Fossil Capitalist Realism: Petrofiction, Climate Change and the Endless Twentieth Century

by

Claire Ravenscroft

Department of English
Duke University

Date:_______________________

Approved:

___________________________
Priscilla Wald, Advisor

___________________________
Thomas Ferraro

___________________________
Imre Szeman

___________________________
Aarthi Vadde

___________________________
Robyn Wiegman

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

2020
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

There is incontrovertible evidence, public acceptance and mounting alarm that the fossil-fueled growth economy is at the root of global warming. Yet, reducing fossil fuel use remains beyond the boundaries of a certain political reality, one apparently distinct from “the reality of climate change” that scientists and critics continually invoke. This project addresses these competing realities from the standpoint of narrative form, asking: how does the realism of lowered expectations for our environmental politics relate to the realism of literary representation, which has largely ceded the task of depicting environmental crisis to non-realist genres like science fiction and apocalypse? What exactly is the “reality” named by these political and literary realisms, and why does it conflict with the reality of climate change? Analyzing works of contemporary petrofiction and the literary genres used by scholars to conduct and communicate our environmental research — like the tragedy-fable of the Anthropocene or the naturalism of New Materialism — Fossil Capitalist Realism explores the past 50 years’ twin realities of ever-heightening energy consumption and free market ideology as a question of narrative form, thinking beyond the defeating realism of energy politics today.
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Introduction

“The core contradiction of today’s economic system is and always has been tied to its facility with energy. … Energy is dialectically bound to economic history — not a concept or variable independent of it, but a structuring force without which capital could not operate.”

Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti, “Materialism and the Critique of Energy”¹

“In reality, however — and naturally in capitalist reality as well — ‘sudden’ catastrophes are actually long in preparation.”

Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”²

When former Starbucks CEO and 2020 US presidential hopeful Howard Schultz derided the Green New Deal at a CNN town hall held shortly after the introduction of House Resolution 109, he levied the same charge that has been levied at proponents of energy transition since at least the publication of The Limits to Growth (1972) and Small is Beautiful


There is incontrovertible evidence, public acceptance and mounting alarm that the global, fossil-fueled growth economy — what Andreas Malm has termed “fossil capital” — is at the root of climate change. Yet eliminating the use of fossil fuels remains beyond the boundaries of a certain political “reality,” one apparently distinct from “the reality of climate change” that scientists and critics continually invoke and in which a majority of us believe.

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This dissertation suggests that this “realism” of continued and, indeed, ever-heightening fossil fuel consumption is married to what Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge describe as the political and economic “realism” of neoliberal capital.\(^6\) Their 2014 essay collection, *Reading Capitalist Realism*, builds from Mark Fisher’s 2009 *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*.\(^7\) With this term “capitalist realism,” these critics identify a cultural mode of lowered expectations to match the political “reality” of free markets, which rose amid the dual emergencies of stagflation and energy resourcing in the 1970s, strengthened during the Reagan-Thatcher years and after the Soviet Union’s fall, and calcified under the 2008 bank bailout.\(^8\) Capitalist realism suggests a cultural or narrative corollary to Francis Fukuyama’s end of history, Slavoj Zizek’s end of ideology and Jacques Rancière’s end of politics: now that “capitalism” and “reality” are one and the same, our cultural forms — from alternative

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\(^8\) Shonkwiler and La Berge’s analysis prioritizes 2008 as the watershed moment for capitalist realism, while Fisher looks to 1989 and 1991, with Reagan and Thatcher having cleared necessary ground the previous decade for the “end of history” to take ideological hold when the Soviet Union collapsed. Neither mention the energy crisis; in including these dates, I follow the work of Timothy Mitchell, David Painter and Matthew Huber, all of whom foreground the decisive role of energy resourcing in the geopolitical shuffles that follow the second world war and especially those that take place during the 70s energy crisis and during the decades of greater interest to Fisher and Shonkwiler and La Berge. Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. New York: Verso, 2011; David Painter, “Oil and the American Century.” *The Journal of American History* 99.1 (June 2012): 24-39; Matthew Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2013.
rock and dystopian cinema to prestige serial television and, most important to this
dissertation, the realist novel — heed their synonymy.9

Significantly, it is not the case that subjects today and the culture we produce and consume
believe in capitalism’s reality in a newly profound and total way. Rather, as Joshua Clover
writes in his contribution to Shonkwiler and La Berge’s volume, capitalist realism names a
“tautology concerning rational expectations.”10 Unlike when capitalism was one political
economic order among many, or at least two, in a widened field of subjects’ expectations
concerning power and policy, today capital has the unusual luxury of admitting its many and
even inveterate faults while still dismissing out of hand any law, critique or demand that does
not heed the market’s primacy. As indicated by Schultz’s scoffing rebuke of the Green New
Deal, it is not necessarily wrong to challenge the imperative of accumulation — just unrealistic.
Capitalism’s real costs, consequences, and limits, its ecological ones most of all, are far from
hidden, yet alternatives and even mild Keynesian reforms require transformation far beyond
any measures with which the market would comply. Regarding the transition away from
fossil fuels, much less a wider project of climate reparations, the capitalist realist is prone to
chide rather than defer to urgent recommendations from the Intergovernmental Panel on
Climate Change or wildly popular environmental protection legislation.11 I mean, get real.

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More, the ordering force of fossil capital in the constitution of “reality” is so strong, asymptotic in its approach to absolute, that alternative policies and demands, the critiques they distill, and the practice of critique more generally do not simply fail to undermine the status quo but are eagerly, ravenously incorporated into circuits of value production. In other words, realism itself has been commodified.\(^\text{12}\)

This defeatist feedback loop of “rational expectations” for our politics dovetails with the feedback loop of carbon emissions, which does not simply add to existing atmospheric CO2 but concentrates and fortifies it, much as capital accumulation “ignites itself anew” in continuous expansion.\(^\text{13}\) As an ideological formation, capitalist realism works much the same way: with our ever-cannier critical diagnosis of capital, its lock on political imagination appears only stronger, requiring only more radical transformation to redress the violences of neoliberal growth, transformation that seems less feasible as such growth and our catalog of its violences go on. It is with this self-perpetuating tendency shared by capital, greenhouse gases and market fundamentalism in mind that I adapt the concept of capitalist realism to the realism of fossil-fueled production amid fossil-fueled environmental crisis. Shonkwiler and La Berge have asked, what is the relationship between the political and economic realism of lowered expectations under late capitalism and the realism of literary fiction? I reframe this important question by foregrounding the tremendous pressure put on both of these realisms by global warming, which seems to confound realist literary representation and prevailing political “common sense” alike.


\(^{13}\) Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital* 284.
“Fossil capitalist realism” identifies the essential role played by fossil fuels in late capitalist aesthetics — the literal and figurative fuel for a neoliberal mode of accumulation whose economic conditions of possibility and horizon of political imagination are defined precisely by the mass exploitation of carbon energy. For literary realism to mimetically represent fossil capital in an era when the reality of a fossil-fueled market ontology runs counter to the reality of climate change, it evacuates certain realist tropes, plunges deeper into others, extracts from non-realist genres, and generally contorts its form, representing both our fossil capitalist reality and fossil capital’s production as “realism.” These contortions in literary form match the contortions in the form of ideology named by capitalist realism, whereby we have passed “the moment of truth” that anchors modernist epistemologies and even the paranoid ones of postmodernism to arrive at an endless self-justificatory loop: fossil capital represents realism represents fossil capital, and so on. The transformative power once assigned to representing reality as it really is — whether the revelations of critique or the piercing mimesis of narrative — looks different today under the tautological model of ideology named by capitalist realism. Understanding the politics of realism’s aesthetic project is highly useful to the critical study of fossil capital in an era when global warming is no hidden truth but, borrowing from Dominic Boyer, “an increasingly secure feature of everyday knowledge.”

My aim in this dissertation is to map these shifts in the form of realist representation as they relate to fossil fuels; to map their operation in contemporary literature, their operation in

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university knowledge production, and how these operations relate to one another; and to
determine a mode of realist representation fit for capital’s post-ideological structure and
accumulating fossil-fueled crises. How does the realism of lowered expectations for our
environmental politics relate to the realism of literary representation, which has largely ceded
the task of depicting climate crisis to non-realist genres like post-apocalypse, naturalism and
tragedy? What exactly is the “reality” named by these political and literary realisms, and how
does it conflict with “the reality of climate change” that scientists and critics continually urge
us to recognize? Why isn’t the stunning contradiction between these competing versions of
reality enough, so to speak, to encourage political transformation adequate to the climate
crisis? And how can our better understanding of realism’s commodification, a structuring
force of historical development today, inform critique that contributes to energy transition,
climate justice, or fossil capital’s abolition?15 This introduction aims to outline some of the
context for my asking these questions and preview the answers I offer in the coming
chapters.

15 On “abolition,” see Angela Davis, Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the
Foundations of a Movement. Chicago: Haymarket, 2016; Dylan Rodríguez, “Abolition as Praxis
Why “capitalist realism”?

Shonkwiler and La Berge distinguish capitalist realism from the “totalizing, suffocating, and yet unassailably correct” definition of postmodernism that Fredric Jameson first developed in his 1984 essay: “The new expansion of multinational capital ends up penetrating and colonizing those very precapitalist enclaves, Nature and the Unconscious, which offered footholds for critical effectivity. … This whole extraordinarily demoralizing and depressing global space is the ‘moment of truth’ of postmodernism.”\(^{16}\) As Shonkwiler and La Berge see it, capitalist realism “presumes that things have gotten worse” from Jameson’s moment of truth, as the ontological unmooring witnessed wide-eyed by postmodernism gives way to truth’s mooring to capital, which subjects understand \textit{a priori} rather than as revelation. As Fisher describes, “Jameson used to report in horror about the ways that capitalism had seeped into the very unconscious; now, the fact that capitalism has colonized the dreaming life of the population is so taken for granted that it is no longer worthy of comment.”\(^{17}\) As capital’s antecedents Nature and the Unconscious and its elsewheres like the “Really Existing Socialism” of the Eastern Bloc or various anticolonial alliances in the Global South more or less disappeared by the end of the 20th century, there has appeared a distinct political and cultural imaginary (indeed, both Jameson and Fisher suggest the political and cultural are increasingly one and the same) defined principally by the jaded knowledge of this disappearance. Today, the real is capital itself, in its steady, totalizing march, no longer the destination at which critical inquiry arrives but such inquiry’s depressive premise. Capitalist

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\(^{16}\) Fredric Jameson, \textit{Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism}. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991: 49. See also Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism.” \textit{New Left Review} 146 (July 1984).

\(^{17}\) Mark Fisher, \textit{Capitalist Realism}. 8-9.
realism names how this self-reproducing post-ideology lives in our culture, whereby capital does not attempt to convince us nor do we believe that it is true or good, but merely that it is real.

In addition to its distinction from postmodernism, capitalist realism may be distinguished from neoliberalism. Shonkwiler and La Berge stipulate that capitalist realism’s utility as a diagnostic for contemporary social form lies in its simultaneous articulation of: “(1) the violence produced by a capitalism that constantly seeks to expand its sources and strategies of accumulation; (2) the lived economic, social, and affective instabilities of an entrepreneurial risk society; and (3) how these are together transformed into a widely accepted brand of Gramscian ‘common sense.’”

For Shonkwiler and La Berge, this third capacity marks capitalist realism’s departure from neoliberalism, in so far as the former identifies “the realization of market imperatives at an ideological level” achieved through and beyond processes of accumulation by dispossession or the production of a market subjectivity, as David Harvey and Michel Foucault have correctly and indispensably theorized.

In this understanding, the term neoliberalism does not quite capture the particular post-ideological form of hegemony under late capitalism, how its violent expansions and lived stresses are “no longer worthy of comment” even as subjects see them for what they are.


However, certain critics have theorized neoliberalism in precisely this third way. In “A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus,” for instance, Jason Read writes that neoliberalism is “as much a transformation in ideology as it is a transformation of ideology … It is an ideology that refers not only to the political realm, to an ideal of the state, but to the entirety of human existence. It claims to present not an ideal, but a reality.” Conducting an autopsy of the would-be revolutions of 2008’s global economic collapse, Philip Mirowski similarly notes that an epistemic radicalism underpins neoliberalism’s economic radicalism. Through what Mirowski terms “a cultivated ontological agnosticism regarding ‘limits’,” late capitalism’s accelerating crises do not indict or undermine the marketization measures that produce them but only entrench and embolden such measures. Substituting human capital bundles in the

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21 The 2008 crash was recognized at the time and has been recognized even more widely since then to be the consequence of deregulated investment activities. Economists of all stripes have pointed to the integration of investment and commercial banking, and specifically the tethering of derivatives and securities to consumer assets, as the primary cause for the 2008 recession. However, as Philip Mirowski explores in *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*, there has occurred a seemingly irrational strengthening of such an economic program in the wake of a worldwide crisis it caused: further public spending cuts, corporate handouts and lack of market oversight. Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown*. New York: Verso, 2014. Neoliberalism rules by enforcing a market logic without bounds and always as priority, so when it encounters crises endemic to itself, it simply prescribes more of the same: “the emergence of problems that projects of marketization themselves produce are, for neoliberalism, simply the frontier of opportunity for further Promethean entrepreneurship.” As Mirowski writes, “The combination of a cultivated ontological agnosticism regarding ‘limits,’ a fundamental imperative for corporate-owned and privately consumed high-technology innovations and systemic celebration of the key figure of the Promethean entrepreneur, forging worlds out of fiery chaos, constructs neoliberalism as a power-knowledge regime that systematically produces systemic risks.” Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste*: 346. See also Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?”; Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*. London: Routledge, 2005; Luigi Pellizzoni, “Governing through Disorder: Neoliberal Environmental Governance and Social Theory.” *Global Environmental Change* 21 (2011): 795-803; Jacques Rancière, “Introducing Disagreement”; Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics.” *Theory and Event* 5.3 (2001).
place of interested actors, hegemony under neoliberalism does not reflect an already existing
totality nor present the means to an intended end but rather functions as an ontology, or, as
Harvey writes, “an ethic in itself.” Make things more like markets so that they will be more
like markets; we should act like market subjects so that markets will be ever more like
markets. In *Capital*, Marx briefly defines the ideological bind that emanates from commodity
fetishism as “We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it.” Updating this formula for
today’s post-ideological condition, Slavoj Zizek writes, “They know very well what they are
doing, but still, they are doing it.” Thus for many it seems neoliberalism does indeed
capture all three phenomena enumerated by Shonkwiler and La Berge as what capitalist
realism newly identifies: the organization of political-economic institutions to facilitate
accumulation by dispossession at any cost, per Harvey; the production of subjects via the
saturation of an apparently spontaneous everyday sphere with market relations, per Foucault;
and further, cementing these historical processes as “reality,” the emergence of a post-
ideological regard for categories like nature and truth and any utopian foothold these might
provide.

“Not an ideal, but a reality,” “a cultivated ontological agnosticism,” “an ethic in itself.”

Facing the post-ideological form of capital named by these definitions of neoliberalism, the
political practice of critique grows inert and even redundant. Here, scholars of capitalist
realism and of neoliberalism find further common ground. Shonkwiler and La Berge write,

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22 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. 2.

four).

Whereas the postmodern emphasizes indeterminacy and ontological uncertainty, capitalist realism acknowledges the limitations of critique — even as it constantly seeks new avenues for it. Under capitalist realism the postmodern skepticism toward systems and paranoia about agency control give way, certainly not to a restored faith in systems but to a recognition of the ruling order of capitalism as both more banal and more encompassing.  

Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins use the framework of neoliberalism to explore these same challenges to representation and critique under late capitalism. As they write, echoing Shonkwiler and La Berge’s “banal and encompassing,” “neoliberal microeconomics does not attempt to render the inside of the human in a sophisticated way or mold it via ideology, since it works on a principle of non-falsifiable and incontestable individual interests.” For them, neoliberalism is an important critical term because it historicizes how today’s capitalism came to “not rely on a depth model [of epistemology],” ill-fit for even the least paranoid representative and critical modes. Despite their different terminology, then, Shonkwiler and La Berge and Elliot and Harkins both follow today’s post-ideological condition to the same questions of representation and critique. What does it mean for our aesthetic forms and their critical interpretation if late capitalist ideology has abandoned depth for the depressive surface of its own realism? More, if the practices of aesthetic

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25 Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, “Introduction”: 16


representation and critique persist amid the evacuation of surface and depth, how are we to evaluate their political utility?²⁸

I believe “capitalist realism” offers a unique and generative framework for answering these questions that it asks in common cause with the term neoliberalism. Although both identify an epistemic instability that repels suspicious and paranoid reading practices developed for a vertical form of ideology, capitalist realism investigates this instability as a commodity. It is not simply that market fundamentalism’s finger-wag of “realism” greases the ideological wheels for continual marketization, providing rhetorical cover for corporations and the state, and depressing subjects’ already-depressed will to demand more and hope for better. Capitalist realism names how late capitalist ideology’s tautological form operates as a site of production and reproduction, producing value. In this schema, not only has critique “run out of steam” but is itself both a commodity and force of commodification, reifying that which it represents and analyzes, including its own “knowing very well” and claim to political powerlessness, and regardless of an artist or critic’s political commitments. To be real is to know capital’s total power without illusion, whether in grunge rock, hip hop and neo-noir film, as Fisher discusses; in serial television like David Simon’s The Wire (2002-2008), as La Berge discusses; or in the genre-bending realist novels of contemporary fiction and the elegies, fables and naturalist aesthetics of Environmental Humanities scholarship, as this

dissertation will explore. These and all critiques do not bounce off accumulation but are “ceaselessly metabolized” into its circuits, not despite but precisely through their diagnoses of capital’s ills and the absence of viable alternatives, reinforcing its realism and selling as commodities themselves. Capitalist realism uniquely identifies this process of realism’s commodification, as well as attends directly to how literary representation and narrative form are embedded in this commodification.

