning friendship, maturation, and growing apart of a young white boy and a young black boy in the heart of Brooklyn? That seems to be the story that Kakutani wants to read, and the story that Godbey actually read. But much like the opal ring that comes in at the end of Morrison’s novel, the material object that turns two teenage boys into magical superheroes is as vital to the juxtaposition of their respective narratives as it is to our understanding of what Lethem is doing at the level of the novel by calling on the specter of the comic book and critiquing the racializing process of gentrification taking over the urban centers of the U.S. Along with a handful of other material objects of emphasis, the ring has the capacity to forge new modes of relation, but when the possibilities of the material are ignored or shunned in favor of a continued faith in the social categories they

have come to recognize as familiar, Dylan and Mingus are unable to effect change in their own lives. The ring is so important, then, because it uncovers the potential fluidity of the social, but also because its promise is ultimately ignored as the novel closes with Dylan's hollow meditation on life's

middle spaces, those summer hours when Josephine Baker lay waste to Paris, when "Bothered Blue" peaked on the charts, when a teenaged Elvis, still dreaming of his own first session, sat in the Sun Studios watching the Prisonaires, when a top-to-bottom burner blazed through a subway station, renovating the world for an instant, when schoolyard turntables were powered by a cord run from a streetlamp, when juice just *flowed*. (508)

This form of nostalgia may resonate with anyone who reads Dylan's voice, but it is an empty longing for simulacra that serve as a comfort to those whose future is hopelessly determined by the social parameters they treat as substances. This meditation seems appealing when we are content to settle for the false binaries created by the familiar social categories Lethem seems at first to reaffirm, but it is finally rendered impotent when considered in contrast to the unrealized possibilities offered by the material domain of the novel, and especially those of the ring.

The subtlety with which Lethem introduces the power of the ring into the text is the polar opposite of Morrison's abrupt insertion of her ring and can be confusing because, as Peter Bradshaw proclaims in his aforementioned review, we are reading along in a traditional-feeling, realist narrative when, all of a sudden, Dylan and Mingus are flying around all over the place. The very first time we catch sight of the ring Dylan is in an empty lot trying to assert himself as a graffiti tagger with his own identity, "but this isn't going to happen today. Because today is the day the flying man falls from the roof"

(99). Next, there is “a shadow flashing at the corner of the boy’s eyes [...] Flight, reversed. Then a collapsing thud, someone thrown, and the wheezing sigh, the exhale thrown from a body by force of impact” and all of this followed by a voice: “Little white boy,” groans the voice. “Whatchoo doin’?” (99). The narrator consistently refers to the falling person as “flying man,” but the flying man is homeless, filthy, and smells of urine. For all his straightforward characterization, the descriptions, actions, and words of the flying man in the larger context of a realist novel direct our readerly minds toward an ironic portrayal of a drunken derelict who is much more a falling man than a flying man. Dylan gives the man two quarters and then a dollar as the man “turns a silver ring on his pinky finger” and explains to Dylan that he “used to fly good” (101). When Dylan responds that he has seen the man fly, we are inclined to read him as humoring the derelict out of fear. Thus, the first revelation of the ring and its powers can be completely missed because of the racial tension in which the scene is couched. While it might seem that race is only an ancillary concern to a young boy confronted by a homeless man described as “huge,” the ritual the two engage in whereby Dylan gives the man \$1.50 is an example of a racialized exchange called yoking that recurs throughout the novel: “Sixth grade. The year of the headlock, the year of the yoke, Dylan’s heat-flushed cheeks wedged into one or another black kid’s elbow, book bag skidding to the gutter, pockets rapidly, easily frisked for lunch money or a bus pass” (83). The yoke is not always physical. When the flying man asks Dylan for a dollar, the boy is “almost relieved to shift to such familiar turf. On automatic, he digs in his pocket” (100). Even in its introduction

to the narrative, the power of this material object is overshadowed by the racialization of an exchange of currency, pushing the miracle of flight into the shadows of racial tension.

This exchange works in reverse as well. While in its adolescent form it involves the yoking of white kids as the black kids of Brooklyn lift lunch money and bus passes, in its adult form it involves the guilt-induced, or at least sympathetic, spending of white money on behalf of homeless black people such as the flying man. In fact, the next time we see the flying man he has been lying on the sidewalk for days, where Dylan and Mingus spray paint his sleeping bag with their “Dose” tag. Dylan’s father sees the tag one night as father and son walk home together from a lecture given by one of Abraham Ebdus’s fellow experimental filmmakers. Disappointed in his son, Abraham wakes the homeless figure who groans himself into animation with the snort, “*Fuckin’!*” (142). Abraham calls an ambulance, and days later he and Dylan visit the now grounded flying man at the “red brick hospital wedged against one side of Fort Greene Park,” where the Jamaican nurse frowns at Abraham’s disappointment with the care the derelict is receiving: “She frowned too, showing her disagreement with Abraham Ebdus’s implication that the hospital wasn’t doing its job with this drunk fool, who was killing himself like many thousands of others and deserved no particular special notice for having happened to be checked into this ward by a white man” (146). When the flying man calls Dylan to his side, rather than being asked to produce some spare change as he expects, Dylan is encouraged to go into a drawer, where the man directs him to take out the silver ring and, “Take it, man” (147). Whether object lesson or sincere attempt to encourage his son to see the man as a person and not a graffiti canvas, the trip to visit the



flying man in the hospital is the event that places the silver ring into Dylan's hands. But the derelict's relinquishment of the ring is bookended by his drunken stupor on the sidewalk, overlooked for days because he does not lie in one of the fast-gentrifying zones, and his being dressed in one of Abraham Ebdus's old suits and put on a bus bound for a Syracuse Salvation Army where he'll be given "three squares and a bunk on the guarantee of his attendance at the local Alcoholics Anonymous, where among the hard-bitten, laid-off-lathe-operator types he'll be the sole black face" (150). Isabel Vendle's gentrification project marches on as the homeless man who is finally named, Aaron Doily, leaves the city.