Realism in its colloquial meaning as “common sense” is mirrored by the realism of literary form, a mirroring that, depending on whom you ask, reflects uncritically, reproduces in part, or pierces through what is taken to be common sense “reality.” It is this literary sense of realism that marks Shonkwiler and La Berge’s most significant contribution to discussions concerning the end of ideology as well as marks their departure from Fisher’s analytic. They reframe capitalist realism from a generalized cultural mood of commodified critique and lowered political expectations as the representation of this social process in narrative form, one that demystifies capitalism’s reality and its production of the realism commodity. More than simply a reduction in the objects of capitalist realist analysis — from the varied thematicization of dog-eat-dog grit across late capitalist popular culture to a pervasive formal crisis in realist narrative that results when realism represents a version of capitalism whose real is located in the realist text itself — this honing in on literary form and literary formal crisis offers a critical opening in the total defeatism to which Fisher’s diagnosis leads.

Following a long tradition of Marxist literary criticism, Shonkwiler and La Berge’s pivot to

the formal operation of narrative in a particular historical moment allows them to redeem from Fisher’s cynical assessment a mode of representation for the artist and critic alike that retains a consciousness-raising structure and thus, however unguaranteed, revolutionary capacity.

If capitalist realism is defined precisely as late capitalism’s collapse of the real and realism into itself, literary criticism is well-positioned to map this collapse and evaluate its political stakes. Terry Eagleton defines literary form as “a complex unity of at least three elements: it is partly shaped by a ‘relatively autonomous’ literary history of forms; it crystallizes out of certain dominant ideological structures, as we have seen in the case of the novel; and … it embodies a specific set of relations between author and audience.” Raymond Williams similarly argues in Marxism and Literature that genre “is neither an ideal type nor a traditional order nor a set of technical rules. It is in the practical and variable combination and even fusion of what are, in abstraction, different levels of the social material process that what we have known as genre becomes a new kind of constitutive evidence.” It is because of this attention to “the intersection between specific rules of discourse (including what is recognizable as aesthetic representation) and actually practiced modes of representation” that in their study of neoliberalism Elliott and Harkins follow Williams in prioritizing genre as “a means of drawing form, formation, and reading protocols together in a fashion that both attends to the process of historical development and allows for attention to emergent

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and unexpected practices.” In this way, and as Eagleton writes, “Marxist criticism is part of a larger body of theoretical analysis which aims to understand ideologies — the ideas, values and feelings by which [people] experience their societies at various times.” These ideologies are particularly available to us in literature, and especially so in this dissertation because “realism” today sits squarely at the intersection of ideology and literature’s representations of reality in a historical moment when both appear to ask new and difficult questions of critics.

The close, if debated, association of literary realism with capitalism motivates both its “detractors and admirers,” as Shonkwiler and La Berge write. Realism, they outline, has long been considered the aesthetic mode most intimate to capitalism. It is this intimacy that in the view of its admirers generates realism’s depth and incisiveness of critique. It is what in the equally compelling view of its detractors fatally compromises the realist project, producing the very subjects and objects that the mode claims to document. Where literary critics on both sides would most likely agree, however, is on the redundancy of the prefix ‘capitalist.’ All realism is already capitalist.

While Shonkwiler and La Berge’s prefix doesn’t mean to simply distinguish capitalist realism from, say, communist realism, even its redundancy does not dismiss the question that splits scholars of realism into camps: is the form especially autonomous, or especially ideological? The short answer is both. Literary realist form today as ever at once hides and

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33 Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism: viii.
reveals the contradictions of capitalism. And narrative representation that neither
ideologically reproduces fossil capital nor gives the truth to fossil capital’s lie by showing a
realer reality than that offered by fossil capital is a valuable object and method to understand
the tautological form of capitalist ideology today. Realism thus offers a uniquely dialectical
window into how late capitalist hegemony operates on both sides of the ideological coin,
admitting its faults, inconsistencies or redundancies and yet maintaining the upper hand of
realism, having its cake and eating it too. As Fredric Jameson writes, “We may even wonder
whether the most useful ‘definition’ of realism may not lie in the capacity of a text to raise
the issue of realism as such within its own structure, no matter what answer it decides to
give.”

Realism is not distinguished from other genres by what it represents (reality) but rather how
it represents it. In his 1936 essay “Narrate or Describe?”, Georg Lukács uses the term
“capitalist reality” as a way of differentiating the observational, naturalist aesthetic mode of
Émile Zola and Gustave Flaubert from the more participatory, realist one of Honoré de
Balzac and Leo Tolstoy. The former takes the abstract vantage point of bourgeois society
and reduces history and historical drama to “a constant, even-tenored stream or a
monotonous plain sprawling without contours,” punctuated by sudden, incidental and
unpredictable catastrophes. The latter ties personal and social forces together such that
climaxes appear patterned though not natural or eternally fated. Realism represents, in short,

social relations, and energy, fossil fuels, oil most of all: these are social relations. To begin to

36 See: Terry Eagleton, *Marxism and Literary Criticism*; Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the

Quarterly* 73.3 (September 2012): 477.
understand the social relation of energy, its structuring of production and the relations of production (or, social reproduction), how subjects come to understand these as “reality,” and how this process of understanding offers opportunities for consciousness-raising, requires representative forms with the capacity Lukács identifies in realism. Such forms are, in Eagleton’s words, “rich in a complex, comprehensive set of relations between man, nature and history; and these relations embody what for Marxism is most ‘typical’ about a particular phase of history. By the ‘typical’ Lukács denotes those latent forces in any society which are from a Marxist viewpoint most historically significant and progressive, which lay bare the society’s inner structure and dynamic.”

While contemporary fiction is perhaps defined most strongly by the literary’s genre-fication — that is, its departure from or severe complication of realism — and while, more generally, realism’s tenability as a discrete category of literature and its capacity to critique the “reality” it represents are always up for debate, I follow Lukács in estimating realist aesthetics as “a genesis, a dialectic and a perspective.” With this description, Lukács suggests that precisely because of its formal and political paradoxes realism is uniquely revelatory and transformative for capitalist subjects, fleeing stable identification in a way that mirrors the in-motion quality of capitalist value itself. This dialectical rather than transitive dynamic linking reality and realism, base and superstructure, political economic logic and our own desires, beliefs and collective power — this dialectic produces an unsettled-ness that in the task of collective struggle must be considered vital, because it is in this very space of unsettled-ness

38 Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism. 28.

that consciousness-raising can take place. In aspiring to represent for readers subjects and society as they “really” exist, the lens of realism is doubly fruitful for examining this space: the realist novel both exhibits via its own formal mechanics the imperfect rendering of fossil capital as reality and produces an encounter with this failure of ideology for capitalist subjects, i.e., readers.
Why “fossil capitalist realism”?

Giovanni Arrighi calls capitalism “the first and only historical social system that has become truly global in scale and scope.”\textsuperscript{40} Energy Humanities scholars have argued that this globalization has largely and indispensably to do with the productive capacities granted capital by fossil fuels. Andreas Malm’s aforementioned \textit{Fossil Capital} and Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti’s \textit{Materialism and the Critique of Energy} (2018) are two of the most important works in this body of scholarship, historical and conceptual developments that are at once breakthrough in and representative of the field and which offer a compelling vision of energy’s role in capitalist development.\textsuperscript{41} Arrighi goes on to write, “Mapping this transformation [of capitalist globalization] over time is a particularly challenging task,” invoking hand in hand with the question of capitalist development the question of its representation.\textsuperscript{42} In light of those contributions by Energy Humanities scholars, we might consider representing capitalism’s transformation as it involves fossil fuels to be one and the same mapping as that named by Arrighi, and equally challenging.

Representing fossil capital is not an ecocritical project. In his 2010 essay, “The Biopolitical Unconscious: Toward an Eco-Marxist Literary Theory,” Leerom Medovoi argues that the ecocritic writes from the standpoint of environmental emergency — and frequently fossil-fueled environmental emergency — a writerly position that obscures how capitalism


\textsuperscript{42} Giovanni Arrighi, “Spatial and Other ‘Fixes’”: 527.
develops precisely by way of ongoing environmental emergency rather than in spite of it, knowingly or unknowingly. Lawrence Buell, grandfather of literary ecocriticism, identifies “apocalypse” as “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal.” Adeline Johns-Putra writes that “Environmental apocalypse lifts us into kairotic time when it implores us to think of lost pastoral pasts, trusting that we will be inspired to reverse the devastations of the present.”

This emergency ecocritical genealogy in the US far exceeds these three critics — and indeed, their work offers some of the most exhaustive engagement with this genealogy — extending back to Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and George Perkins Marsh, through the 20th century works of Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey and Aldo Leopold, into today’s major ecocritical figures like Amitav Ghosh, Ursula Heise and Greg Garrard. In these works, ecocriticism’s central hermeneutical project hinges on a binary of visibility/invisibility,


45 Adeline Johns-Putra, “‘My job is to take care of you’: Climate Change, Humanity, and Cormac McCarthy’s The Road.” Modern Fiction Studies 62.3 (Fall 2016): 525.

seeking to make visible the invisible “axiomatic truth” of “an anthropogenically produced crisis of earthly life” that appearances and common sense are understood to disavow.\textsuperscript{47} Neglecting to historicize this “truth” and, more, to consider how fossil capital today does not deny eco-apocalypse but rather commodifies its truth as realism, literary ecocriticism fails to maintain the dialectical double vision instructed by Eagleton, Williams, Jameson, Elliott and Harkins, and Shokwiler and La Berge. Fossil capital, by contrast, offers such a historical framework for studying the representation of environmental emergency’s reality, allowing the literary critic to not only distinguish between systemic and punctual representations of environmental crisis (as we might say, riffing on a popular anti-austerity refrain of the post-2008 era, “fossil capital \textit{is} the crisis”), but also to grapple with how late capitalism’s surfacing from a depth model of ideology demands critical heuristics beyond making crisis visible, whether understood as systemic or punctual. As capitalist realism identifies, the “axiomatic truth” of such crisis arrives as commodity rather than revelation.

Thus a historical materialist understanding of today’s environmental crisis is required should literary criticism set its political sights beyond fossil capital’s commodification of crisis. Following Medovoi as well as Rob Nixon, Jennifer Wenzel and others, it is my sense that what Jameson terms the “cognitive mapping” of our fossil-fueled world-system, rather than the making visible of fossil-fueled environmental emergency, is a usefully dialectical representative mode and hermeneutical framework for setting our sights thus, that is, on fossil capital’s abolition. Jameson has described cognitive mapping in short as “how you map your relation as an individual subject to the social and economic organization of global

\textsuperscript{47} Leerom Medovoi, “The Biopolitical Unconscious”: 125.
capitalism,” distinguishing this aesthetic task from the bird’s eye view of social science. I am distinguishing it further from the similarly fetishized critical perspective taken by visibility scholarship in the Environmental Humanities when this making visible is detached from the crucial political process of consciousness-raising that Jameson invokes: “how you map your relation.” Drawing on the work of Lukács, Jameson puts political priority on representative forms that empower subjects to locate themselves within the capitalist world-system, with cognitive mapping occurring at once in and with the text. In the case of a fossil-fueled understanding of this world-system, rather than adopt the aesthetic stance of emergency’s witness this political authorization of the subject finds its hermeneutical footing on the historical production of existing material conditions rather than the scientific or otherwise axiomatic truth of such conditions. Further, it seizes upon the utopian remainder revealed by such historical analysis to imagine ourselves beyond a fossil capitalist totality that might otherwise appear predetermined, eternal or natural. For realist cognitive mapping specifically, which takes reality as its organizing representative principle, cognitive mapping spells out in clearest terms the proximity of these ideological and literary processes of world-building and their gaps and contradictions. In light of the above literary critical insights on the politics of representation — whereby representation both shapes history and is shaped by it, obliging the critic to interpret aesthetic objects in an accordingly dialectical fashion — we might consider the literary and literary critical task of representing fossil capital, as opposed to revealing environmental emergency, to be immensely valuable for the political task of

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abolishing fossil capital.⁴⁹ In this way, my project matches that of the broader field of the Energy Humanities as described by Jeff Diamanti and Imre Szeman: “gathering sites, concepts, and common cause to enable and enact decarbonization, decolonialism, and decapitalization.”⁵⁰ Contemporary realist narrative can represent fossil capital as a historical system wherein we are all historical subjects, mapping in the world of the text and in that shared by text and reader “points of potential contest” in the fight for a world beyond and better than fossil capital.⁵¹

Clover notes that while even in crisis the market knows no limits, the limits imposed by rational expectations under capital’s contemporary post-ideological form “take on even greater force in crisis, when gain is ever harder to come by, and thus must govern ever more regions of thought and action, ever more rigidly.”⁵² With this emphasis on capitalist realism’s crisis diet, both Clover and the editors of Reading Capitalist Realism have in mind the adaptations that Arrighi makes to Fernand Braudel’s longue durée in his The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times. Arrighi writes that “long periods of discontinuous change end[] in a reconstitution of the capitalist world-economy on new and enlarged foundations.”⁵³ Like crisis eras gone by, late capitalist developments have been

⁴⁹ As Terry Eagleton writes, “Marxist criticism analyses literature in terms of the historical conditions which produce it; and it needs, similarly, to be aware of its own historical conditions.” Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism. Berkeley and Los Angeles: California UP, 1976: vi.


⁵¹ Jeff Diamanti and Imre Szeman, “Nine Principles.”

⁵² Joshua Clover, “Communist Realism”: 242

sustained by crisis, paving the way for what has been termed post-Fordist production, flexible accumulation, or “informalization,” which identify “the rise of highly sophisticated systems of financial coordination on a global scale.”\textsuperscript{54} The Long Twentieth Century seeks to understand such reorganization “in the light of patterns of recurrence and evolution, which span the entire lifetime of historical capitalism as a world system. Once we stretch the space-time horizon of our observations and theoretical conjectures in this way, tendencies that seemed novel and unpredictable begin to look familiar.”\textsuperscript{55} With “the endless twentieth century,” my dissertation’s subtitle means to suggest that the crisis-fueled transformations in capitalist profit-taking over the past fifty years are both in step with the cyclical picture drawn by Arrighi and yet have no end in sight because of its tautological ideological apparatus and its ever-increasing, ever-crisis-producing dependence on fossil fuels. In this sense, neoliberal capital will “look familiar” long into the future, both as one permutation among many across the history of capitalist development and as a permutation characterized by a never-ending form of ideology and by a central material reliance on energy resources that will have long-lasting environmental impacts. Arrighi’s “long twentieth century” threatens to be “endless” because of the recursive loop into which capitalist realism funnels disbelieving subjects as well as the every-heightening fossil fuel consumption that is so particular to the US-led capitalism that Arrighi names and its transformation into neoliberalism. Late fossil capital is primed to structure the \textit{longue durée} of the deep future.


\textsuperscript{55} Giovanni Arrighi, \textit{The Long Twentieth Century}. 4. See David Harvey, \textit{The Condition of Postmodernity}.
I aim to put the insights of Malm and other Energy Humanities thinkers — namely the insight that carbon emissions accumulate with and through the accumulation of capital — in conversation with the insights into cultural form and political power offered by the term capitalist realism. In a refocus of this term onto the question of energy and environment — a friendly refocus and one analytically compatible with and, in my mind, politically linked to the anticapitalist mission of Shonkwiler and La Berge's text — this dissertation is most interested in how capitalism resists critiques related to contemporary environmental crisis (whether figured as “global warming,” which crucially identifies the crisis’s primary environmental process, carbon emissions) or “climate change” (which cynically obscures it to instead gesture apocalyptically at a fuller range of its effects). Like the Realpolitik of the 2008 crisis instructed with regards to the regulation of finance, the Realpolitik of our swelling environmental crisis insists that the regulation of fossil fuel use — much less its reduction or elimination, or the adoption of energy socialization and climate reparations — is to be neither suggested nor demanded. The “polluters should pay” agenda of the environmental movement responsible for the Clean Air Act and the EPA has been sidelined for a “Third Way” environmentalism. In the way Clover describes, the Realpolitik of environmental crisis involves redoubled commitment to the violent marketization measures that define the past fifty years of skyrocketing carbon emissions, such that the lines between disaster relief and disaster profiteering or climate adaptation and resource war-making are all but clear, and any higher expectations for climate politics are deemed unserious.