If we approach the text with race as a primary lens, asking how the novel can inform our knowledge of race rather than asking what is there, then of course we will continue to wind up with the same conclusions about white and black that we had when we began. This approach is tantamount to asking a question to which you already know the answer. Shifting our focus to the material domain of the text, we find such social categories defined and redefined. Leaving aside the ring for a moment, Lethem also has a fascination with other material objects in *Fortress*, including the vast network of slate sidewalk squares lining the streets of his Brooklyn neighborhoods. The Dean Street kids play a marbles-style game with bottle caps called skully, and in spite of his early ineptitude with the spaldeen used for stoopball, Dylan gains some notoriety for his mastery of skully. Dylan is most well-known for his uncanny ability to find "the ideal square of slate" on which to play, a square whose slate "shouldn't be flawed by a crack or vein, or tilted, or bowed" (20). He prefers a square close to his own house "for the way it

was shaded by a particular tree—the dynamics of space and sound, the quality of privacy and access, for a whole series of subtle aesthetical distinctions [...] and so Dylan declared it the best square for skully, on the whole. And he was believed” (20-21). Although some of the kids continue to make fun of Dylan, he is considered an authority on skully, and his squares draw the biggest crowds and the most inventive innovations. Dylan attempts to redraw the borders of the typical skully square into the star-shaped parameters used in Chinese checkers, but the other kids reject this game: “it wasn’t skully” (21). Dylan’s talent with the sidewalk is even enlisted by some of the girls who ask him to draw their hopscotch diagrams. Lethem spends a thorough paragraph detailing the making of skully caps, discussing the ideal size, weight, metal, and waxiness: “Like a tiny factory Dylan made rows of perfect skully caps and lined them up along the stoop: vanilla Yoo-Hoo with pink wax, Coke with green, Coco Rico, the cork of the cap still stinking of sugar, with white” (22). Yet the entire complex sidewalk world that Dylan and his mates assemble together crumbles “after Dylan’s rapid rise to chief alchemist and philosopher of skully, nobody seemed to want to play the game anymore” (22). The materiality of the sidewalk, the chalk, the bottle caps has forged a common network that is no respecter of race, class, or gender, but when the children look up from the slate and see each other, see Dylan as the “chief alchemist and philosopher” everything falls apart.

Much like the perfect sidewalk slate, the ring offers Dylan—and eventually Mingus—the opportunity to form new ties among the Dean Street crowd. Unlike the slate, the ring also creates opportunities to break through the circumference of the Gowanus neighborhood through the startling ways in which it empowers its wearer.

Dylan first discovers these powers during a game of stoopball in which he is suddenly transformed into a master outfielder, able to snag homeruns out of the air in a single bound. After a few amazing catches, the narrator muses on Dylan's state of mind in which he sees "the ring and the ball in some kind of partnership of magical objects" (160). He even finds himself outjumping the amazing Mingus as the two leap for the same fly ball and Mingus "[a]ll[s] short, minus the advantage of the flying man's ring," and lands on the ground barking, "Kangaroo boy!" (163). Dylan goes unaccountably unhassled at a block party later in the summer, and the narrator speculates, "maybe this night's just lucky, maybe he's passed through some flame and come out the other side. Maybe it's the ring. Maybe the ring has made him invisible. Maybe the ring has made him *black*. Who can say?" (166 original emphasis). The unrealized potential of constructing an alternative mode of relation using the credibility imparted to him by the ring renders Dylan's racialization of his newfound powers especially disappointing. These social rubrics seem impassable. In his analysis of *Fortress* alongside Lethem's more recent rewriting of the Marvel comic *Omega: The Unknown*, David Coughlan tackles these impassable gaps by comparing them to the "gutters" that separate the individual panels in a comic. Coughlan argues that Lethem's Brooklyn in *Fortress* is a "city laid out like a comic book page, where each block of houses can be seen as a panel, and the streets are the comic's gutters" (206). He goes on to interpret the gutters of Gowanus as representative of "the ever present possibility of failure, the unbridgeable abyss between a series of isolated individuals" (207). For Coughlan, this impassable gap applies not only to race relations but also to Dylan's connections with his father, mother,

and his hometown in general. But to read the various gaps and gutters in the novel as impassable is to ignore the power of the ring, which Lethem has caused to stand out like a sore thumb in the narrative.

The fact that Mingus also takes up the ring and wields its power in his own right provides a contrasting possibility to the inevitable social settling that dominates most of the novel. Even at the height of racial bifurcation, Mingus uses the ring for the first time to prevent two young black boys from picking on a white boy. After Dylan enters eighth grade, however, he and Mingus seem headed for the most recognizable, stereotypical social positions. Mingus has begun “fluffing cushions for change, palming pennies from the dish Abraham kept at the front door, scraping up enough for a nickel bag” (196). Dylan, on the other hand, finds out from his science teacher Mr. Winegar that his test scores have made him the only kid in I.S. 293 to be accepted into Stuyvesant, a competitive academic high school. When Dylan expresses hesitation about attending Stuyvesant and his desire to go to Sarah J. Hale with his friends, he can see in Mr. Winegar’s eyes that he “might as well have said *I think I’ll just go straight to the Brooklyn House of Detention [...]* *You’re white!* Winegar wanted to scream. *Man can fly!* Dylan wanted to scream” (200-01 original emphasis). Thus the ring, having given Dylan the power of flight, offers an alternative to the familiar social categories of race that would determine Dylan’s future, as well as Mingus’s. When Mingus uses the ring for the first time we are told that it’s “no problem, he’s a natural” (210). He chases two black bullies away from a white boy, and then the white boy corrects his pronunciation of the superhero name Dylan and Mingus have adopted: “‘Aer-o-man,’ corrects the white boy.

‘That’s what I said—Arrowman’” (211). What is at once significant and tragic about the ring is that it has the power to break through the seemingly substantive social barriers that stratify the world of 1970s Brooklyn, and yet this breakthrough ultimately fails. In other words, the gutters are not impassable, as Coughlan has deduced, but the characters’ continued reliance upon the borders that have typically demarcated the gutters continues to render them as wide as the Grand Canyon.

Lethem drives home the ring’s power as Mingus and Dylan embark together on a series of crime-fighting adventures. Leaving the balking of reviewers and critics aside, the ring is clearly real, and the boys clearly fly: “Aeroman flew six or seven times that fall, was perhaps involved in eight or nine incidents, could claim maybe three bona fide rescues, legible crimes authentically flown down on and busted up” (223). These heroics involve a “six-foot Puerto Rican,” “a small Chinese guy,” “drunks boxing at the door of a social club,” and Aeroman, the white boy and black boy who share a superhero identity. But something begins to change. Mingus excels in the acrobatic feats made available by the ring, while Dylan slowly takes up the position of audience: “they’d meant to swap it back and forth, the changing from black to white one of Aeroman’s mystifying aspects, another level of secret identity, but it had always been Mingus in the costume, always Dylan crouched behind a parked car or dangles as bait” (238). When Mingus gets arrested as Aeroman for trying to break up a drug deal set up by an undercover cop, the days of the ring seem over for both. The materiality of the ring is subordinated to the categories it actually has the capacity to reimagine. Drifting apart for a time, Dylan returns to Mingus’s house before leaving for Camden College and buys back a bunch of his comics,

and the ring, from Mingus. Going back to Lethem's interview with Sarah Anne Johnson, the shift that seems to take place here—as the boys become men, the material presence of the ring dissolves into the social strata of race and class, and the novel moves from part one to parts two and three—is readily understandable: “In the first half of the book, though the characters are suffering, there's a golden glow that makes everything okay. Whereas the feeling in adulthood, in the second section, is that nothing is okay” (95-96). Critics such as Singer and Coughlan have read this shift as a reassertion of the “literal over the symbolic” (Singer 277), and as a critique of “relations, ritual, identity, marginalization, consumption, and capitalism” (Coughlan 200). Focusing on the ring, however, it seems equally valid to read the second half of the novel as the unrealized space in which the social remaking that seems so possible in the first half flounders in contrast to the self-indulgent wallowing of Dylan as narrator who imagines himself as the victim of the gentrification forces sweeping his old neighborhood.

Dylan's identity as an adult is intimately bound up with his childhood experiences in Brooklyn to which he assembles a small shrine in the Berkley apartment he shares with his black girlfriend Abby: “Aaron X. Doily's ring, Mingus's pick, a pair of Rachel's earrings, and a tiny, handmade, handsewn book of black-and-white photographs titled ‘For D. from E’” (316).<sup>6</sup> Although not in direct reference to this scene, Matt Godbey maintains that

Lethem's novel implicates identity construction through the consumption of objects, places, and experiences in a system of urban renewal that helps define urban landscapes as sites of authenticity, and, in doing so, suggests how neighborhoods often are reduced to signifiers, denuded of the human element,

paving the way for larger policies and practices that reinscribe racial and economic bias onto the urban landscape. (134)

Godbey's insightful analysis of the novel's view on gentrification helps us see that Dylan's nostalgic identity crisis in the face of the transformation of his old Gowanus neighborhood into the Boerum Hill of Isabel Vendle's dreams are best read as a "victimhood [that] becomes less tenable when one places his crisis of alienation and dislocation alongside the actual, physical alienation and dislocation of Gowanus/boerum Hill's poor black, Puerto Rican and Dominican residents and his role in facilitating gentrification" (140). However, what I want to point out as equally important are the unrealized possibilities for community inherent in the perfect squares of sidewalk slate, and more specifically in the ring. Lethem offers potential alternatives to the static and predictable outcomes that finally result from the ready-made reliance on race and class. The ring is not merely symbolic, metaphoric, allegorical. The ring is actual, real, material. Thus, what seems at least as important as Dylan's or Mingus's participation in playing out the roles set before them is the power of the ring goes inexplicably unrealized when both characters allow an object that empowers them with flight and invisibility to gather dust for years.