As an illustrative example of fossil capitalist realism’s critical method both departs from ecocriticism and builds on capitalist realism, Tom McCarthy’s 2015 novel Satin Island begins with a representation of an oil spill. Or rather, it begins with a representation of a
representation of an oil spill. The novel’s protagonist, U., is stranded at Torino-Caselle airport during a ground stop, awaiting an update on his delayed flight and tucked inside simulacra of departure and arrival times, the day’s soccer highlights, and news coverage of a truck bombing that recently occurred “somewhere in the Middle East.” “Around me and my screen,” he says, “more screens: of other laptops, mobiles, televisions,” one of which pivots from the spectacles of professional sport and perpetual war to that of a burst pipeline:

The scene gave over to an oil spill that had happened somewhere in the world that morning, or the night before: aerial shots of a stricken offshore platform around which a large, dark water-flower was blooming; white-feathered sea birds, filmed from both air and ground, milling around on pristine, snowy shorelines, unaware of the black tide inching its way towards them; and, villain of the piece, shot by an underwater robot, a broken pipe gushing its endless load into the ocean.56

U. turns to another screen. The frontpage headlines on his laptop announce the spill alongside and homologous with the other scandals du jour. Bayern Munich upset Barcelona, can you believe it? Planes are grounded worldwide, can you believe it? The Middle East will never know peace, can you believe it? Our oceans are slicked in petroleum, can you believe it? U. has been trained by prior such everyday catastrophes to believe them all, unblinking.

Further, U. has been trained to recognize the genre tropes of reality’s representation on any number of screens. Indeed, something of an expert on these aesthetic choices, U. commends the news outlet’s opting for compelling if familiar motifs of forlorn workers and wildlife to represent this latest oil spill. He deems the montage, with its viscous turnover of images and the air of “tragedy” invoked, the correct form of representation:

The airspace lock-up was announced halfway down [the laptop screen], adjacent to and in the same font-size as the marketplace truck bombing. Above it, slightly larger, the oil spill, with a sequence of photos showing tugs, oil-covered men wrestling with grips and winches, those black-ringed outlying islands, the giant oil-flower and so forth. The editor had chosen a ‘fade’ effect to link the shots together, rather than the more abrupt type of succession that recalls old slideshow carousels. It struck me as the right effect to use, aesthetically speaking.

What is “the right effect to use” to represent an oil spill? How might we measure such a representation’s “rightness”? More, how do we answer these questions when it is no longer the representation of the real but the representation of capital’s representation as real that is primary to capitalist realism, as well as to this scene in *Satin Island*?

Literary critics are not as certain about the answers to these questions as U., as attested by the lively discussions of fossil fuels’ cultural and political life that animate the Energy Humanities and the broader Environmental Humanities. Both academic fields might have qualified as “emerging” even just a few years ago but now they boast specialized journals, annual conferences and colloquia, professional organizations, undergraduate and graduate curricula, and ballooning bodies of scholarship. In their introduction to *Energy Humanities: An Anthology*, Imre Szeman and Dominic Boyer identify as a central task of the field to “render nameable, readable and visible” fossil fuels in their full cultural and political-


economic significance, especially amidst environmental collapse, noting that energy possesses a “curious invisibility” despite its “saturat[ion of] every aspect of our social substance.”

Amitav Ghosh’s 1992 essay “Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel” is a seminal text for the pursuit of this task, and indeed was the spark for much early “Petrocultures” scholarship. Writing during the first Gulf War, Ghosh laments the conspicuous absence of any “Great American Oil Novel” in a nation utterly obsessed by petroleum access and the postwar lifeworld it has built, focusing specifically on the deficit of realist novels that represent the “Oil Encounter.” Indeed, with this early articulation, “petrofiction” circulates as much as a name for “the failure of literary fiction” as it does as a name for a corpus to be studied. From Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* (1927) to *Satin Island*, an array of fiction has been marshaled by critics to contest Ghosh’s central claim, with important interventions from

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Stephanie LeMenager concerning American literature, Graeme Macdonald concerning world literature, and others. More, the critical conversation has replaced Ghosh’s question *Why isn’t there petrofiction?* with *How is oil, energy, or fossil capital represented, and to what end?* What may have appeared in 1992 as a lack of the Oil Encounter’s representation is today interpreted to signal the indeterminate status of what this Encounter actually is, what form its representation takes, and what political stakes we might attribute to that representation. This status has been explored and clarified by Brent Ryan Bellamy, Michael O’Driscoll and Mark Simpson; Jeff Diamanti; Rob Nixon; Imre Szeman; Jennifer Wenzel; Patricia Yaeger; and many others, as I discuss at length in my first chapter.


That oil’s representation remains such a rich and disputed research topic among scholars indicates that U. should not be so confident in his assessment of the news hour montage. Yet, his cool regard for the oil spill through the eyes of a public relations guru or BP executive preoccupied with the “right” representation of cascading capitalist violences rather than the violences themselves is especially instructive for entering into these critical debates with the rubric of capitalist realism in mind. For many Energy and Environmental Humanities scholars, half the critical trouble seems to be whether it is such an event as an oil spill whose representation is of concern or the representation of the fossil capitalist world-system that produces such emergencies as a matter of course. Considering today’s post-ideological conditions as analyzed by capitalist realism, one must further add, inextricably from these first two concerns, the question of how these representations are produced as a commodity called “realism” and act to reproduce fossil capitalist realist subjects and fossil capitalist relations of production.

McCarthy deftly represents these nested reals and realisms in *Satin Island*. Throughout the Torino-Caselle airport, “high-end motion-capture cameras, the type that sharpen and amplify each frame, each moment” render the temporary emergency of the oil spill itself in crystal clarity. At the same time, U. consumes these images in tandem with news items that cuttingly diagnose oil’s deep and pervasive embeddedness in modern social totality: the petrodollars that subsidize much of professional soccer, the supposedly inevitable and eternal wars in the gulf region, the fuel that keeps planes aloft and profitable in the carbon-accumulating air. These altogether amount to an apt representation of fossil capital beyond the emergency event. And, finally, at a cynical remove from both of these representations of the real, U. is above all a witness to the production of realism as a commodity, constituted by these
representations of oil and fossil capital. Fossil fuels’ world-making, world-ending power is not news to U. Habituated to fossil capitalist reality, his engagement with its “news” is primarily aesthetic. He engages less with what is represented on the airport screens than with its representation as reality, evaluating the digital “oil-flower,” the workers and birds, the athletes and war casualties, in a defeated, deflated nod to the political transformation once attributed to their representation and critical engagement. U. typifies how Fisher describes the capitalist realist subject, drawing from Friedrich Nietzsche’s Last Man: “‘the oversaturation of an age with history … leads an age into a dangerous mood of irony in regard to itself … and subsequently into the even more dangerous mood of cynicism,’ in which ‘cosmopolitan fingering,’ a detached spectatorialism, replaces engagement and involvement.”

Inextricable from encounters with a fossil-fueled emergency event and with fossil capital, U. encounters the production of fossil capital’s realism and the development of a cynical culture around this realism’s production, in which he participates in a “dangerous mood,” all taste and expertise, consumer-subject. In this way, Satin Island’s fossil capitalist realism demonstrates that the singular fossil-fueled emergency and the total fossil-fueled system are imbricated together; that oil can indeed be represented in this imbrication; and that such representation is a commodity, interpellating fossil capitalist realist subjects who are “decadently enfeebled precisely by [an] excess of awareness” of realism’s mooring ultimately to the real of fossil capital alone.

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65 Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism, 6.

66 Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism, 7.
Chapter outline

Fossil Capitalist Realism is organized around two sites of ideological production under late fossil capital (1973-present): literary culture and the university, which focus the first and second halves of the project, respectively. The first two chapters of my dissertation consider how contemporary realist novels figure the relationship between fossil fuels and neoliberalism and what these novels teach us about the uncertain future of fossil capital. I examine Rachel Kushner’s The Flamethrowers (2013) — a novel that has received little critical attention in the Environmental and Energy Humanities — and Cormac McCarthy’s The Road (2006) — an ecocritical darling for which I offer a new interpretation — and find that their realist representations of fossil capital at the level of literary content produce tensions and ruptures at the level of literary form. I analyze The Flamethrowers as a historical novel of fossil capital and McCarthy’s The Road as an example of what I term a “tough oil realism,” combining sci fi, melodrama, parable, horror, Western and other non-realist genres to offer, paradoxically, a realist representation of a fossil-fueled future. As a pair, these narratives represent the tumultuous onset and uncertain future of the surge in carbon extraction under neoliberalism, or “late fossil capital,” the most recent of the “long waves of fossil development” that Malm uses to periodize fossil capital, with recursive bildungsroman plot arcs and redundant combinations of genre that follow the tautological loop named by capitalist realism.67 Building from critical genealogies in Literary Theory, Ecocriticism and Petrocultures, these chapters shift the critical terrain of literary studies in the Energy

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Humanities such that the “petro” in “petrofiction” names not a plot encounter with oil but fossil fuels’ prefixal operation in the long twentieth century of US empire in both its productive and social reproductive dimensions, contributing to debates in American Studies, Contemporary Literature and the Energy Humanities.

Much like novels, knowledge production is an act of representation. The second half of my dissertation thus examines the literary dimensions of university environmental research, finding traces of similarly fraught narrative forms as in contemporary fiction. I consider how, within the humanities and without, prevailing methods of climate research represent fossil-fueled environmental crisis and how university knowledge production today contributes to the political project of energy transition. My third and fourth chapters draw from Lukács and Toni Morrison to apply the toolkit of literary analysis to two influential critical discourses in the Environmental Humanities: the Anthropocene and New Materialism. In close readings of representative texts from these scholarly discourses — Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “The Climate of History” (2009) and Jane Bennett’s Vibrant Matter (2009) — I treat Anthropocene and New Materialism as forms of “postcritique” that shun the hermeneutics of suspicion as a method of analysis for climate crisis, Chakrabarty because climate change is a post-historical kind of object and Bennett because demystification presumes a human subject. Refusing the historical materialist method that Lukács and Morrison identify in realist narrative, these critical frameworks represent climate change using the narrative conventions of fable-tragedy and naturalism, respectively, thereby heeding the tautological loop of ideology under late capitalism named by capitalist realism and constraining the political solutions they offer for climate crisis.
My conclusion follows these literary threads outside the humanities, where I read the 21st-century emergence of sustainability and climate institutes in US universities as part of a strategic realist technique of power. Drawing from scholarship on the corporatization of scientific research and higher education, I examine the paradox of widespread, well-funded research on environmental crisis and an absence of accompanying systemic social change. Amid neoliberal shifts in climate research across university disciplines, I consider the limits imposed on knowledge production by the realism of fossil capital and turn to the promises of praxis-oriented scholarship as an alternative method for literary critics in the Energy and Environmental Humanities. Altogether, these chapters offer fossil capitalist realism as a name for a structuring ideological formation in university knowledge production that normalizes the heightened fossil fuel extraction of neoliberal accumulation and social forms as the “reality” within which academics and students work, study and attempt to understand or solve the climate crisis. They offer a method for identifying how our scholarship produces and reproduces fossil capital as realism.
1. Rachel Kushner’s Resource Aesthetics: Oil and the Historical Novel

“There is something almost antinarrative about the ontology of oil, if narrative is understood as the working out of cause and effect and oil is understood to produce something out of nothing… a viscous angel of history… a miraculous agent, external to a historical narrative, whose arrival makes possible what is otherwise impossible within the narrative’s own terms.”

Jennifer Wenzel, “Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited”¹

“The shiny metal of gas tanks, fenders, carburetor covers, headlamp rings, and wheel rims sent the orange neon skidding over chrome and steel and suffusing everything — the atmosphere and the charge in the atmosphere, this feeling of sedition — in ember orange. For the first time in his life he found the neon, and the way it bathed those shiny machines parked below it, dazzling. Something was coalescing, an energy transfer from the cyclists to his own spirit. Life is here, he thought. It is happening now.”

Rachel Kushner, The Flamethrowers²

When August 2017’s Hurricane Harvey landed on the US gulf coast, it shattered every rainfall and flood record in the books. Harvey’s size, speed and path behavior far exceeded the parameters of standard meteorology models. The US National Weather Service announced that the precipitation, high winds and longevity of the storm’s landfall — seven


days — were too unusual for its tried and true forecasting techniques to reliably predict.\(^3\) Indeed, the NWS added two new colors, plum and lavender, to its doppler radar imaging in order to accommodate the unprecedented rainfall levels around Texas’s Galveston and Trinity Bays, a strange literalization of Prince’s “Purple Rain.”\(^4\)

At twenty-six lanes, I-10’s Katy Freeway is the world’s widest highway as it cuts through Houston’s business district, the Energy Corridor, but during Harvey it looked like a roaring sea. Elsewhere across the city, stoplights and treetops peeked from the water’s surface. Homes, schools and hospitals were likewise submerged. The storm’s floodplain could be seen from space and was dubbed a “sixth Great Lake.”\(^5\) Maps needed to be redrawn, and if they had been, they would have borne striking resemblance to the region’s pre-Holocene topography. In this way, as Harvey shifted the Texan coastline and blanketed Houston’s built environment with floodwater, it also suggested we recalibrate our sense of time, winding


back geologic clocks to the early Holocene epoch and springing them forward into the so-called “Anthropocene” all at once.6

With scenes like these, mainstream news coverage of the storm took on a near pornographic sensationalism, following Harvey’s path like a white Bronco and, even against protest, forcing microphones into the faces of our latest climate refugees-by-any-other-name.7 By turns harrowing and uplifting but always playing for shock and awe, the media reporting by even those networks that have normalized climate change denial did not mince words in signaling that the fate of the Houston area’s seven million residents was bound to sooner or later become the fate of us all.8 My favorite headline from this corpus is Bloomberg’s “Science Confirms Hurricane Harvey Was Indeed ‘Biblical.’”9 Another from the New York Times stands a close second place: “Apocalyptic Thoughts Amid Nature’s Chaos? You Could Be Forgiven.”10 Secular and zealot accounts bled together. Harvey was an apocalypse — scientifically verifiable — and one that foreshadowed further apocalypses to come.


7 See Taryn Finley, “Harvey Survivor Criticizes Media for Lack of Empathy in Heartbreaking TV Interview.” Huffington Post (29 Aug 2017).

8 See Seth Borenstein, “Scientists say warming makes storms, like Harvey, wetter” Fox News (Aug 29 2017); Seth Borenstein, “Studies: Warming made Harvey’s deluge 3 times more likely” Fox News (Dec 13 2017).


As indicated by these snapshots of the hurricane’s representation in the public imaginary, Harvey’s “500-year-flood” marked a shift in how we understand the categories of “apocalypse” and “reality” to relate to one another — not just for residents of perennially apocalyptic realities like Los Angeles, as Mike Davis has shown, but for all of us.\(^{11}\) Individually, “apocalypse” and “reality” are at once aesthetic, political and, apparently, scientific categories and they arrange time, space and subjectivity in complex ways. Their shift into something like synonymy complicates these meanings even further, a seeming paradox captured well by the phrase “our new normal,” which names climate change’s awkward assimilation into our sense of the everyday.\(^{12}\) The catastrophic is to be expected, the sublime anything but strange, the apocalyptic as realistic as it gets.

It is newly normal and quite significant that elements of the US right — long the happy home of climate change denialists, strategic and fanatic alike — interpreted Harvey as a symptom of global warming. Of equal significance is how the new normal narrative of “eco-apocalypse,” as Imre Szeman has termed it, framed the storm’s interpretation by the US


liberal commentariat and even swaths of the left. Unlike climate deniers, these blocs believe in global warming and attribute it to resource consumption and especially fossil fuel consumption at rates far beyond what is ecologically sustainable. Whether the fault of our species’s inexorable technological development, insatiable consumers concentrated in the Global North, population growth in the Global South, or mendacious fossil fuel corporations, climate change for these believers is a reality to contradict the false reality of the status quo. Just ask Al Gore’s Climate Reality Project, one of many efforts urging us to accept “the reality of climate change,” a ubiquitous phrase. The realism required to face this reality, however, takes on decidedly non-realist aesthetics in the case of an extreme weather event like Harvey, which announces reality through apocalyptic destruction. Amitav Ghosh observes in The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable that in the modern novel and modern geology alike such “catastrophism [has been] exiled to the margins” of what is considered narratively or scientifically realistic. But realism today — even from the bourgeois vantage point of the realist novel Ghosh is so invested in — appears bound to apocalypse, muddling alongside our genres of literary representation the

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political subjects they call into being, the political values they invoke, and the political outcomes to which we might expect them to contribute. Amid an everyday reality of apocalypse, what does it mean to be a realist?

Witnesses from across the political spectrum have taken note of this turn of events in what constitutes “reality” and “realism,” and my aim here is to think about what this turn means for the future of fossil capital. The crossed wires of genre and ideology at play in how we think about reality and fossil fuels today indicate the need to reappraise how realism as a literary form, as an epistemic project, and as a political tool operate amid the utter normalcy of environmental crisis. It is crucial to foreground, following work by Leon Sealey-Huggins, Nick Estes and others, that such crisis is nothing new under capitalist modernity’s ongoing, combined and uneven colonial project, which deals apocalyptic blows to working and non-white communities and forms of life as a condition of its perpetual growth. But the collapse of reality and apocalypse is newly characteristic of the story capital itself tells, no longer its own repressed real or the regrettable cost of business but its surface appearance and self-admitted downside. Environmental crisis’s shift from the “the darker side of modernity” into the light of hegemony appears to me significant for understanding and

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working to end these broader histories and relationships of dispossession, extraction and oppression that determine our present.\textsuperscript{17}

The binaries of realistic and unrealistic, visible and invisible, truth and its denial, all severely complicated by today’s manifold realisms of representation, knowledge, and politics — these are binaries that have fundamentally shaped the big questions and critical methods of literary studies in the Environmental Humanities. As Ghosh’s book asks, ventriloquizing a question that centrally animates the field, “why [does] contemporary culture find it so hard to deal with climate change?”\textsuperscript{18} The Great Derangement is most interested in how environmental crises at scales large and small have been “banish[ed] to the humbler dwellings that surround the manor house” of realism — in the early novel, Gothic, romance and melodrama; today, fantasy, horror, science fiction and their increasing indistinction from one another and from literary fiction.\textsuperscript{19} My sense is that contemporary realism has banished neither climate change nor its engine of fossil capitalist world-system — far more sublime — from its representations of reality, but that realism today operates differently than in other periods of cultural and economic production. We are due an understanding of this realism, one that accommodates how fossil capital’s contradictions grow both more spectacular and more mundane, both more dramatic and more like a setting, both more demystified and more hegemonic, and one that explains and evaluates the political consequences of these seeming paradoxes.


\textsuperscript{18} Amitav Ghosh, The Great Derangement: 9.

\textsuperscript{19} Amitav Ghosh, The Great Derangement: 24.
In this and the next chapter, I am grappling with two theories of realism in examining fossil capital's realist representation in contemporary fiction. The first I take from Georg Lukács, truly literary realism’s biggest fanboy, and the second from Leigh Claire La Berge, who draws on Lukács in expanding Mark Fisher’s “capitalist realism” to put narrative form center stage in Fisher's more sweeping investigation of neoliberalism’s culture of lowered political expectations. Working with a similar understanding of how literature operates formally and yet separated by several decades and a mode of accumulation or two, Lukács and La Berge offer two theories of realism deriving from two theories of ideology. In using them both, I am suggesting that ideology today, which I understand as the ideology of fossil capital, operates in two ways at the same time, presenting a kind of “third way” of ideology, appropriately echoing that Blairite slogan.

The first way, Lukács’s, derives from a vertical model of ideology theorized by Karl Marx and later more exhaustively by Louis Althusser as a regime of subject formation rooted in institutions, whereby reality lies beneath the surface of ideology and breaks through symptomatically or is reeled into consciousness by way of demystification. The second way, Fisher and La Berge’s, takes the form of a tautology, whereby ideology’s broken surface hardly undermines the domination of subjects by capital and indeed strengthens capital’s grip on what is considered “realistic.” As La Berge explores, ideology today centrally involves the “commodification of realism” itself, such that capital’s contradictions are sold as reality,

absorbed into its hegemony rather than weaponized against it as symptomatic or demystified truth. (Hurricane Harvey, to me, is a case in point). In this way, we can say that ideology has functioned in different ways across capitalist history and today, I suggest, it functions in old and new ways simultaneously. The result is that the suspicious critical practice so prized by an Althusserian account of ideology cannot alone dismantle today’s version of capitalism, which admits the very contradictions that such critique exposes yet insists despite them that it is still the only realistic political economic game in town. Yet, demystification remains a critical component of consciousness-raising, the only road out of capitalist realism’s recursive loop of critique and into collective praxis.

Literary realism today takes this same dialectical form as ideology, or realism in its colloquial sense. In terms of the literary, to both live up to Lukács’s expectations of realism (its perhaps unrivaled capacity to represent capitalism in a historically rigorous and politically transformative way) and to take seriously La Berge’s less triumphant, though just as committed, assessment (today capitalism represents realism as much as realism represents capitalism), the contemporary realist novel is burdened by a seemingly paradoxical task in representing fossil capital. On the one hand, it must represent fossil capital itself as the crisis and not as a coherent total world that is interrupted by crises that are external (e.g., “biblical”) or, as Ghosh describes it, improbable. Such a realism would represent how such apocalypses form a rule rather than an exception, are patterned rather than arbitrary and in no way “new,” symptomatic of contradictions of fossil capital that are just as often not

announced in such apocalyptic fashion. This Lukácsian formula echoes that of Jennifer Wenzel in this chapter’s epigraph when she writes that “narrative is understood as the working out of cause and effect,” offering historical explanations for the seemingly “miraculous” unfolding of events. No crises is produced “out of nothing,” even when the “magic” of fossil fuels is involved, and realism helps to diagram how crises are really produced. On the other hand, per La Berge and Fisher, realism today must contend with the habituation to contradiction and critique named by “capitalist realism” and with the attendant lowering of political expectations risked by incorporating apocalyptic destruction into our understanding of everyday reality. Literary realism must both reveal the contradictions of fossil capital’s reality and yet not misunderstand the political role played by such demystification, which without a corresponding collective praxis can actually defang critique and demotivate praxis in the order of exposure therapy: the more we simply point out the violent and dire reality of fossil capital, the more we accommodate our sense of reality and realism to it.

With all these opening proclamations of what realism today does and must do, this first chapter explores the layered structure of fossil capital’s prevailing ideological formation in contemporary fiction, what I term fossil capitalist realism. I will begin by using Brent Bellamy, Michael O’Driscoll and Mark Simpson’s concept of “resource aesthetics” to adapt a Lukácsian approach to realist fiction for a fossil-fueled understanding of capitalist reality. I do this to take part in ecocritical debates concerning the representation of environmental crisis and the arrangement of time and space in petrofiction. Through close readings of select scenes and motifs in Rachel Kushner’s 2013 novel The Flamethrowers, I demonstrate how the task of representing fossil capital — especially as opposed to representing fossil
fuels or fossil-fueled environmental crisis — fractures realist timespace, opening up a
cognitive map for the fossil capitalist subject in this very representative failure. Thinking
through this paradox with Bellamy et al’s resource aesthetics, these sections (“Approaches to
representing environmental crisis” and “The Flamethrowers: setting, character, form”) offers
The Flamethrowers as a historical novel of fossil capital in a way consistent with Lukács’s
estimations of literary realism’s consciousness-raising capacity.

Then, in the sections “Literature of the long wave” and “Follow the carbon,” I analyze The
Flamethrowers through a fossil-fueled reworking of La Berge’s capitalist realism. To do this, I
read Kushner’s novel alongside another work of petrofiction, Cormac McCarthy’s The Road
(2006), an ecocritical darling much-studied for its rich and “realistic” depiction of planetary
ecological crisis. As a pair, these narratives represent the tumultuous onset and uncertain
future of the surge in carbon extraction under neoliberalism, or “late fossil capital,” the most
recent of the “long waves of fossil development” that Andreas Malm uses to periodize fossil
capital.23 Drawing upon this “long wave” periodization of economic history as well as recent
work by Brent Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti on the fossil-fueled origins of the commodity-
form, I amend La Berge’s definition of capitalist realism as literature representing the
“commodification of realism” itself. If, as La Berge suggests, capitalist realism “follows the
money” until realism stops representing capital and instead is represented by capital, these
critics’ location of fossil energy at the core of the value form and broader capitalist world-
system that value animates allows me to argue that fossil capitalist realism “follows the

Materialism and the Critique of Energy, eds. Bellamy, Brent Ryan and Jeff Diamanti. Chicago:
carbon” such that realism ends up being represented by, rather than representing, fossil capital. I demonstrate in close readings of Kushner and McCarthy’s novels that the attempt to follow the carbon across the neoliberal long wave of fossil development at the level of literary content results in tensions and ruptures at the level of literary form, with recursive künstlerroman plot arcs and redundant combinations of genre that follow the tautological loop named by La Berge’s capitalist realism.

My analysis in this chapter offers an account of how fossil energy and literary genre intersect to both sustain neoliberal accumulation and contradict its pretense to “reality” as today’s crises in capital and climate unfold. It lays foundation for chapter two, where I take up the question of fossil fuels and social reproduction and evaluate the political stakes of fossil capitalist realist fiction through a continued look at The Road.
1.1 Approaches to representing environmental crisis

1.1.a Slow violence

Where more fitting to witness climate crisis in real time than Houston? More than simply located on a vulnerable gulf coast that had seen more than a few category 4 and 5 storms in the years leading to Harvey, the city is the world capital of the oil industry.\(^\text{24}\) Hundreds of energy companies have headquarters and do business in Houston — across extraction, oilfield services, oilfield equipment, pipeline construction, refining, roads, power utilities and gas stations — and the metropolitan area is home to the highest concentration of petrochemical facilities on the planet. These headquarters include seventeen Fortune 500 fossil fuel companies like Phillips 66, ConocoPhillips, Halliburton, Apache and Kinder Morgan, as well as corporate subsidiaries like Shell Oil Company and BP Corporation North America. In this way, the eco-apocalyptic narrative of “the climate strikes back” seemed particularly appropriate in the case of Harvey: Mother Nature had picked her target with uncanny precision, commanding us to “wake up” to the reality of fossil fuel production.\(^\text{25}\)

But Harvey was, of course, not the poetic justice that a fossil-fueled environmental disaster in the headquarters of our fossil-fueled world-system might appear to be. The storm has impacted not the oil execs/war criminals of downtown Houston’s Energy Corridor but


disproportionately the working, poor and non-white populations already long abused by the industry’s colonization of the corridor between New Orleans and Houston. Beginning with the oil strike at Spindletop in 1901, the story of gulf coast energy production has been one of precarious and dangerous jobs; a gutted public sector, which at best denies residents goods associated with social democracy and at worst blatantly hands control of them to the unsupervised corporate benefactors of local, state and federal government; and egregious water, air and soil pollution by ammonia and ammonium nitrate, aerosol plumes and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) like benzene and butadiene, which are strongly associated with diseases like childhood leukemia. Houston’s satellite cities Beaumont and Port Arthur mark where Louisiana’s Cancer Alley becomes Texas’s. Due to the area’s heavy concentration of petrochemical and natural gas processing facilities, lung cancer death rates here far exceed the state average of 54 per 100,000: in Polk County, that rate is 99 per 100,000; in San Jacinto County, 95; Liberty County, 80; Orange County, 79. The ballooning of these rates is

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27 “Incidence Rate Tables.” *National Cancer Institute State Cancer Profiles* (April 2018). Note that Reserve, Louisiana, has the highest cancer rates in the country, at fifty times the national average. Jamiles Lartey and Oliver Laughland, “Almost every household has someone who has died from cancer.” *The Guardian* (May 6 2019):
contemporaneous with the ballooning of the fossil fuel industry in the region and the dismantling of Environmental Protection Agency regulations to make way for what Tianna Bruno and Wendy Jepsen have termed the “marketization of environmental justice,” based on a study of Port Arthur.28

Such converging economic, social, political and environmental trends evoke not the lightning bolt of ecological rapture used by mainstream news media to represent Harvey’s “new normal” and which the left has likewise struggled to think beyond in its agenda-setting for climate politics. Instead, they beg for representation of what Rob Nixon has termed “slow violence,” identifying how capitalism’s simultaneously environmental and social destruction and more specifically that of neoliberal capitalism largely occurs in an “unspectacular time” beneath the threshold required to make news headlines or even appear.29 How to represent not simply the 120,000 households that lost power during Harvey, the 80,000 with at least eighteen inches of floodwater, the 23,000 with over five feet, but the historical processes by which 84% of the city’s public parks came to be located in chronically toxic subwatersheds, so that Harvey’s flooding deepened rather than triggered suddenly for the first time their exposure to six Superfund sites, 32 municipal solid waste sites, and 299 petroleum storage


How to represent the recovery and remediation agenda in Harvey’s wake, the racial capitalist algorithm whereby some neighborhoods — like those with the 85% of Harris County households that do not have flood insurance — were simply left off the cleanup list? How to represent fossil capital in the absence of such an event as Harvey to concentrate these contradictions so acutely? David Simon’s television series *Treme* (2010-2013) and Benh Zeitlin’s film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) depict this regional history of “unspectacular” environmental violence by foregrounding the racialized and classed realities that precede, outlast and shape hurricane events, these texts having been occasioned and granted a wider audience by the “unnatural disasters” of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and BP’s Deepwater Horizon spill in 2010. Nonetheless, the “slow,” creeping, necrotic quality of violence wrought by gulf coast energy production and the broader fossil capitalist world we live in — unspectacular but no less world-ending — remains largely absent from and perhaps, as Nixon suggests, resistant or unavailable to representation through realist aesthetics.

As I’ve indicated, Ghosh has likewise doubted realism’s representative capacity for climate change, though as we’ll find for different reasons than Nixon. Let me ask then, following this central thread of literary criticism in the Environmental Humanities and the Energy

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Humanities, how does fossil capital arrange time and space? How do these arrangements shape what appears as spectacle, what goes unremarked, and what counts as realist? How does literary realism represent not only an apocalyptic event like Harvey but the broader political, economic and environmental relationships that produce it?

Nixon begins his 2009 essay “Neoliberalism, Slow Violence and the Environmental Picaresque” highlighting a line from John Berger: “Prophecy now involves a geographical rather than a historical projection; it is space and not time that hides consequences from us.”33 Andreas Malm similarly diagnoses, “Over the past decades, critical theory has moved towards space, away from time as the long-favored dimension, the classical vessel of structure, causation, rupture, possibility.”34 Fredric Jameson’s cognitive mapping likewise argues that the vocation of postmodern art is cartography, with the organization and representation of space acting as the “key mediatory instance” between the individual and late capitalism, coordinating “existential data (the empirical position of the subject) with unlived, abstract conceptions of the geographic totality.”35 Nixon’s slow violence is an attempt to restore time to the core of literary and critical engagements with the political

33 The opening paragraph of Nixon’s essay is worth quoting in full: “A quarter of a century ago, Raymond Williams called for more novels that attend to ‘the close living substance’ of the local while simultaneously tracing the ‘occluded relationships’ — the vast transnational economic pressures, the labor and commodity dynamics — that invisibly shape the local. To hazard such novels poses imaginative challenges of a kind that writers content to create what Williams termed ‘enclosed fictions’ need never face, among them the challenge of rendering visible occluded, sprawling webs of interconnectedness.” Nixon, “Neoliberalism”: 443. The John Berger line appears in Edward Soja, Postmodern Geographies: Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory. London: Verso, 1989: 22.

34 Andreas Malm, Fossil Capital 6.

economy and social relations of environment. Space is, of course, not irrelevant to environmental violence. Indeed, the only structure of feeling to match global warming’s “no future” ethos is its pervading sense of claustrophobia.36 Evacuate where? “There is no planet B.”37 There is profound political value in naming that, by no coincidence, just as Houston was going underwater so were Mumbai and Istanbul, and the same can be said for the way a neighborhood map of Houston’s flooding looks like a neighborhood map of where evictions jumped in the wake of Harvey.38 As Jameson has quipped, all politics is about real estate and history is a series of land grabs.39 Yet, such cartography without a historical materialist framing risks defaulting to a kind of mythic or ontological lens, an apocalyptic representation that I have suggested inures us to the realism of fossil capital’s predations on planet and people alike.

Thus for Nixon the difficulty and necessity of representing capitalism is centrally a question of time when it comes to environment. “Slow violence” presents a counterweight to the prevailing spatial orientation of contemporary critical thought, naming the temporal

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underbelly of neoliberalism’s “geographies of concealment.” In the language of literary analysis, environment usually registers as drama or fades into setting, taking the form of “extraordinary events [and] ordinary forgettings,” where nature’s visibility signals emergency and invisibility that all is well. Complicating this picture, Nixon demonstrates in a reading of Indra Sinha’s 2007 novel *Animal’s People* that the largely invisible quality of capitalist environmental violence is lost under these binaries of visibility/invisibility, drama/setting and emergency/non-emergency that shape how critics have understood the representation of environment — violences that however can indeed be represented and require a critical attention to time to interpret. Sinha’s text represents environmental violence in its unspectacular time primarily through a distortion of realist character development surrounding the 1984 Bhopal disaster. It offers a protagonist at once singular and typical of global capital’s exploitation and neglect, whose failure to develop in the order of the *bildungsroman* represents the slow timescale at which this systemic violence impacts livelihoods and shapes subjectivity: the novel’s plot transforms the narrative’s form. Additionally, *Animal’s People* represents how the invisibilizing of violence is a key technique of class war under neoliberalism effected by manipulating a variety of timescales. In addition to the multiple timescales at which the environmental violence of such a crisis as the Bhopal disaster takes place — from staged colonization to a chemical explosion to somatic invasion — capital redoubles these violences by expertly coordinating state and social institutions to keep these timescales radically out of joint, a kind of synchronized asynchrony that

40 Nixon’s geographies of concealment, then, dovetails with David Harvey’s spatial fix, but for Nixon capital’s mobility is tied as much to continued accumulation despite the steady dwindling of viable, non-toxic environments as to accumulation despite recurrent stagnation. David Harvey, *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003.

41 Rob Nixon, “Neoliberalism”: 460.
preempts meaningful protection and redress for subjects. For Nixon, a purely realist rendering of this strategy would reify it through the bourgeois vantage point that anchors realism as it has historically developed, hence Sinha’s incorporation of nonrealist elements into character and setting.