As the categorical and cultural realities of race press Dylan and Mingus into their respectfully recognizable roles as guilty white gentry and perennial prison inmate, the ring is all but forgotten, and we cannot help but wonder what happened to Dylan's radical yet unstated assertion that "*Man can fly!*" How could someone with the power of flight succumb to the same pressures that shape the lives of those without this power? Dylan

seems to awaken to the tragedy of this question a little too late as he decides to return home from California to New York with a plan in the back of his mind to free Mingus from prison. During his time on the west coast he has found that the power of the ring has changed from enabling flight to turning its wearer invisible, so he arrives at the prison intending to have Mingus put it on and follow him out. The guards sift through the contents of his pockets, asking “What’s this ring?” and, pointing to a single orange earplug, “What’s that?” (439). Dylan responds that it is an earplug for his airplane ride, but there is some confusion on the part of the guard and he wonders to himself, “I’d never pondered the bourgeois implications of an earplug” (440). Whereas the sidewalk slate and silver ring have typically offered the opportunity to reconstruct the social categories that organize our daily lives, the contents of Dylan’s pockets now seem to build the walls of class higher than ever as the material world is constantly being organized according the familiar social patterns of race and class as if they were not processes. When Dylan tries to give Mingus the ring toward the end of their visit Mingus tells him to put it away. Dylan insists, “‘You could use it to break out of this place,’ I said quietly. His laugh now was bitter, and authentic. ‘Why not?’ ‘You couldn’t even use that thing to break *into* this place.’ The rest, until my time was up, was small talk. [...] A wall had fallen between us” (444-45 original emphasis). After leaving, Dylan puts on the ring and sneaks back in to talk with Mingus for hours, hearing the long story of his rap sheet and about how their childhood friend/enemy Robert Woolfolk is also in prison and has gotten Mingus in all kinds of trouble with other inmates. Dylan leaves Mingus and sneaks invisibly through the prison until he finds Robert and gives him the ring. The exchange ends no differently



than the myriad yokings Robert bestowed on Dylan when they were kids: “‘Yo, Dylan?’ ‘What?’ ‘*Fuck* you, motherfucker’” (493). As white Dylan bluffs his way into getting a guard to escort him back to the parking lot, he hears that an inmate has leaped to his death off of a gun tower. Robert Woolfolk, unaware of the ring’s transformation into an object that enables invisibility rather than a flight, is unable to adapt to the change and his attempt to use the material object to break through the walls society has built around him results in his death.

Once the social begins to appear as a substance in our understanding of the world then the material possibilities can go unrealized for so long that they can be rendered impotent when enacted within the confines of familiar categories such as the racial and class strata that dominate Lethem’s novel. Dylan’s whiteness literally enables him to talk his way out of prison, while Mingus’s spirit is so utterly broken by the legal system that he resists the chance to escape. The material domain loses its potency in the second half of the novel because it finds itself treated as subordinate to and not constitutive of the social categories of race and class. In order to actualize a remaking of the social through the material domain of everyday life the consensus categories that are typically relied upon must be opened up for renovation at the very least. I do not mean to say that we can ever forget, or that we should forget, how race, class, nation, gender, generations, and other categories have been understood. Instead, I am simply proposing that we must be willing to pause and look at what is there rather than constantly assuming what is there and dwelling on what we know about what is there.

The final meditative pages of *Fortress* enact the sad state of affairs to which we are left when we are willing to bracket what is there and ignore the material possibilities of remaking the order of things. After leaving New York, Dylan drives through Indiana to visit the man his mother ran off with when he was still a Gowanus kid. The man, Croft, offers Dylan the rusty old manual typewriter on which he had pushed Dylan's mother to write her son postcards, but Dylan turns it down and the two go for a pleasant walk instead. Leaving Indiana, Dylan listens to Brian Eno's *Another Green World* and reflects on the way in which music became a cathartic resource in his life as he built his personal world in the middle space "the communists and gays and painters of celluloid imagined they'd found in Gowanus, only to be unwitting wedges for realtors, a racial wrecking ball. A gentrification was the scar left by a dream" (508). But these middle spaces are not the beautiful products of nostalgia. They are the only logical possibilities left to a generation who forfeits the possibility of remaking rather than settling into the social categories they have allowed to define the parameters of their lived experiences. We should feel no pity for Dylan who opines, "a middle space opened and closed like a glance, you'd miss it if you blinked" (508). The novel ends in memory with Dylan driving down the road, not alone, but with his father some years earlier during his college days:

Abraham and I let ourselves be swept through the blurred tunnel, beyond rescue but calm for an instant, settled in our task, a father driving a son home to Dean Street. There was no Mingus Rude or Barrett Rude Junior with us there, no Running Crab postcard or letter from Camden College pushed through the slot. We were in a middle space then, in a cone of white, father and son moving forward at a certain speed. Side-by-side, not truly quiet but quiescent, two gnarls of human scribble, human cipher, human dream. (509)

Even the middle space that Dylan seems to remember with some sad fondness is marred by the “cone of white” that shelters father and son from the everyday reality of the world in which they must live and operate. It is true, as Matt Godbey has pointed out, that the novel “reveals how gentrification is a deeply racialized process” (147), but it is also true that the material domain of the novel, and especially the silver ring, highlights this revelation by uncovering alternative possibilities for remaking this racialized social realm.

The contrast between the promises that go unfulfilled in Lethem and the triumphant remaking of the social in Morrison highlights the powerful yet painful possibilities inherent in the material domain of everyday life. Morrison’s characters are ever-willing to start again. Joe Trace lives through at least seven changes in his life, becomes seven different Joes, and at the end of the novel he is poised for his eighth incarnation. Lethem’s characters, however, constantly subordinate the possibilities offered by the material world that surrounds them to the familiar social categories that have been presented to them as “what is there.” Whereas *Jazz* represents the potential to be found in constantly poking at “what is there,” *Fortress* represents the inevitability of social stratification when “what is there” is taken for granted and bracketed in favor of the suspicious inquiry into “how we know.” When considering whether to close this study by giving either Morrison or Lethem the final word, I chose Lethem in spite of Morrison’s more promising narrative because it seems to me that Lethem’s novel is indicative of postmodern fiction’s last gasp, its attempt to communicate in any way possible that the material opportunities for remaking everything that seems normal