The timescale of the singular, apocalyptic event is primary within capital’s strategic coordination of time. As Nixon writes, “extreme weather events convert the attrition of slow violence into photogenic spectacle.” The drama of fossil fuels’ and environmental crisis’s visibility renders even less visible the ongoing conditions of social and environmental crisis under fossil capital. Space conceals time, presenting processes as things, and miracles appear to simply happen. Rather than offer us narrative, maps without history offer us what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls “visualization.” Fossil capital is remarkably easy to visualize or describe — think of Peter Mettler’s high-flying Petropolis (2010), the photography of Edward Burtynsky, or various climate change and peak oil documentaries. Each conducts a kind of x-ray on contemporary social form to expose petroleum’s circulatory sprawl. Gerry Canavan has named this figuration of oil its “sublime interactivity,” owing to the stunning simultaneity it communicates. Representing fossil capital in a politically transformative way need not

42 Andreas Malm, Fossil Capital 10.


abandon this spatial frame, but as Nixon suggests it must contextualize space through historical time in its multiple and often strategically disjointed threads. More, as Lukács and Jameson alike would insist, it must recenter these renderings of timespace around the mediation of subject and totality to avoid reifying capital and, in La Berge’s estimation, reducing its realism to a commodity.

1.1.b Petro-magic realism

More specific to fossil capital’s Houston headquarters going underwater, Jennifer Wenzel has suggested that the literary critic must approach fossil fuels in a way similar to that suggested by Nixon concerning the representation of environmental violence as a more general phenomenon, pointing to how the time of fossil fuel development registers in both literary plot and form simultaneously. “There is something almost antinarrative about the ontology of oil,” she writes, “if narrative is understood as the working out of cause and effect and oil is understood to produce something out of nothing… a viscous angel of history… a miraculous agent, external to a historical narrative, whose arrival makes possible what is otherwise impossible within the narrative’s own terms.” Like Nixon, she contends that, both within narratives and the worlds they represent, fossil capital resists the temporal progression associated with realist events, settings and characters, molding these into seemingly magical forms. With her analytic of “petro-magic-realism,” Wenzel indicates that oil’s troubled rendering in realist form owes to its promise and delivery of wealth without

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work and its obliteration of such normally “unyielding obstacles as time,” materializing nations and national literary traditions out of the thin air of non-history.48

Wenzel reads Ben Okri’s 1988 short story “What the Tapster Saw” against the first Nigerian novel in English, Amos Tutuola’s 1952 The Palm-Wine Drinkard as Okri’s revision of the tapster tale folk plot in light of the supplant of the palm economy that Tutuola represents by the petroleum economy. In a parallel to the lens offered by Sinha’s Animal, Okri’s readers see what the tapster sees. As an “agent of production,” his surreal journey to the land of the dead via a oil drilling site — again, a plot of environmental violence that shapes its narrative form — offers a “multi-perspectival vision [that] help[s] us to understand the intricate and multivalent relationships among palm, petroleum, and publishing; what tapsters see are not merely liminal, posthumous, or subterranean visions of the ‘bewitching’ or the fantastic, but also networks of production, consumption, and exploitation.”49 In this nascent extractive economy, the tapster’s window is not simply one providing mere visibility to an instance of fossil capitalist violence but rather the mapping of such an instance within interlocking time and spatial scales and filtered through a subject’s experience within the global political economy, relating empirical subject to abstract totality.

1.1.c Great derangements


I have engaged Nixon and Wenzel at length here because of their historical materialist approaches to the literary representation of an otherwise reified object, environmental crisis. I find their work most useful for determining how fossil capital’s “reality” relates to the reality of realist fiction today. Their approaches stand out in the Environmental Humanities for their generative complication of the field’s operative binaries of visible/invisible and representable/unrepresentable, categories that I have suggested are not historical in their analysis and which do not obtain in our “new normal” of both everyday apocalypse and a form of hegemony which does not hide this everyday apocalypse. The binaries of visible/invisible and representable/unrepresentable assign a high critical priority to “making visible” and a related political priority to “raising awareness” that I do not think are applicable in an era when capital readily makes us aware of its failures to secure health and happiness for life on earth. Nixon and Wenzel avoid the ahistorical trap of these binaries and instead demonstrate how everyday subjective experiences and environmental crisis are both historically produced and fundamentally linked together, and further because of this singular and typical quality can indeed be represented through dialectically linked elements of plot and form, such as in the cases of Animal and the tapster. In this attention to realism’s shifting contours over the course of capitalist history, Nixon and Wenzel are similar to Lukács and La Berge but of particular value to me because of their specific concern with what this historical shifting means for the realist representation of energy and environment, which I am likewise keen to understand.

Ghosh’s *The Great Derangement* is exemplary of the version of literary ecocriticism that I am positioning Nixon and Wenzel against and above, so I would like to take a paragraph or two to unpack what his analysis misses and why it dead-ends into the oversimple diagnosis that
climate change cannot be represented by realism. In the book’s first section, “Stories,” Ghosh writes,

Global warming’s resistance to the arts begins deep underground, in the recesses where organic matter undergoes the transformations that make it possible for us to devour the sun’s energy in fossilized forms. Think of the vocabulary that is associated with these substances: naphtha, bitumen, petroleum, tar, and fossil fuels. No poet or singer could make these fall lightly on the ear.50

Departing from his argument in his seminal essay, “Petrofiction,” wherein Ghosh attributes the conspicuous absence of the Great American Oil Novel to a uniquely American embarrassment about fossil fuel dependency — “verging on the unspeakable, the pornographic” — here fossil fuels acquire an almost ontological representability.51 “Global warming’s resistance to the arts” goes beyond any failure of the artist or reader and must instead be attributed to a vulcan lexicon fundamentally at odds with something like beauty, which literary fiction possesses and offers. Ghosh’s realism, then, is one which beautifies the world, which makes the world “fall lightly on the ear.” It does so, Ghosh goes on to clarify, by eliminating from view precisely that which defies the capitalist management of reality. Drawing from Franco Moretti, Ghosh asserts that the modern novel was “midwifed into existence around the world through the banishing of the improbable,” an arm of the biopolitical regulation of population and economy that made the nascent capitalist world-system “fall lightly on the ear.”52 Global warming falls into this improbable category, unthinkable for bourgeois art, which concerns itself instead with the tidy universe of the everyday and the domestic.

50 Amitav Ghosh, The Great Derangement: 73.
51 Amitav Ghosh, “Petrofiction.”
There are a set of overlapping contradictions here. The first concerns Ghosh’s strange fidelity to an art form he considers essentially bourgeois. If realism takes the view of capital, how could it represent global warming as anything but a contradiction to capital’s beautiful reality, an off-key note in a melody that otherwise “falls lightly”? Why would we expect a form so wedded to capital to represent the lie global warming gives to capitalism’s truth? Then again, Ghosh’s commitment to this form indicates he attributes it some sort of counterhegemonic political value. We are meant to yearn and strive for a great work of literary climate fiction. But if this is the case, and realism is indeed capable of thinking against fossil capital, why would we punish contemporary fiction for taking forms outside the purview of bourgeois realism, for diverging from the capitalist fever dreams of Thackeray and Austen? What explains Ghosh’s interest in both soberly condemning realism’s compromised origins and elegizing that it has strayed from this past today? Ghosh’s second contradiction concerns his identification of realism with the great works of the 19th century. Not only is Ghosh’s preoccupation with this overly narrow picture of realism inattentive to the form’s transformation and slippages across history and especially today, but it commits his argument to the iteration of realism perhaps least capable of understanding climate change’s systemic roots because of its especially close identity with a nascent bourgeois consciousness shielded from something like “the world.” Third, Ghosh continually oscillates between the realist novel in particular and “the arts” broadly. Thus not only does he fail to consistently historicize realism — not just as a modern form but as a form that has changed across modernity and postmodernity — but he moreover repeatedly obscures how even his transhistorical definition of realism distinguishes it from other literary and cultural forms and makes it of such particular interest to The Great Derangement.
Last, Ghosh’s fixation on “improbability” as a metric of representability introduces a number of paradoxes to his account of realism and global warming. His centerpiece case study for making this point is his own experience with an unexplained tornado in 1978, an “exceptional event” he cannot imagine representing without resorting to non-realist techniques because its occurrence was so unlikely. Yet as Nixon and Wenzel instruct, environmental crises like the Bhopal disaster and fossil-fueled global warming are nothing if not likely. There is nothing improbable about an under-regulated, cost-cutting corporate outpost in a postcolony malfunctioning and yielding a devastating environmental catastrophe, nor is anything improbable about the absence of any comprehensive repair and redress for the communities affected even decades afterward the event occurred. Likewise, fossil-fueled global warming resulting from a fossil-fueled global economy is far from improbable; indeed, it is certain. The scenes of everyday life that predominate the bourgeois novel Ghosh invokes may indeed banish improbable phenomena, but Nixon and Wenzel demonstrates that the everyday is precisely the timescale and spatial framework at which much environmental violence takes place — slow and unseen, beneath the threshold of drama, spectacle and apocalypse, contorting that everyday and the sense of reality it brings. For Ghosh to associate the absence of such environmental crisis with the everyday is to reify the realist novel’s bourgeois purview and banish Animal and tapsters from lived reality. In this way, the freak tornado is a false comparison — a once-in-a-lifetime event doesn’t match entire lifeworlds, how life chances are expertly managed as probable or improbable by the uneven distribution of environmental violence. And finally, even if we generously interpret Ghosh’s fixation on probability to be a critical commentary on capitalism’s failure to recognize and represent its own contradictions — he understands that climate change is a
problem of capital, but capital doesn’t — it becomes clear that Ghosh has not caught up to the “new normal” wherein capitalism embraces its apocalyptic reality in the deflationary cultural mode named by capitalist realism. Capitalism today, perhaps unlike 19th century capitalism, can admit the environmental unsustainability of perpetual economic growth. So why can’t Ghosh’s bourgeois realist novel? And if it could, it would bring us back to the question of why we would even look to literary fiction for representations in the first place, if we are to believe the form is so closely aligned with a capitalist worldview. Ghosh’s definition of realism is for an ideological order gone by and a literary form that has transformed since its first emergence in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding. By misjudging either the probability of global warming or capitalism’s own representation of global warming today, Ghosh’s sense of either realism or reality — or both — misses the mark.

Jeff Diamanti and Imre Szeman write, “The transition from a world organized around the flow of solar energy … to one reliant on the energies of fossil fuels brought with it the reconfiguration of time and space that so many thinkers have noted as a defining aspect of modernity.” Here, Diamanti and Szeman insist that the modern world represented in the modern novel is a fossil-fueled one. Fossil capital’s reality and a realist representation of fossil capital lies in the very timespace of modernity that fossil fuels help to produce, rather than a singular event that interrupts the reality of this timespace — the field that determines probability itself. Fossil capital is precisely what organizes Ghosh’s sense of everyday bourgeois “filler” as well as of what constitutes its interruption by unusual drama or its shattering contradiction by global warming. Because Nixon and Wenzel, as well as Lukács

and La Berge, have a historically dynamic understanding of what realism is — what reality its plots depict, what subject positions it may take the perspective of, what formal elements it might employ to match these — they do not assume that realism either beautifies the world or shows us the truth of its dark underside, nor that the reality of realism and the reality of capitalism are one and the same or fixed across history. Instead, they examine how particular texts represent particular environmental crises, with texts, crises and literary criticism alike all contextualized within the dialectical unfolding of fossil-fueled capitalist history. My analyses of *The Flamethrowers* and *The Road* will take this approach one step further to highlight how realist novels today often themselves represent the production of realist representations of the world.
1.2 *The Flamethrowers*: setting, character, form

1.2.a Port Arthur

Let’s turn to Kushner’s novel to see how these dynamics in the criticism play out. Given our framing discussion of Harvey, an interesting place to start in *The Flamethrowers* might be the gulf coast’s Port Arthur, Texas, a major node in Houston’s petro-megacity that makes an unexpected appearance in the novel. *The Flamethrowers* takes shape around a pair of *künstlerroman* plots, the primary of which follows a young woman, Reno, as she navigates the mid-70s’ conceptual art world in its uneven stretch across New York’s SoHo, her home in the American West, and northern Italy during the years of lead; the second follows T.P. Valera, a young diehard in Italy’s Arditi battalion during the First World War who will later become an auto tycoon in the model of Henry Ford. Through these characters and the uncanny, if surprising, parallels in their storylines, the novel develops its chief investments in gender, labor, and the relationship between “radical” art and “radical” politics.

None of these topics immediately summon to mind Port Arthur, which was certainly bustling with oil production in the 1970s but hardly a hotspot in the “expanded field” of conceptual art and autonomist praxis that seem to interest Kushner most in the Reno
storyline. Yet Port Arthur is the destination of one of the novel’s many road trips. In this scene, Reno’s friend and fellow performance artist, Ronnie, recounts to their SoHo artist peers his drive to Port Arthur at the request of one Saul Oppler, a fantastically vogue artist who brings to mind Gordon Matta-Clark or Robert Mapplethorpe. Ronnie admires Oppler a great deal and calculates that winning his favor might be a professional boon for his own uncertain career as an artist. So, borrowing Oppler’s car, Ronnie pulls a harrowing, adrenaline-fueled all-nighter to — bizarrely — shuttle the artist’s pet rabbits from his Manhattan loft to his secluded creative haven in the Texas town, a family estate:

I’d never driven an E-type Jaguar before, and I had to stop and get different shoes because my goddamn sneakers were too bulky or puffy or something to handle the tight little Jaguar pedals. … Professional dance slippers would have been best. I couldn’t find any of those. Nothing even close. I was at a truck stop in Maryland. They had key chains with crabs in sunglasses. Stun guns. Packages of tube socks, which everyone knows are for truckers, for no-mess masturbation while driving. They didn’t have any Italian shoes. I bought women’s bedroom slippers, Dearfoams, size thirteen. After I slit the heel they fit me perfect. I was ripping down I-85 in Oppler’s E-type with his rabbits in the back, wearing my Dearfoams, and somehow managed not to get pulled over. I felt like Mario Andretti. … I almost hit an armadillo. Got to Port Arthur in the late afternoon. Horrible place, by the way. Big, squat refineries, air that smells of burning tires. Snakes dangling from the trees, trying to stay cool, I guess. And dead ones, flat puddles of jerky fused to the road. In the middle of the gravel drive into the property was a giant lizard eating a baguette, one of those really cheap and fluffy grocery store baguettes. Sickening, this lizard tearing off hunks of bread and devouring them. I park, and Oppler comes out of his studio and starts limping toward the car, I guess his leg was asleep or something. He’s calling to those rabbits like they

know their names and are going to be happy to see him. I’m thinking, isn’t he amazed by how quickly I got here? Isn’t he going to at least mention it? I was redlining his Jaguar. I pissed in a Dr Pepper bottle. When it was full I pissed in a potato chips bag. I broke the law. Gave up a night’s sleep. Forwent the tube socks at the truck stop. … All in the name of doing Saul a favor. I mean, you try to help a person. He opens the car door and leans in the back and makes this sound. A wailing. High-pitched. … Those goddamn rabbits were dead.55

What does this passage teach us about fossil capital? What timespace does it represent, and how? What can we say about its realism?

First, as it relates to a realist cartography, the brief cameo of Port Arthur offers a surprising counterpoint to the novel’s preponderant setting in Manhattan and Milan, spoken-for cultural hubs that Kushner might mine for data on the era’s zeitgeist without her reader thinking twice. Add Port Arthur to the mix, along with Reno’s hometown namesake, and Kushner’s map of the postmodern art world begins to coalesce with what Stephanie LeMenager terms “petrotopia.”56 Normally relegated to background hum, if it even makes an appearance at all, the fossil economy is part of Kushner’s picture of postmodernity, a “squat,” “sickening” intrusion into the high art and high-minded leftisms that occupy the bulk of the novel and which soon return to divert readers from the stink of refineries. The novel’s opening on Reno driving for days on end through the American Southwest and her plot’s later venturings to a striking Fiat factory only deepen the novel’s exploration of what Patricia Yaeger has called an “energy unconscious,” as I’ll discuss later in the chapter. For


now, the Port Arthur road trip clarifies how Kushner’s novel spatializes reality by way of fossil fuels, whether via the vehicles that propel characters hundreds of miles at the drop of a hat or the oil wealth that underpins the creative economy, as indicated by Oppler’s Port Arthur pedigree.

Second, paralleling Nixon and Wenzel, this passage’s timescape takes us to the edge of realism. This passage captures the novel at its most picaresque, one dizzying episode of many episodes that emerge and disappear without developing its coming-of-age plots as much as simply marking the passage of time like the bumpers, kickers, switches and slingshots of a pinball machine, part of the novel's genre-bending, genre-failing project. (What are we to make of the lizard eating a baguette? Nothing, really, in the end, apart from maybe noting how much it resembles the reptiles that guide Okri’s aforementioned tapster.)

In a handful of sentences we’ve flown from New York to Maryland to I-85 to Port Arthur, landmarked by half-glimpsed details like crab keychains and Dr. Pepper, redolent Americana, Kushner’s prose redlining like the Jaguar’s gas pedal. This is not the tidy domestic realism Ghost uplifts: Ronnie’s manic, associative, run-on sentences; the rush of the all-nighter; the clumsy adaptation of bodily rhythms to the demands of road time (pissing into bottles and bags, masturbating into a sock); Oppler’s total lack of concern for the efficient job that Ronnie made of the drive (“isn’t he amazed by how quickly I got here?”); and, of course, the dead rabbit punchline — that none of Ronnie’s nightmare drive mattered anyway, those hours were wasted, moot, might as well not have happened. Further, this sequence of events does not occur within the primary narrative of the novel but is instead displaced onto a past-perfect one as Ronnie recounts it to his friends after the fact. Ronnie moreover recounts the events in a kind of performance that Reno finds unsettling for its similarity to Ronnie’s
artwork, such that even the story’s telling is not quite contemporaneous with realist plot-time: it is a work of art within the novel, a play within a play. Is this a gimmick? The timeline that brings together Port Arthur and Manhattan within Kushner’s map of late capitalism is jumbled and erratic, even dead-ended. The two cities’ timescapes are disassociated from or even conflictual with one another, surreal and mismatched; the characters, settings and drama offered as contiguous and whole but stretching the limits of credulity, a joke.

Importantly, following Nixon, Wenzel, Lukács and Jameson’s emphasis on the subject or “agent of production” — in other words, a worker — this off-kilter realist timespace coalesces around a figure, Ronnie. In this scene Ronnie is center stage but within the novel’s broader plots he plays only a supporting or minor role, with personal attitudes and socioeconomic position Kushner offers to us as both idiosyncratic and common among his generation, singular and typical. Ronnie’s position in fossil capitalist timespace and the logic driving his plot is defined by his status as a worker under an incipient regime of flexible accumulation. His journey is an uncanny picture of trucker work-time, with radically accelerated turnover times in the delivery and consumption of commercial goods and a correspondent generalized time-space compression, as theorized most extensively by David Harvey. Ronnie offers a precarious, gig-ified doppelgänger of the more stable, propertied position of Oppler. With oil money and oil land, Oppler summons Ronnie like an intern, who is eager at the mere chance of career advancement and can fossil-fuel his way toward this dead-ended opportunity. Both artists are in this sense tapsters, though The Flamethrowers’s refusal to abandon realist aesthetics as Sinha and Okri’s texts leaves the picture of these

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tapsters more fractured and less resolved by the capacities of those more fully genre-fied narratives. *Animal’s People* and “What the Tapster Saw” resolve the temporal and, less so, spatial contradictions of fossil capital by turning to genre form — abandoning realism, essentially — while Kushner’s historical novel clings to it, and so its aesthetic resolution fails and the subject position of worker within fossil capitalism is a bit more muddied. Perhaps it is because its realist tapsters are not quite legible as tapsters that the novel has flown somewhat under the radar of petrocultural analyses. Yet in the end, decidedly, Kushner’s fractured, bloodshot cognitive map of the early neoliberal 1970s takes us to the same fossil capitalist headquarters in Harvey’s crosshairs, with character, setting and drama all fundamentally fossil-fueled.

1.2.b Resource aesthetics

Here I think Brent Ryan Bellamy, Michael O’Driscoll and Mark Simpson’s “resource aesthetics” offers a generative reframing of slow violence and petro-magic-realism adequate to the complex realism at play in Kushner’s representation of fossil capital.58 Resource aesthetics, in their words, “return[s] the question of visibility to a consideration of the material requirements of aesthetic production … by thinking the figural iterations of resources and the literal face of aesthetics.”59 Resituating visibility within the brute, even vulgar materiality of what Marx terms “natural wealth,” resource aesthetics clarifies the aesthetic to be “a site of inescapably social and material contest,” where texts are both acted

on by and act upon their political economic conditions, conditions fundamentally colored by fossil energy. Representation is neither merely ideological and passive to the material formation of life nor unyielding and autonomous from it, but, rather, per Jacques Rancière’s “sensible” or Terry Eagleton’s “amphibious,” neither and both. As Bellamy et al write,

Resource aesthetics can be said to provoke the contradictions between the instrumental and the beautiful, the literal and figurative, extraction and its representation … the aesthetics of resources alongside the aesthetic as resource. … Disrupting the seamless space between form and function, resource aesthetics as critical method challenges the aesthetics of symmetry that underlie resource extraction: a phantasmatic aesthetics of exchange without waste or excess mirroring the belief in a balance of nature that will always right itself regardless of humanity’s incursions. At the same time, to regard the aesthetic through the lens of resource extraction is to reframe the aesthetic as an appreciation of its material condition: to destabilize the presumption that aesthetics is a study of only what is visible and to insist that attention to the sensible must necessarily extend beyond the visual province of conventional aesthetic discourse.

Oil thus demands dual, dialectical attention to the visibility of resources in our cultural objects (an anomalous road trip to a petrochemical refining campus, where realism shades into picaresque; a hurricane strike on the thumping heart of oil hegemony, where weather shades into miracle) and the aesthetic function of resources and their infrastructure, which disappear the historical oddity and class war end-game of fossil capital into the ostensibly neutral spaces and “ordinary forgettings” of everyday life. This latter emphasis on infrastructural aesthetics answers Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle’s call for attention to

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capital’s “logistical landscape” as well as makes possible for studies in the novel form the notion of fossil capital as a Bakhtinian chronotope or literary infrastructure, the material precondition for the seamless unfolding of realist time and space and, equally important, the contradiction upon which they snag, wrinkle, and fray. Because the saturative quality of oil’s aesthetic-ideological mesh means that it most often appears as a spectacle that both names and removes from political contest the conditions of that spectacle, those cultural forms which consciously attempt to render fossil fuels both and neither and imperfectly and with subjects offer an aesthetic counter-vocabulary of seeing and thinking through the mesh-spectacle dynamic and into “energy’s dialectical imbrication with capitalist accumulation” — or, a cognitive map. Thus, in both oil’s easy insensibility and its painstaking, awkward or intrusive sensibility, resource aesthetics gives the petrocultural critic something to grab onto.

Importantly, following Rancière, Bellamy et al coach that the clarity offered by the method is characterized by a “simultaneity of inclusion and exclusion,” where the immediate perception of resources fails to secure their aesthetic availability. In Kushner’s novel, this representative mode helps piece together a map of fossil capital’s globalizing reach at the


64 “Render” follows Brent Ryan Bellamy et al, who write, “The term ‘render’ is key, functioning through what Nicole Shukin has memorably theorized as its ‘double entendre’ or ‘double logie’ to provide a hinge between the figural and the material — between representation as resource and resource extraction as process.” Here they draw from Nicole Shukin, Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. Brent Ryan Bellamy et al, “Introduction.”

dawn of the neoliberal era and the fossil-fueling of labor, a map that consistently eludes Reno’s full grasp even as she intuits, follows and represents it. The same “air that smells of burning tires” from Ronnie’s time in Port Arthur, for instance, surrounds our heroine during her trip to Milan on the dime of an Italian automotive company — a thinly veiled surrogate for Fiat, whose factories were a springboard for 1969’s “Hot Autumn” and the subsequent years of lead. The smell of gasoline in the rioting autonomist streets returns Reno to the childhood scenes of her eponymous hometown, allowing her for the first time in the novel to tentatively locate Nevada and Milan on the same map. Here, by virtue of tar and rubber, Reno finds the alienation of her social mobility to disappear. In the very possibility of such a cartography, however, the common gasoline smell highlights its ultimate insensibility:

I left with Gianni just as the police began arresting anyone on the street who was wet. Anyone in possession of lemons. Anyone who smelled of gasoline. That smell was pervasive. The students smelled of it. Some of the women. All of the men. It was something I associated with Reno kids, my cousins and their friends, always smelling of gasoline. Scott and Andy returning from the filling station in the back of Uncle Bobby’s pickup truck with pink gasoline in plastic jugs, or siphoning it from unsuspecting neighbors with a segment of old garden hose, their studious expressions, pulling gasoline, angling the siphoned liquid into a container, sometimes getting a mouthful by mistake. … Boys who loved the smells of gas and oil and carburetor cleaner, soaking into their hands, soaked into the red shop rags they used to clean engine parts, cleaning these parts in a manner so fastidious it was as if they were cleaning tarnish from expensive jewelry, working the rags over the tiny set-screws of their carburetors. The hands that cleaned carburetor and engine parts, permanently black. That I could draw no connection between that world and this one, the people who stank of gasoline in the Piazza del Popolo, and Scott and Andy who loved its smell, made me sad for Scott and Andy in a way I could not explain.66

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The tension Reno describes here — the same smells, auto parts and greasy boys but “no connection” to be drawn across them — captures Rancière’s identification of the aesthetic as “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.” Whether the Port Arthur petropolis that underwrites New York-based concept art or the gasoline fumes that pervade the high culture “real world” of Milan just as much as the low culture “nowhere” of Nevada, such glimpses into the fossil fuel base of Reno’s life allow readers to see all that petromodernity encompasses (in terms of “self-evident facts,” the Piazza crowd and Scott and Andy) as well as what it excludes (an aesthetic rendering of the Piazza crowd and Scott and Andy in some social or political affinity). This inclusion and exclusion are equally constitutive to late capitalist space and its aesthetics. Kushner’s petrocultural cognitive map both comes together and falls apart.

Following Nixon, beyond the sheer possibility or impossibility of such a map, the utility of a spatial imaginary for the ecocritic lies in whether it aesthetically resolves neoliberalism’s “temporal dissociations.” In my mind, Kushner’s map artfully exposes without attempting to aesthetically resolve the contradictions of environmental time, because at the novel’s most spatially integral — a feat Jameson considers utopian in its impulse and impossible to complete — its timescape remains maddeningly fragmented. The gas smell shared by Milan and Reno, these locations are emphatically denied any real connection even with our kunstler heroine functioning as a hinge between them. That hinge is defined precisely by the impossibility of integrating the timescapes of these two worlds, an impossibility that adopts

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a kind of sentimentality or melancholy by positioning US flyover country and its people in a “sad” or backwards state that even the sensory bond of petroleum cannot overcome. Reno is our heroine’s past, Milan her present. Reno is history’s runoff, quaint, and Milan, in the thick of history. In Reno, your hands are studiously, lovingly black, playing at precapitalist craftsmanship; in Milan, you hope the smell doesn’t give you up to the cops, militating on behalf of Fiat in its new covenant with the neoliberal state. Even when the space of petroleum approaches some sort of cohesion, historical time remains uneven, out of joint.

1.2.c Kushner’s fossil capital realists

Organizing the novel as she does around two künstlerroman plots, Kushner allows us to grapple alongside the political impasse of Reno’s petro-subjectivity the question of representative impasse. Representing the intersection of fossil fuels, politics and culture — in short, fossil capital — is not just Kushner’s task but that of her artist heroes as well, and to equally indeterminate ends. That’s right — a fossil capitalist realist novel about fossil capitalist realism’s producers themselves. Both Reno and Valera have moments of clarity and inspiration rendering experiences of what Diamanti and Szeman term petro-subjectivity. But to render it on realist terms, must abandon the global, sweeping historical lens gestured at by Kushner’s proliferating fossil capitalist maps and dilate into hyper local and hyper present settings. Significantly, this present tense takes shape around the experience of fossil-fueled speed — driving a motorcycle (my gerund form here intentional, the suspended time of a non-verb) — and offers Kushner’s characters themselves the opportunity to stage the petro-aesthetic impasse. Though it is alone on their Moto Valera bikes that oil-time seems

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coherent, all attempts by the novel’s protagonists to draw a resource aesthetics from these experiences repeatedly, vexingly fail; oil stunts the künstlerroman. The most memorable of such scenes features Reno in her trials at breaking the female land speed record in Utah’s Bonneville Salt Flats, one of which results in a shattering crash. Reno’s experience of increasing speed magnifies time into an almost viscous medium that stretches the bounds of each moment, until time is both passing and not: “I was going 120. Then 125. I felt alert to every granule of time. Each granule was time, the single pertinent image, the other moment-images, before and after, lost, unconsidered. … I was in an acute state of present tense. Nothing mattered but the milliseconds of life at that speed.”

Reno’s lucidity in these moments — rendered in the immersive, non-linear image/afterimage terms of that most literally petrocultural medium, the plastic ribbon of film — contrasts sharply with her photos of the crash site, which underwhelm, only vaguely attached to the experience she wants them to represent, “detritus of an experience, ambiguous marks in the white expanse of the salt flats.”

The Flamethrowers’s second plot captures the same impasse in its trace of auto tycoon T.P. Valera as a young diehard in Italy’s Arditi battalion during the first world

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68 Rachel Kushner, The Flamethrowers: 29-30. The scene echoes one in Don DeLillo’s Point Omega (2010), in which the novel’s protagonist, Richard Elster, attends an exhibit at MoMA entitled, “24 Hour Psycho,” likely borrowed from Douglas Gordon’s concept piece from the early 1990s. The artwork displays Hitchcock’s film slowed down such that it occupies 24 hours from beginning to end, replaying each day. In DeLillo’s novel, we witness the Psycho piece’s slowing down of the famous murder scene, which both allows the reader to apprehend its full horror otherwise hushed by the standard 24 frames-per-second pace and decades of iconicity as well as defamiliarizes and empties the scene of precisely such horror by rendering it abstract, almost nonhuman. This is the doubled, tripled eerieness of Elster’s viewing in the novel: the nested present-past-perfect tensing of the action on screen, the film recording, the slow motion, the museum spectatorship, the rendering of these all in the novel, the reader’s reading. Like Kushner’s novel, Point Omega dwells in post-abstract art as well as the desert spaces of the American west to register the slowing and thickening of contemporary ecological time. Don DeLillo, Point Omega. New York: Scribner, 2010.

war. Motorcycling with his futurist throng, “autochoreographed” like fish, Valera writes “poems about speed and metal” in frenzied bursts. Yet, after such moments in oil’s consuming presence,

An hour later he could not recall his poem. Only a few fragments, like broken seashells caught in a dragnet. OIL OF POSSIBILITY and REMORSELESS, SPEEDING SHADOW BELOW BLUE UNBROKEN SKY, and LOVE AND HATE THE SAME, FORGED IN YOUR FLYWHEEL / BLACK AS MELTED PRUSSIAN CANNONS / NO TAINT OF DEFEAT.

Like Reno, the moment passes and Valera is left with mere “detritus.” Though crude, the poem’s CAPS LOCK form seems more adequate to Valera’s subject than the whirlwind, half-baked images that its prose clumsily names. In both examples, the oil-time of now is briefly integral before suddenly crashing into the future. Thus, in foregrounding the desperate, futile desire to aestheticize fossil speed shared by both Fordist futurism and post-Fordist conceptual art, Kushner’s novel indicates that oil’s presence, though both material precondition and burning inspiration for such artistic regimes, can only register as a rupture to them. As Reno observes, “The photographs would be nothing but a trace. A trace of a

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70 Rachel Kushner, The Flamethrowers: 74-75.

trace.” Valera’s pointing to seashells is appropriate: imprints of something disappeared, his and Reno’s artworks are, in a word, fossils, and every bit as dead.

Resource aesthetics prescribes critical attention to oil both in its literal, self-evident appearance in cultural objects as well as in its aesthetic lack or unavailability, which lends itself to symptomatic reading by the negative dialectician. These motorcycle scenes require such a method. As particularly disappointing cases of what Peter Hitchcock calls the “missed encounter” of oil, Kushner’s high-speed moments are as exhilarating to her readers as to her characters, wild and loud, virile. That the novel engages fossil fuels in such an intoxicating, affirmative mode suggests that its oil aesthetics functions at least in part ideologically — the rev of the engine, the wind in your hair, REMORSELESS POSSIBILITY: this is freedom, this is life! Reno and Valera are surely gripped by what LeMenager calls “the emotional power of twentieth-century material cultures,” the corporeal experiences of petromodernity that constitute its everyday common sense, desire and joy, and perhaps the novel’s readers are too without such a canny guide as Kushner to send us crashing. Yet, simultaneously, in fossil speed’s flight from narrative logic and the strictures of representation, it indeed promises

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72 Rachel Kushner, *The Flamethrowers*. 30. Plastic has been described in similar ways as Kushner here describes its base substance, oil, as trace. Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis: “less a substance than its antithesis, a paradigm in which substance is transformed into a way of being unmoored from the coordinates that stabilize presence and meaning.” Roland Barthes: “at one end, raw, telluric matter, at the other, the finished, human object; and between these two extremes, nothing; nothing but a transit… And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature… it is less a thing than a trace of movement.” Amanda Boetzkes and Andrew Pendakis, “Visions of Eternity: Plastic and the Ontology of Oil.” *e-flux* 47 (September 2013); Roland Barthes, “Plastic.” *Mythologies*. New York: Noonday, 1991: 110-111.

73 Peter Hitchcock, “Oil in an American Imaginary.” *New Formations* 69 (Spring/Summer 2010).

74 Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil* 68.
some version of autonomy from ideological capture. Over and over, we witness oil slip the aesthetic dragnet, breaking Kushner’s book and the best artistic efforts of her heroes.