around us are consistently being overlooked in favor of the pleasurable demystification of what we think we know about our social existence. Why has critique run out of steam, as Latour asks? Well, perhaps because instead of capitalizing on the possibility of rearranging the material world into configurations that open conventional social categories, we continue to linger in our own intellectual morass, repeatedly yanking the curtain back on the wizard and ignoring the plasticity of the world surrounding us.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In his classic treatise on interpretation, *Freud and Philosophy*, Paul Ricoeur argues that the triumvirate of Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx forms an influential “school of suspicion” in which the act of interpretation is primarily informed by our tendency to “look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as ‘false’ consciousness” (33). Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick characterizes the influence of this “school of suspicion” on critical theory of the twentieth century more broadly by arguing that this “paranoid inquiry” has become “coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry, rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds” (6). Felski extends this conversation by drawing from Ricoeur’s frame, Sedgwick’s assertion and other more recent arguments such as Stephen Best’s and Sharon Marcus’s in their 2009 essay “The Way We Read Now,” to develop her own nuanced theory of “suspicious reading [as not] just an intellectual exercise in demystification but also a distinctive style and sensibility with its own specific pleasures” (216). Felski also offers a book-length treatment of alternative interpretative strategies in her 2008 “un-manifesto” *Uses of Literature*.

<sup>2</sup> The tension between epistemology and ontology is nothing new in discussions of postmodern literature. Ihab Hassan calls our attention to what he sees as the postmodern shift away from questions about knowledge and transcendence to questions about being and immanence in his classic “Postface” to the second edition of *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* in 1982. Extending Hassan’s work, Brian McHale argues that postmodern fiction’s interest in the ontological is not so much a binary opposition to the epistemological foundation of modernist fiction so much as it is a shift in the dominant “hierarchy of devices [...] that is, modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as [...] ‘How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?’ Other typical modernist questions might be added: What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty? [...] The dominant of postmodernist fiction is *ontological*. That is, postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions [such as] What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?” (9-10). Following McHale, Linda Hutcheon further complicates this tension by suggesting that postmodernism should be understood, not so much in terms of Hassan’s binary oppositions or McHale’s shifts in dominant, but in terms of “unresolvable contradictions”: “postmodernism is the *process* of making the *product*; it is the *absence* within the *presence*, it is the *dispersal* that needs *centering* in order to *be* dispersal; it is the *idiolect* that wants to be, but knows it cannot be, the *master code*; it is the *immanence* denying yet yearning for *transcendence*. In other words, the postmodern partakes of the logic of ‘both/and,’ not one of ‘either/or’” (*Poetics* 49). As with her theory of “complicitous critique” in *The Politics of Postmodernism* that I discuss in the first chapter, Hutcheon’s theory of the postmodern seems most helpful here. However, when we turn our attention to the material world of postmodern fiction, asking questions about human and nonhuman actors and their roles in making the very processes, absences, and dispersals of postmodernism, then what becomes clear is that what makes fiction postmodern is its fundamental commitment to questions about “what is there.” Whereas Alan Sokal accuses postmodernism of ignoring or even denying the existence of an external world, and the editors of *Social Text* are willing to bracket the existence of that reality in order to engage in epistemological inquiry, critics such as Hassan, McHale, and Hutcheon have had their fingers much nearer the pulse of postmodernism in their interest in questions of ontology. I would argue that while postmodern fiction certainly acknowledges the existence of an external world, and certainly, as Hutcheon suggests, is not predominantly interested in either its being or our knowledge of its being, what makes fiction postmodern is its unwillingness to bracket the material world and become bogged down in an endlessly suspicious inquiry.

<sup>3</sup> The chain link is given to the nameless narrator as a gift from Brother Tarp, who has kept it as a reminder of the chain gang from which he escaped in his former life down south. He explains the significance of the object by justifying his reasons for keeping it: “Because I didn’t want to forget those nineteen years I just kind of held on to this as a keepsake and a reminder.” He says, “Funny thing to give somebody, but I think it’s got a heap of signifying wrapped up in it and it might help you remember what we’re really fighting against. I don’t think of it in terms of but two words, *yes* and *no*; but it signifies a heap more [...]” (388). This yes/no binary becomes a both/and in the hands of Ellison’s protagonist and resonates with Charles Johnson’s later discussion of Amiri Baraka’s theory of the place of black writers in the American literary tradition as perpetual outsiders: “Baraka placed his finger perfectly on the role all ‘outsiders’ have played in respect to a host society: ‘outside and inside at the same time,’ and thereby capable of the observations and omniscience neither group—black or white—can generate from its center” (21). Setting aside potential objections to the “center” Johnson seems to perceive as formative to either racial marker, the troubling of the boundaries between inside and outside serve to strengthen the purposes of this study insofar as I want to move away from the strictures of “how we know” race, for instance, and move toward a more open and mercurial conception of “what is there” that has led to the theories of race that exist, and the remaking of race that is constantly in-process.

<sup>4</sup> Gates traces the trope of the talking book in the African American literary tradition back to “five black texts published in English by 1815” that demonstrate the significance of “recording an authentic black voice in the text of Western letters” as an answer to the rising significance of writing as an indicator of humanness (130). Gates characterizes the trope of the talking book as “the ur-trope of the Anglo-African tradition” (131), and insists that “the trope of the Talking Book is not a trope of the presence of voice at all, but of its absence” (167). Thus, as we consider the significance of Morrison’s talking book speaking in the 1920s and being written by Morrison herself in the late 1980s and early 1990s, we should consider the novel itself as an absent space in which the material components of the narrative might be constantly arranged and rearranged to form unique configurations.