Aesthetic kryptonite, unfurling novelistic infrastructure just to rip it up, in the very ideological seductions that can only be represented for a moment before evaporating, oil also offers terrain for counterhegemonic thought and action. Minding this ideology-autonomy duality, it is thus via Kushner’s repeated return to the fleeting experience of speed — recurrent throughout the novel, a sort of adhesive binding for two plots that otherwise only parallel rather than converge — that she points to oil’s insensitivity as a historical medium and thereby dialectically renders sensible fossil capital. Similar to the smell of gas or the delirium of an overnight drive, the “self-evident facts of sense perception” that accompany Reno and Valera’s speed gather Kushner’s plots in something like petrocapitalist totality. But, this gathering requires Kushner to tie her narrative threads where they inevitably fray, and refray — bulging knots of the aesthetic stall-out that oil presents to representation in Reno’s photos, Valera’s poems or Kushner’s own novel. The Flamethrowers suggests that fossil capital might be only sensible at the high speeds that for their visceral self-evidence and aesthetic failure both obscure and clarify oil’s “historical substance.” Thus in Kushner’s novel oil is not quite the apocalyptic “antinarrative” force that Wenzel suggests but, in consistently rupturing the otherwise continuous character of the plots, it counterintuitively makes possible our sense of a fossil capitalist totality that exists beyond realist capacity, securing historical consciousness precisely in the denial of oil’s aesthetic cohesion.

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75 Andreas Malm, Fossil Capital 13.
Like skidmarks and the drip of pitch on white salt — and toward the novel’s end, the gleam of engine against Alpine snow or, in Valera’s petit-prince upbringing in North Africa, against the white of laundry, limestone and ocean froth — oil’s aesthetic content is best rendered as a black gape. This gape is not, however, truly vacant, but rather emphatically material and one which dialectically renders sensible the seemingly pure setting that it stains, in a kind of Benjaminian understanding of history. Importantly, to beat Nixon’s drum and my own dead horse, this flash is fundamentally temporal rather than spatial, disruptive rather than integrative, made possible by an aesthetic plane that is both ideological to and autonomous from fossil capital. The disenchanting stillness of Reno’s photography and of Valera’s stop-and-go poetic scraps acts as a photo negative, reproduction and subversion, to petromodernity’s aesthetic-ideological mesh.

1.2.d Kushner as fossil capital realist

Reno and Valera’s moments of dissonance mirror the halting quality of Kushner’s own prose in depicting them. It bears mentioning that, alongside these plots, the novel’s third, implicit bildungsroman stars Kushner herself, puzzling the question of the contemporary novel, whether it like the futurists can believe in its own aesthetic-political viability or like the postmodernists must deploy various formal gimmicks and inside jokes to grasp at a political significance high art no longer carries. In its relation to fossil capital, the novel is a similar “ambiguous mark” of the object it seeks to render, mere “detritus” of the real thing. However, diverging from Ghosh’s lamentation, Kushner suggests that the failure of the

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novel and other forms to aestheticize fossil capital marks the opportunity to understand petromodernity’s aesthetic regime. Thus, drawing upon Georg Lukács’s formulation of historical fiction in *The Historical Novel* (1962) and *Studies in European Realism* (1964), I’ll offer *The Flamethrowers* as the historical novel of fossil capital and suggest that to render sensible its subject the office must follow, as Kushner expertly does, the absent “moving center” of oil’s aesthetic rendering, its remorseless speed and impossible historical time.77

*The Flamethrowers*’s two, now three, plots chart the development of modernist, postmodernist and (cringe!) post-postmodernist aesthetics across three moments of crisis in petroleum hegemony’s long twentieth century: 1) the birth of Fordism and fascism, 2) the dual emergencies of stagflation and energy resourcing in the 1970s, and 3) the novel’s own conditions of production in the era of climate change and tough oil development (cringeworthy in its own right). This trajectory alone makes the argument that there is something inextricable about our politics, our aesthetics and our resources — that my own cumbersome distinctions between modernist, postmodernist and post-postmodernist and their understandings of subject and totality beg to be historicized through Malm’s long waves of fossil capital. In addition to those mentioned, a few key scenes in the novel highlight the possibility and meanings of such a historicized relationship between art, power and oil: Mussolini’s corpse hanging on exhibit at an Esso gas station, Italy’s autonomist riots as they originate in the country’s auto industry and converge with performance art, as well as ongoing conversations among Reno’s peers about the energy crisis and appraisals of the automobile as an art object, gnawing at the remains of the Fordist economy for some sort

of aesthetic sustenance. In this sense, to survey art and politics of the 20th century and to understand those of the 21st, the novel takes as its organizing principle fossil capital, the gushing, refining, revving, spilling ties that bind the century together as a single, coherent period and whose aesthetic eyes you cannot quite meet. This is surely a provocative choice on its own and one furthermore unusual within the petrofiction corpus, whose texts typically follow an individual or community within the oil economy (Upton Sinclair’s *Oil* [1927] or Abdul Rahman Munif’s *Cities of Salt* [1984]) or even the very biophysical substance of oil (Reza Negarestani’s *Cyclonopedia* [2008]) but rarely the *longue durée* of the fossil economy itself or the aesthetic movements that populate its tenure.78

The result of Kushner approaching her subject this way is a formally heterogenous novel that incorporates and unsettles genres that range from more to less explicitly fossil-fueled: futurist and vorticist poetics, painting and sculpture; the road trip novel; performance art, land art and video art; the manifesto; the picaresque, the bildungsroman, the feminist novel and the historical novel. A veritable archive of aesthetic production under petromodernity, *The Flamethrowers* is a bold rejoinder to the questions of period, scale and form asked by such concepts as petrofiction, climate fiction, and, vastly more popular than these, the

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Anthropocene. Indeed, in its capacious structure, *The Flamethrowers* presents a strong counterargument to Ian Baucom’s work on the historical novel of the Anthropocene. Whereas I from the start believe “the historical novel of the Anthropocene” to be simply a contradiction in terms, given that the Anthropocene imaginary lacks the dialectical understanding of history required of the historical novel form, Baucom’s adaptation of Lukács’s “moving center” to “moving centers” attempts to account for the multiple temporal scales called forth by the Anthropocene. Against such an approach, Kushner’s novel is instead grounded in the not-pluralized moving center of fossil-fueled capitalist production across multiple but nonetheless bound regimes of accumulation. This vertical rather than horizontal or, in Baucom’s words, “nested” framework seems essential to Lukács’s assessment of “whether it is the unity of the external and internal worlds or the separation between them which is the social basis of the greatness of a novel” — emphatically, it is their unity, and the Anthropocene admits no subject of history whose internal world can bear such unity with the external world of climate change. In framing oil as, per Wenzel, “a


80 Ian Baucom, “‘Moving Centers.’”

81 See chapter three of this dissertation.

viscous angel of history,” Kushner presents us with a historical novel of fossil capital. *The Flamethrowers* makes possible oil’s theorization as both ideology and autonomy, setting and spectacle, the cancer rates that precede and outlive hurricane events.\(^8^3\)

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\(^8^3\) Jennifer Wenzel, “Petro-Magic-Realism Revisited”: 212.
1.3 Literature of the long wave

1.3.a Fossil capital “in motion”

In his 1949 essay on Dostoevsky, Lukács writes,

On the one hand, the ‘arbitrariness,’ the abnormality of the family [in Dostoevsky’s *The Raw Youth*] appears in the minds of the individuals — the better people of the present are almost all mentally ill, says a figure of that novel; and on the other hand, all the distortions within the family are only the most conspicuous expression of a deep crisis in the whole society. In seeing and presenting this, Dostoevsky becomes the first and greatest poet of the modern capitalist metropolis. There were of course poetic treatments of city life long before Dostoevsky … but Dostoevsky was the first — and is still unsurpassed — in drawing the mental deformations that are brought about as a social necessity by life in a modern city. The genius of Dostoevsky recognizes consists precisely in his power of recognizing and representing the dynamics of a future social, moral and psychological evolution from germs of something barely beginning. We must add that Dostoevsky does not confine himself to description and analysis — to mere ‘morphology,’ to use a fashionable term of present-day agnosticism — but offers also a genesis, a dialectic and a perspective.84

This passage defines realism in the historical novel by three marks. The first is this arbitrariness of the Dolgoruky family’s psychological disturbances, whereby the particular events involving particular characters — what Lukács has elsewhere called “wholeness or verisimilitude” — can stand apart from any overarching “authorial will or agenda.”85 The second mark is such an agenda of the “unity of the inner and outer,” central to Lukács’s

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literary criticism far beyond this essay. Here, the acute mental illness and generalized psychological misery depicted in Dostoevsky’s works constitute “the purest classical symptom of his ‘primary phenomenon,’” social alienation by capital, and the author’s brilliance lies in manifesting such broader conditions of modern life into the psychic, often visceral experiences of his characters. The third mark relates to the author’s representation of such a unity ahead of its full development, writing amid the “germs of something barely beginning” and elaborating from these emergent conditions, as Raymond Williams would call it, a fuller picture of the world being built. In short, for Lukács the historical novel represents moments of transition or crisis in social and individual life in order to represent historical change per se.

A historical novel of fossil capital, then, might represent fossil capital at such moments of transition. A similar impulse drives a special issue of *PMLA*, in which Patricia Yaeger suggests a project of studying “Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale-Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power and Other Energy Sources.” In the issue’s essays, scholars engage in something like a canon reformation, disputing Ghosh’s provocation that there is no Great American Oil Novel (or Great American Wood or Coal or Atomic Novel) by recovering the “energy unconscious” of major works and authors, and this project has continued in the decade or so since the issue’s publication. Michael Walonen, for instance, outlines “a well-established world literary tradition whose constituent texts may not be *War and Peace* of what Ghosh calls the ‘Oil Encounter,’ but nonetheless offer an incisive running commentary

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on oil’s social and spatial impact.” He offers petrocultural readings of *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1927) and of such late 20th-century texts as Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco* (1992) and Ghosh’s own *The Circle of Reason* (1986). Stephanie LeMenager has grappled with the presence of oil in post-45 US literature, where suburb- and highway-obsessed standards of the period like Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) and Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) when viewed through the lens of oil appear positively drenched in the it. In assembling this petrofiction corpus to contest the notion that the energy materials of modernity have left our literary objects untouched, this version of the field is essentially borne from the argument that it did not or could not exist. However, Lukács indicates that it is not simply pointing out a connection between energy sources and literature but analyzing the historical mechanism of this connection that contains the political promise proper to the historical novel.

Thus with my reading of *The Flamethrowers* as a historical novel of fossil capital, I aim to refocus from the petrocultural critical methods employed by Walonen and LeMenager, which primarily analyze novels and oil rather than novels and fossil capital. In redefining or recentering “petrofiction” from the representation of oil to the representation of fossil capital — an analytic that concerns precisely this historical mechanism, connecting fossil fuels to economy and thus to politics and culture — I am interested in works of the order described by Lukács which formally manifest moments of crisis among energy regimes and, even more so crises, internal to the time when fossil fuels have been the world’s dominant

energy source for production and by mid-20th century, as chapter two will examine, reproduction. A novel that offers, in Lukács’s words, “a genesis, a dialectic and a perspective” as it pertains to the fossil capitalist world might examine the transition from wood to coal or from one “long wave” of fossil development to another as a means of understanding how it is that fossil fuels mediate capitalist reality and shape the lives led within its bounds. Such a refocus asks questions as much of form as content, if not more. Take Walonen’s interest in *Moby-Dick*, a novel that on the level of content is evidently interested in energy resourcing. But does the whale oil economy of 19th century New England demand such an epic, encyclopedic form as Melville’s text? As the whaling ship appears less like the stage for high seas adventure and more like just another factory floor, how does the novel’s form tell us something not just about the text and the energy economy of its time but about how a dynamic, developing energy economy registers in textuality? Likewise with Sinclair: why represent robber baron capital in naturalist form? What shifts internal to fossil capital explain the formal distinctions between Melville’s 1851 text and Sinclair’s one in 1927? How might the historical novel represent and help us to understand how fossil capital, finally, works?

Kushner’s fractured, deranged realism provokes parallel questions: How do *The Flamethrowers*’s own conditions of emergence at a particular stage in fossil capital shape its particular representation of oil? How do crisis moments of the first world war and the early 1970s appear from Kushner’s own fossil capitalist crisis conditions in 2013? It is critical that

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the subject of Kushner’s novel is fossil capital at points of crisis in the American “long twentieth century,” and specifically that the Reno plot and Kushner’s own moment mark the tumultuous onset and uncertain middle of the neoliberal long wave. The road trip novel of the postwar salad days is not tortured by a rupture of form and content; Kerouac and Nabokov’s aesthetic conflicts occupy the plot alone. Valera, on the other hand, navigates the birth pangs of Fordist production, forged through world war militarization and electrifying industry, fossilizing transport and deepening colonial footholds. Rather than flee the mind-numbing suburbs for the easy self-discovery of the open road, he is buried by the impossibility of Futurist aesthetics. In turn, Reno’s journey plays out within the cluster of automating, flexibilizing, floating, merging, offshoring and otherwise terminal crisis-averting tactics of late fossil capital — a portrait of the artist in the young neoliberal long wave. In representing fossil capital in transition and in representing past representations of it in parallel transitions, Kushner gives a historical picture of how fossil capital works, how its long waves develop to condition social life, and how these processes appear aesthetically and might be represented. Or, as Jed Esty writes, Kushner depicts fossil capital “in motion”:

Critical realism does not fix or freeze the current state of affairs but shows society in motion; it would avoid presenting global capitalism as the transcendental signified or catalogued hyper-object and would instead aim to capture the world system operationally as a series of interlocking processes, causes and effects, screens and mediations. The current vogue for historical fiction might mean precisely this sense of renewed interest in the motive forces of history as the proper subject for the novel.89

1.3.b Fossil fuels and neoliberal production

To think about these “motive forces” of fossil capital and the historical novel today, in this section I will address two questions: What is the relationship of fossil fuels to capital and to the neoliberal mode of accumulation? How are these relationships mediated in literary form?

To the first question, Bellamy and Diamanti supply an unambiguous answer in their introduction to *Materialism and the Critique of Energy*:

> Whether for the requirement of aggregate economic growth or the expansion of new horizons of value, capitalism has been historically and logically bound to ever-increasing quantities of energy. The core contradiction of today’s economic system is and always has been tied to its facility with energy. … Energy is dialectically bound to economic history — not a concept or variable independent of it, but a structuring force without which capital could not operate.\(^{90}\)

Bellamy and Diamanti’s argument here for energy and capital’s historical, logical, dialectical bind builds from their location of fossil fuels in the “material origins of the commodity-form.”\(^{91}\) The second scientific revolution, namely the field of thermodynamics, developed from the observable equation of “the work of the body and the work of the machine” in early industrial production, where the energy produced by water or coal, as examples, might be converted into the energy of human motion and vice-versa.\(^{92}\) Bellamy and Diamanti argue that industrial capitalism effects a conversion of various energetic forces — “what it takes to make a thing and what it takes to move it” — via the value form. In *Capital*, Marx recognizes how human labor undergoes a dual abstraction at the hand of coal and of the

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\(^{91}\) Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti, “Materialism and the Critique of Energy”: ix.

\(^{92}\) Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti, “Materialism and the Critique of Energy”: xii.
value form and thus arrives at a dialectical notion of energy and labor through the term labor power, or Arbeitskraft. Bellamy and Diamanti write,

As a technical term for the value form of human work in the factory too, labor power simultaneously names the objective consistency between the worker's caloric output, the coal power expressed in machinery, and the abstraction of both forms of Arbeitskraft by the value form of capital at a more general level. ... By naming the commodification of human work labor power, Marx alerted his readership to the twofold abstraction taking place in the production process: human exertion becomes a flow of energy in the concrete, while at the same time being modulated by a value form of capital in the abstract. 93

Labor power identifies how human work achieves “objective consistency” through and with the nonhuman work of fossil fuels and the value form, with the commodity-form a fetishized expression of labor's “energic content” as purposed for surplus value accumulation.

Bellamy and Diamanti's argument corresponds with that made by Malm in Fossil Capital, tracing the vital role of early steam technology in the forging of the industrial labor-capital relation and the regulation of an emergent working class in Britain. Malm demonstrates how fossil power helped to produce the proletariat as a concentrated laboring population subject to the extraction of surplus value, as well as solidified capital's ability to discipline it and maximize this extraction. Steam consolidated labor into urban centers from its scatter across the hydropower infrastructure of textile manufacture, significantly increased labor productivity and quelled labor costs, and proved indispensable to suppressing the period's growing militant sabotage and strike activities. From this founding relation between fossil

93 Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti, “Materialism and the Critique of Energy”: xiii-xvi.
fuels and industrial production, Malm extrapolates a more general relation between fossil fuels and the development of capital in the manner named by Bellamy and Diamanti. Over time, carbon energy is increasingly threaded through the productive process, multiply commodified and consumed. Fossil fuels are extracted and commodified by one set of capitalists in an act of the “primitive accumulation of fossil capital,” purchased by other capitalists as a critical component in the production of other commodities and value realization in transport, as well as consumed by workers and capitalists alike. As Malm writes,

> At a certain stage in the historical development of capital, fossil fuels become a necessary material substratum for the production of surplus-value. But they are not merely necessary as leather for boots, raw cotton for cotton textiles or iron ore for machines: they are utilized across the spectrum of commodity production as the material that sets it in physical motion. Other sources of mechanical energy are pushed to the fringes, while capital expands in leaps and bounds, energized by fossil fuels. These have now become the general lever for surplus-value production.  