<sup>5</sup> In her essay “Signifyin(g) on Reparation in Toni Morrison’s *Jazz*,” Marjorie Pryse argues that by making the book itself the narrator of *Jazz*, Morrison creates a relationship between text and reader that renders their positions interchangeable, but preserves the distance between them. Pryse relies here on the psychoanalytic theory of transference offered by Melanie Klein: “While agreeing with Sigmund Freud that transferences ‘are new editions or facsimiles of the impulses and phantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the progress of the analysis,’ Melanie Klein maintains, unlike Freud, that transference ‘originates in the same processes which in the earliest stages determine object-relations’” (583-84). This transference relationship between text and reader is important to Pryse because it enables *Jazz* to explore the region between the two “to create the possibility that a talking book may engage in a psychodynamic relationship with a reader” (584).

<sup>6</sup> I don’t reference Dylan’s “black girlfriend” flippantly here. I merely intend to emphasize Lethem’s treatment of Dylan’s and Abby’s relationship as one established more for Dylan’s nostalgic comfort than for love. As reviewer A.O. Scott suggests, in the latter half of the novel Dylan comes across as a “moody, thwarted 30-something in 1999, an obsessive, pedantic music critic who seems to love the fact that he has a black girlfriend more than he loves the girlfriend herself” (7).

## CHAPTER VI

## CONCLUSION: AFTER ISMS, OR, THE PROMISE OF POSTMODERNISM

To read literary criticism of the last decade and more is to realize that if you have just arrived at postmodernism's funeral then you are exceedingly late. As Hutcheon said of postmodernism in 2002, "Let's just face it: it's over" (*Politics* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 166). Numerous studies in recent and not-so-recent years strike out at whatever comes, "after," "beyond," and "post-" postmodernism, and there has been a revived interest in something called the "post-contemporary," a theory of the present that first briefly produced a blip on the radar of literary studies in the 1970s.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, however, the legacy of postmodernism has become part of the fabric of aesthetic production. Hutcheon explains this paradox in her contribution to the collection *Postmodernism, What Moment?* (2007), in which she declares that postmodernism is both alive and dead in the twenty-first century (17). Josh Toth thinks through the aftershocks of postmodernism at length in *The Passing of Postmodernism* (2010). Toth is not merely content to point out that "what comes after postmodernism remains informed by postmodernism" but pushes further to demonstrate "that the current epistemological, or cultural, reconfiguration—a reconfiguration that maintains many postmodern 'traits'—betrays the inevitable persistence of what Jacques Derrida might refer to as the 'inheritance,' or 'specter,' that animated postmodernism in the first place" (4). Critics overtly invested in postmodernism as an international phenomenon reassess—as Thomas Vaessens and Yra van Dijk do in their introduction to

the recent *Reconsidering the Postmodern* (2011)—the critique and death of postmodernism through various means, including a reevaluation of its touchstone features such as irony, relativism, jargon, and indifference to society.<sup>2</sup> The funerary and spectral language that haunts debates over the postmodern presence in the new millennium insinuates a once-vital and familiar entity that is now being reencountered in a skeletal and uncanny form.

But what does the so-called “death” or passage of postmodernism accomplish? Is realism dead? Modernism? When and how were these “isms” born in the first place? How do their lives, reigns, and deaths affect our reading of literature? Or perhaps more to the point, when is the soonest possible moment at which we can abandon this way of classifying texts? I am certainly not the first to raise such questions,<sup>3</sup> yet these nomenclatures continue to masquerade as *a priori* paradigms with as much vigor as the social categories I have discussed throughout this project. There is no hidden power behind these isms, only groups of people and aesthetic works who see in themselves something similar to or different from what they perceive in others, usually others from an earlier point in time though not always as Ezra Pound’s many contemporaneous isms will attest. For most critics what is unique about postmodernism in this long and tedious lineage is that its prefix, post-, suggests that its suffix, -ism, primarily belongs to the “modern” found at the heart of the word. As Brian McHale points out, “postmodernism is not post modern, whatever that might mean, but post *modernism*; it does not come *after the present* (a solecism), but after the *modernist movement*” (5 original emphasis). However, whereas McHale argues that the ism does “double duty” by also announcing a



unique “poetics” (5), I would like to offer what may seem a hairsplitting postscript.

Rather than representing, announcing, or naming a new ism, postmodernism’s postness signifies the abandonment of isms. That is, postmodernism is not an ism at all, but a state or sense of being after isms, even a perpetual afterism.

Such a rereading of postmodernism should come as no surprise considering this study’s preoccupation with flux, movement, work, process, and the significance of everyday materiality. The evolution of the suffix -ism has led to its current denotation of “a form of doctrine, theory, or practice having, or claiming to have, a distinctive character or relation” (*OED*). Thus, if what the fiction of the last half century shows us is that all our doctrines, theories, and practices are the constant products of ongoing material processes that are notable because of their very capacity for change, then the distinctiveness that stands as the key feature of any ism is a subordinate characteristic of postmodernism at best. What the title of this project “Postmodern Materialism” implies, then, is a distinctive theory of the material whose only particular characteristic is its variability. Note that it takes the addition of a materialism to bring any ism at all to the postmodern, and therefore we might say it takes an ism to bring an end to isms. Postmodernism does not signify the end of history as some have maintained, nor any other apocalyptic reckoning of the aesthetic, economic, historical, or political. Samuel Cohen says of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 that “on or about September 11, 2001, human character did not change,” and so I would say about the advent of the postmodern (4). Postmodernism’s relation to previous isms is less like a schism and more like the open space a schism contains, more like the hollow space of Heidegger’s jug, Alvarez’s drum,

or Barth's glass bottle. Postmodernism is a recognition of the boundlessness that actors require to move about and form relations without the restrictions imposed upon them by a ceaseless insistence on seemingly preexistent doctrines, theories, or practices, and thus it calls for a redefinition in our critical discourse.

Offering conceptual corrections to the problems implicit in his question, "Why has critique run out of steam," Latour pleads with us that

The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather. The critic is not the one who alternates haphazardly between antifetishism and positivism like the drunk iconoclast drawn by Goya, but the one for whom, if something is constructed, then it means it is fragile and thus in great need of care and caution. (246)

As a critical project, the postmodern is a gathering, an assembling of the social into myriad configurations that cannot be accounted for solely by what Foucault calls the comparison of measurement which relies first on a "consideration of the whole" (*The Order* 53). Postmodernism is not merely one of the anti-positions that Latour antagonizes in which "antifetishists debunk objects they don't believe in by showing the productive and projective forces of people; then, without ever making the connection, they use objects they do believe in to resort to the causalist or mechanist explanation and debunk conscious capacities of people whose behavior they don't approve of" (240-41). Instead, by showcasing the simplest actors in the construction of the social, the project of postmodernism is to call our attention away from ourselves, away from our own preoccupations, and toward the material world that we all share in common. Such a shift in consideration necessitates a theoretical movement away from human essence as the

centerpiece of our social relations, and thus precludes an overly reductive comparison of measurement that more often than not results in the exclusion, alienation, or marginalization of individuals and groups based on perceived differences in being. Postmodernism teaches that we are not the point. The singular individual and the collective are but small beacons thrown from a boat moving through uncharted waters. But if we are not the point, then what, or who, is? Silko answers this question in the words of Betonie that have guided much of this study: “it is the people who belong to the mountain” (*Ceremony* 128). What is important in this moment of Tayo’s healing ceremony is neither the people nor the mountain, but the nature of their relation to one another, the very idea of what it means to “belong.” We belong, not to ourselves or even to each other, but to a much larger order of things that is, as Foucault says, “established without reference to an exterior unit [...] but by discovering that which is the simplest, then that which is next simplest,” until we eventually reach “the most complex things of all” (53).

That “most complex thing of all” is, in this case, the relational process we call the social, and thus the postmodern project is to showcase the course of moving from the simplest things to the complicated and multidimensional “belongings” that make up our relations. To redefine the postmodern is, therefore, to insist on the significance of all actors in their own rights, an insistence beautifully rendered in Jonathan Safran Foer’s first novel, *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002). This curiously emotive, hilarious, and intense work of fiction tells the story of a young man, also named Jonathan Safran Foer, who travels from the U.S. to the Ukraine in search of the small shtetl from which his

grandparents escaped during the violent and cancerous expansion of the Third Reich during World War II. The journey is narrated through a book being written by Jonathan's young Ukrainian counterpart and tour guide, Alex Perchov, and is interspersed with letters from Alex to Jonathan and with fantastical sections devoted to a history of the shtetl itself. The narratives finally collide late in the novel as Jonathan, Alex, and Alex's grandfather discover the place where the shtetl formerly stood. All that remains is a single house occupied by a single old woman they believe to be the young girl named Augustine from a photo Jonathan was given by his grandfather. The house is filled with things:

There were many boxes, which were overflowing with items. These had writing on their sides. A white cloth was overwhelming from the box marked WEDDINGS AND OTHER CELEBRATIONS. The box marked PRIVATES: JOURNALS/ DIARIES/ SKETCHBOOKS/ UNDERWEAR was so overfilled that it appeared prepared to rupture. There was another box, marked SILVER/ PERFUME/ PINWHEELS, and one marked WATCHES/ WINTER, and one marked HYGIENE/ SPOOLS/ CANDLES and one marked FIGURINES/ SPECTACLES. (147)

The many things in the jam-packed house seem at first obvious symbolic representations of the remains of the shtetl, and yet as some of the contents of these boxes are unpacked and the stories in the items are told, the relationship between things and people takes an unexpected turn.

Among the many "queer things like combs, rings, and flowers," the woman pulls a wedding ring from a box labeled "REMAINS." She recalls that her friend had buried the ring inside a jar and told her "just in case." She then insists that Jonathan take with him a box labeled "IN CASE." Jonathan says to her through Alex that he cannot possibly

take the box, and the following exchange ensues between the woman, Alex, who is narrating, and Jonathan (the hero) which bears reproducing at length here:

“I did not understand why Rivka hid her wedding ring in the jar, and why she said to me, Just in case. Just in case and then what? What?” “Just in case she was killed,” I said. “Yes, and then what? Why should the ring be any different?” “I do not know,” I said. “Ask him,” she said. “She wants to know why her friend saved her wedding ring when she thought that she would be killed.” “So there would be proof that she existed,” the hero said. “What?” “Evidence. Documentation. Testimony.” I told this to Augustine. “But a ring is not needed for this. People can remember without the ring. And when those people forget, or die, then no one will know about the ring.” I told this to the hero. “But the ring could be a reminder,” he said. “Every time you see it, you think of her.” I told Augustine what the hero said. “No,” she said. “I think it was in case of this. In case someone should come searching one day.” I could not perceive if she was speaking to me or to the hero. “So that we would have something to find,” I said. “No,” she said. “The ring does not exist for you. You exist for the ring. The ring is not in case of you. You are in case of the ring.” (192)

The ring does not exist to be validated by Jonathan’s and Alex’s search. Instead, the ring is what actually brings validation to their search. If the ring, along with the myriad other objects, did not exist, if it had not been saved “just in case,” then Jonathan and Alex would never come to know the evolution of their own histories. The in-caseness of the travelers is punctuated by the fact that the ring refuses to fit on Jonathan’s finger:

She attempted to put it on the hero’s finger, but it did not harmonize, so she attempted to put it on his most petite finger, but it still did not harmonize. “She had small hands,” the hero said. “She had small hands,” I told Augustine. “Yes,” she said, “so small.” She again attempted to put the ring on the hero’s little finger, and she applied very rigidly, and I could perceive that this made the hero with many kinds of pain, although he did not exhibit even one of them. “It will not harmonize,” she said, and when she removed the ring I could see that the ring had made a cut around the hero’s most petite finger. (192-93)

If the ring's significance was dependent upon its discovery by Jonathan and Alex, then it would certainly have slid easily onto our hero's finger in an Odyssean flash of revelation. But the object resists. It cannot simply be made to fit Jonathan's finger. In fact, it injures him, leaving a cut as evidence of its lack of "harmony" with his skin. The ring is the ultimate *thing* in this moment as the stories it contains and the shape it possesses defy what the narrator of *Housekeeping* calls the transformation of the thing into "pure object," or into the object that has become nothing more than the imaginative cipher of human actors.

To recognize the resistance of a thing is also to become aware of its capacity to participate in the many relational exchanges that constitute our sense of the social. This awareness manifests itself in profound ways in the postwar literature of the United States, often by revealing how the formations we take for granted as "social" are much more fluid than we have been able or willing to admit, and just as often by gathering actors together in ways that seem antithetical to those static categories. Perhaps what is most important about this particular way of reading contemporary fiction is that it does not represent the birth or death of any ism. "Postmodern" is a term exhaustively used to denote a certain body of texts that most critics recognize as sharing common aesthetic and thematic traits, while "materialism" has been with us as long as there has been a Western tradition of writing. What makes this study, and postwar literature, unique is that it is intended to serve as a revelation about the way things and people already operate in relation to one another, a revelation, not in the divine sense, but in the sense of a disclosure or exposure of something that has always been the case. Postmodern fiction

has always been after isms, always been attuned to the objects of everyday life, always been invested in the material construction of the social, always been dialed in to the social as a fluid phenomenon.

The railroad calendars, tin cans, baseballs, toy drums, glass bottles, target arrows, and rings that inhabit postmodern fiction do not exist as mere reminders or symbols in case we just so happen to pick up a book and find them there. We are just as much in case of the objects. Their existence in these texts draws our hands forward to turn the page, jogs our memories in relation to experiences with similar objects, and evokes the many stories contained by the Coke bottles and guavas in our own lives. When we talk about postmodernism what we are really talking about is our desire to find in art a respite from the many stultifying and narrow isms that we have invented to give us a way of articulating relations that cannot be fixed in time or space by words, things, or people because they are in fact constituted by these entities. If it *is* anything, postmodernism is seeing these relations in their material and fundamental states of flux. Or as I imagine it, postmodernism is most beautifully rendered in the final command of Morrison's mysterious narrator to simply "look, look. Look where your hands are. Now." Although our hands sometimes come together in harmony and sometimes in discord, the social is always a result of their work. While Morrison asks us to look at our hands to see that we are free to "say make me, remake me" (229), the whole of postmodern fiction also asks us to look up from our hands to what is being remade because the vision that our eyes behold will change as soon as we look back down to our hands in the next now.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For theorizations of what comes alongside/after/beyond/post- postmodernism, see Christian Moraru's *Cosmodernism*; Neil Brooks and Josh Toth's *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*; José Lopes and Garry Potter's collection *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*; Klaus Stierstorfer's *Beyond Postmodernism: Reassessments in Literature, Theory, and Culture*; and Robert Rebein's *Hicks, Tribes and Dirty Realists: American Fiction After Postmodernism*. For the "post-contemporary": Jerome Kinkowitz published a book-length treatment of Vonnegut, Barthelme, Kosinski, Baraka, Sloan, Sukenick, Federman, and Sorrentino in 1975 entitled *Literary Disruptions: The Making of a Post-Contemporary American Fiction*, and Larry McCaffery published an article in *Boundary* the very next year with an eerily similar title: "Literary Disruptions: Fiction in a 'Post-Contemporary' Age." The recent revival of the language of "post-contemporary" can be seen everywhere from special sessions at both the Modern Language Association and American Comparative Literature Association conventions in 2012, to an entire series at Duke University Press dedicated to "Post-Contemporary Interventions."

<sup>2</sup> The most important study of postmodernism as a transnational movement is the landmark *International Postmodernism: Theory and Literary Practice*, edited by Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema and published in 1997. Section 4 of this text, "The Reception and Processing of Postmodernism," is especially illuminating on this front as it maps effects of postmodernism around the globe. For a concise articulation of how Bertens and Fokkema imagine the relationship between an international postmodernism and more local literary traditions, see pages 300-301.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps the most cogent discussion of the problem inherent in using "isms" to organize our understanding of literature can be found in the work of Chinese critic and novelist Gao Xingjian. See especially his book *The Case For Literature*, translated into English by Mabel Lee for Yale U P in 2007. Gao Xingjian's postulation of a state of being "without isms," which he discusses in the author's preface as well as in the chapter bearing that title comes as close to a discursive approach to what I call postmodern materialism as anything else: "In being without isms one is not rashly attempting to establish some sort of theory, but this is not the same as not speaking. Yet there is no beginning and no end; it is speaking for the sake of speaking and does not lead to any conclusions" (25).



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