Malm adapts Marx’s general formula of capital to reflect fossil fuels’ operation as this general lever. He contends forcefully that carbon is required for more than a single round

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95 Malm adapts M-C-M’ (Money-Commodity-Capital) in a series of analyses that incorporate Production (P), Labour (L) and the Means of Production (MP), and finally Fossil Fuels (F):

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\begin{align*}
M - C - M' \\
M - C \ldots P \ldots C' - M' \\
M - C (L + MP) \ldots P \ldots C' - M' \\
M - C (L + MP (F)) \ldots P \ldots C' - M' \\
M - C (L + MP (F)) \ldots P^{CO_2} \ldots C' - M'.
\end{align*}
\]

Under this carbonized reworking of Marx’s general formula, accumulation goes on indefinitely:

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\begin{align*}
M - C (L + MP (F)) \ldots P^{CO_2} \ldots C' - M' \gg M' - C' (L' + MP' (F')) \ldots P^{CO_2'} \ldots C'' - M'' \gg \\
\text{etc.}
\end{align*}
\]

As Malm writes, “One could think of [fossil capital] as the biophysical shadow of Marx’s general formula of capital, coming to the forefront only at unexpected biospheric dusk.” Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital* 280-292.
of the productive process and sustains capitalist development in the *longue durée*. As Diamanti likewise argues, “Capital accumulation is both mathematically and historically impossible over time without a linear increase in energy stock.”

As indicated by the “hockey stick” shape of climate change data, this linear increase has historically consisted of “long waves” of intensified energy consumption rather than a steady and uniform climb. Drawing from the work of Ernest Mandel, Malm describes how capital’s energy stock increases by accumulation cycles of downswings and upswings. Each stagflation-breaking upswing of the economy, Malm contends, is secured by severe growth in the rate of energy consumption from that of preceding waves. Similar to Bellamy and Diamanti’s emphasis on the “core contradiction” that fossil fuels present to capital accumulation (already long understood to be contradictory even without considering energy), Malm situates energy as both the essential material problem and essential, if always only temporary, “material solution to the contradictions of the structural crisis.”

Fossil fuels repeatedly perform this essential function overcoming overaccumulation in the form of technology revolutions that increase labor productivity, automating production via carbon-

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97 “All upswings so far have rested on the freedom to consume vastly greater quantities of energy than the previous wave. There has never been any other way to feed growth in commodity production.” Andreas Malm, “Long Waves”: 183-184.

intensive machinery — from the steam engine to the microprocessor — and thereby
“leaping” ahead of the decline in profits.  

As with the founding moment of proletarian steam-discipline, the arrival of such
revolutionary technology is occasioned in part by a rise in the power of organized labor that
capital must overcome to move from downswing to upswing. In the case of neoliberalism,
the long wave most pertinent to this essay, the “perilously strong labor movement” of the
late 1960s Keynesian Global North and anti-imperialist struggles in oil-producing nations of
the Global South had stalled the surplus value rates of the “petrotopian” postwar period
such that by the time the energy crisis took hold in 1973, capital was already reeling from a
deficit in docile labor power. More, it was at this moment that the ’68 spirit had converged

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99 “Qualitative leaps forward are necessary in the organization of labor and forms of
energy. … The fundamental revolutions in power technology — the technology of the
production of motive machines by machines — thus appears as the determinant moment in
revolutions of technology as a whole. Machine production of steam-driven motors since
1848; machine production of electric and combustion motors since the 90s of the 19th
century; machine production of electronic and nuclear-powered apparatuses since the 40s
of the 20th century — these are the three general revolutions in technology engendered by
the capitalist mode of production since the ‘original’ industrial revolution of the later 18th
Waves”: 171). Malm’s framework additionally highlights that upswings typically feature
massive infrastructure construction projects, whether power lines, roadways or logistics
technology.

100 “No upswing can transpire, however, Mandel argues, unless any working-class resistance
threatening to smother profits is defeated. The eruption of a structural crisis is usually
attended by high unemployment, deflation or inflation, deteriorating working conditions,
aggressive wage-cuts as capital seeks to dump the costs on labor and widen profit margins — all conducive to intensified class struggle.” Andreas Malm, “Long Waves”: 171.

101 Andreas Malm, “Long Waves”: 179. I borrow “petrotopia” from Stephanie LeMenager,
Living Oil. See Timothy Mitchell’s Carbon Democracy and especially chapter six “Sabotage” on
US and Big Oil activities in the Middle East during the 1950s and 60s.
with an emergent environmental movement and its peak-oil and finite-earth drumbeat.\textsuperscript{102} Despite these swelling ecological concerns, fossil fuels played the same role in the 1970s as in previous downswings, such that by 1980 an upswing was in full effect. Diamanti crucially reminds us that the period identified by cultural and political theorists as neoliberal is defined equally by intensified fossil fuel consumption as by flexible strategies of accumulation and the production of a new market subjectivity: “capital in the postindustrial era is as much a measure of labour shedding as it is of energy deepening.”\textsuperscript{103} Or rather, insofar as these flexible mechanisms for the absorption of surplus, labor automation and commodification of the entrepreneurial subject’s home life are underwritten by intensified energy consumption, neoliberalism must be conceptualized as an “oil system.”\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{102} The aforementioned bestsellers \textit{The Limits to Growth} and \textit{Small is Beautiful} index this dual ecological-economic sea change, as do such events as the 1970 update to the Clean Air Act and nationwide power outages during the summer of that same year, which mainstreamed environmental concerns from the political fringe. Stephanie LeMenager’s \textit{Living Oil} documents how the era’s federal policies and high-profile events — including the first murmurings of global warming, the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, the first Earth Day in 1970 and subsequent summer of power outages, the National Environmental Policy Act and the Clean Air Act — spurred public anxiety and fervor on questions of resource and especially energy extraction along with population growth, food production, nuclear waste and pollution into mainstream political debate. The Club of Rome and Schumacher’s texts grew more, not less, popular with this background. As Timothy Mitchell describes in \textit{Carbon Democracy}, “the emergence of ‘the environment’ to rival ‘the economy’ as a central object of politics, defined not by the limitless expansion of a country’s GDP but by physical limits to growth,” pitting economic expansion against environmental safety or sustainability, and in ways that disputed the necessity or sense of in continual “upswings.” See especially chapter one “Origins, Spills” in Stephanie LeMenager, \textit{Living Oil} and Mitchell, 176.


This “deepening” took several forms. One was mass automation in the Global North and the expansion and relocation of industrial production to the post-Soviet bloc and especially East Asia. This process “extended the logic of the fossil economy into new territories, giving the main impetus for the epochal boom in combustion outside the traditional core” and requiring the elaboration of carbon-intensive information, communications and transport infrastructures to manage new transnational vistas of value production.105 “Energy deepening” in the 70s and more drastically in the 80s also took the form of the petrodollar tsunami resulting from sustained oil shocks, which Giovanni Arrighi details at some length in *The Long Twentieth Century* as providing essential fodder for the swelling of finance and international lending institutions definitive to late capitalism.106 In these ways, heightened fossil fuel extraction can be found facilitating the innovations that David Harvey enumerates as flexible accumulation: the floating dollar, merger activity, niche markets, automation, the ascendancy of finance, the spatial fix of offshore factory production and the time-space compression of accelerated turnover times in the delivery and consumption of commercial goods.107 Neoliberalism likewise marks a shift in the energy resourcing and automation of social reproduction, as Matthew Huber has argued: “refineries provided an ecological basis, and consequently the supplementary materiality, for reproducing the imaginary of an individuated condition, or ‘life,’ that is improvable solely by one’s own effort and


107 See especially chapter nine, “From Fordism to flexible accumulation,” in David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. 95
entrepreneurial capacities.” Huber and Mitchell have both argued that this entrepreneurial subject’s full articulation by the Reagan 80s was facilitated by the 1973 oil crisis, seized by right-wing policymakers and talking heads as an opportunity to stay the rise of de-growth and anti-carbon discourse and normalize market fundamentalism.

Thus, threaded throughout the institutions, processes and logics that scholars have used to define neoliberalism — outlined here incompletely, but nonetheless gesturing at what it means to account for fossil fuels in analyzing the shift to neoliberal production and reproduction — is a reconfiguring of energy consumption to unprecedented heights. This consumption does not originate value but acts as an essential material conduit for capital’s recalibration and expansion in the face of crisis, sending production into and through cycles of overaccumulation and “the decisive factor postponing a logical and terminal crisis in the labour-capital relation.” Fossil fuels are both the material and conceptual substance of capital and the spring of its continual expansion.

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108 Matthew Huber, *Lifeblood*: 64.

109 By pointing to an inconvenient, confusing and possibly contrived “energy crisis” and championing a specific formation of economic governance to curb it, the market’s defenders retooled growing concerns about energy resourcing and US economic growth into a populist narrative of individual freedom, whereby radical marketization was the only way out of the era’s ecological and economic uncertainties. Public confusion about the centrality of fossil fuels to continued accumulation was opportunistically levied to demonstrate that even a finite earth was no match for the market’s power to produce profit. As Mitchell writes, “Not just the oil crisis, but almost any conflict between rival political claims, according to this new technology of rule, was to be grasped — and governed — as a matter of simple supply and demand.” Timothy Mitchell, 177. See *Carbon Democracy* chapter seven, “The Crisis That Never Happened” and in Matthew Huber’s *Lifeblood* chapters four and five, “Shocked! ‘Energy Crisis,’ Neoliberalism, and the Construction of an Apolitical Economy” and “Pain at the Pump: Gas Prices, Life, and Death under Neoliberalism.”

1.3.c Petrofiction is not really about oil

Having now established a relationship between fossil fuels and capital and specifically neoliberal capital — where carbon is the “general lever” for surplus value production at the birth of industrialism and since, but one which introduces structural crises of accumulation that require recurrent and ever-greater increases in energy expenditure, of which neoliberal profit measures are the most recent — I turn to late fossil capital’s mediation in literary form.

As I’ve indicated, Nixon’s work helpfully points toward how we might theorize the representation of late fossil capital in its temporal and spatial complexity. “Slow violence” offers a literary critical method for the “geopolitics of deferral” specific to neoliberal capital, which offshores, delays and conceals environmental crisis such that it rarely reaches the aesthetic threshold of scandal and instead appears (rather, disappears) as business-as-usual. In their biophysical form, fossil fuels undoubtedly generate visual scandal far too flashy to require Nixon’s heuristic: a gusher, derrick fire, tanker spill or oil flare all offer spectacle precisely because their malfunction physicalizes energy that infrastructure normally

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obscures or abstracts. Fossil capital’s broader environmental crisis of global warming likewise creates visual scandal, largely via events like category 5 hurricanes. As such individual events grow in frequency and their variety congeals in the popular mind into a single “climate change” phenomenon, global warming’s total, cumulative effect too acquires an aesthetic impression, borne most often in Benjaminean retrospect or the proleptic defeat of eco-apocalypse. This impression of due reckoning — per Malm, the “revenge of time” — marks a tipping point into visibility at the end of a long period of invisibility or misrecognition.

Thus, in thinking with Nixon I want to distinguish the representation of late fossil capital from the representation of either fossil fuels themselves or fossil-fueled global warming. Of course, the interruption these events present to fossil capital are endemic to it, less exception than rule, and the material truth they present to capital’s immaterial lie has profound critical value. Nonetheless, as glitches in an aesthetic regime largely unspectacular in its violence — what Diamanti has termed the “energyscape” of postindustrial economy and culture — they offer a primarily negative window into fossil fuels’ infrastructural function in capitalist accumulation. This might be complemented by a window more direct, one that accounts for how fossil capital eludes or complicates narrative representation as a thing that happens in

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114 Jeff Diamanti, “Energyscapes”: 2.
the same way as does environmental racism, the focus of Nixon’s text: for both, the aesthetic missed encounter is the missed encounter of the value form.

My analysis of Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers* indicates that this encounter cannot be recovered as plot content alone but rather provokes contradictions on the level of plot that require formal adaptation to represent. Amy Riddle argues that while in such novels as Helon Habila’s *Oil on Water* (2010) oil is readily, extensively represented as “a hostile object, a distorted form of natural wealth, or an expression of nature as such,” oil *as commodity* and oil *as wealth* is less apt to such physical description. This divergence follows the tracks outlined above, one along the “socio-ecological horror” of fossil capital’s manifest costs and the other along their absence, production humming along, business-as-usual. As Riddle writes, “wealth in the value form itself… may not be directly representable in literature — it is after all not a measurable thing but a historically specific set of social relations — but the ways in which we see the value form as it bears on social relations in literature dealing with oil gives us a way to mediate the fictions themselves.” Capital being, finally, fossil capital, and the value form a dialectical knot of capital, labor and carbon energy surplus, the representation of fossil capital take as its subject capitalist social relations in total — the purview of realist narrative — in their mediation by fossil fuels.

In prioritizing the representation of oil as a “substratum” to production and essential figure of social relations, Riddle departs from a critical approach to “petrofiction” inaugurated by


116 Amy Riddle, “Petrofiction and Political Economy”: 414.
Ghosh’s seminal 1992 essay.\textsuperscript{117} In his assessment of “the oil encounter and the novel,” Ghosh famously diagnoses a deficit of “Great American Oil Novels” to mirror Abdelrahman Munif’s \textit{Cities of Salt} (1987).\textsuperscript{118} That he comes up empty-handed in his search despite “petrotopian” works like Jack Kerouac’s \textit{On the Road} (1957) and Vladimir Nabokov’s \textit{Lolita} (1955) points to the limits of defining petrofiction by “a thematic of oil in the content of the work.”\textsuperscript{119} For Ghosh, oil is one commodity vector in a multi-vectored colonial project, its economic significance equivalent to that of former king commodities like spices and sugar, unmaking and remaking precolonial social forms as extractive economies take root. The absence of petrofiction on par with the great realist novels of empire is thus for Ghosh both conspicuous and puzzling: though petroleum’s quotidian ubiquity in postwar US fiction surely rivals the colonial commodities that quietly comprise 19th century European realism, no road trip novel matches \textit{Vanity Fair}.\textsuperscript{120} Riddle, by contrast, approaches oil as what Szeman calls an “ur-commodity,” possessing “supra-objective qualities” as indicated by Malm’s carbonized reworking of Marx’s general formula.\textsuperscript{121} Her treatment of oil as neither interchangeable with other resources nor incidental to capitalist expansion directs her analysis of Habila and Munif’s novels to form rather than content. More, in her estimation, these two levels of representation are inverse, relating on a zero-sum basis: “the more oil is described in a work, the more it disappears” in its function as surplus value’s “general

\textsuperscript{117} Amitav Ghosh, “Petrofiction.”

\textsuperscript{118} Abdel Rahman Munif, \textit{Cities of Salt}.

\textsuperscript{119} Amy Riddle, “Petrofiction and Political Economy”: 419.


\textsuperscript{121} Imre Szeman, “How to Know about Oil: Energy Epistemologies and Political Futures.” \textit{Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes} 47. 3 (2013): 162. “Supra-objective qualities” from Amy Riddle, “Petrofiction and Political Economy”: 414.
In other words, the more fossil fuels appear, often as “hostile object” or nature qua nature, the more fossil capital disappears.

If the question is not so much whether fossil fuels, fossil fuel extraction or fossil-fueled environmental crises can be represented (they can) but whether fossil capital can — specifically its “recurrent expansions and restructurings” and those distinctive to late fossil capital — this representation must be embedded and encoded in a work’s form. The “petro” in petrofiction should not be thought to signify only a plot encounter with the real of oil, whether as eco-catastrophe like in *Oil on Water* or, per Ghosh, as the “unspeakable [and] pornographic” unfurling of US empire in *Cities of Salt*. As it pertains to fossil capital, the “petro” in petrofiction marks fossil fuels’ prefixal operation in the capitalist totality that realist novels represent. As much the condition of plot as plot itself, the thing that happens and the field of happening, fossil fuels play the role of the growth economy’s “invisible inner forces” and can do the same in narrative, structural to the realism of both. Oil mediates the social fiction of infinite economic growth and, as Riddle suggests, “mediate[s] the fictions themselves.”

Riddle’s primary formal interest is narrative voice (Munif’s third person collective, Habila’s “voices without quotation marks”). In the same vein but with a different focus, Jennifer Wenzel’s aforementioned “petro-magic realism” suggests that fossil capital registers formally

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123 Amy Riddle, “Petrofiction and Political Economy”: 414.

124 Amy Riddle, “Petrofiction and Political Economy”: 422.
as an “antinarrative” force refracting realist plot development through the symbolic economy of the oil market.\textsuperscript{125} Wenzel’s framework is useful for considering the historical novel of fossil capital for two reasons. One, petro-magic realism correlates the production of the postcolonial literary commodity with that of other export commodities, where literary form shifts to match shifts in the extractive economy of the Nigerian postcolony. Wenzel’s analysis of Tutuola’s \textit{The Palm-Wine Drinkard} (1952) connects emergent oil production in the 1950s Niger Delta with the reconfiguration of realist narrative into seemingly magical varieties, varieties at the time themselves emergent in world literature’s generic composition. My upcoming analysis of Kushner and McCarthy’s texts similarly contends that fossil capital embattles realism with non-realist conventions — as Riddle argues, beckoning particular narrative voices, and additionally arranging and deranging realist timespace, directing \textit{bildungs} and \textit{künstler} development into a recursive loop, and/or focalizing realist narrative through non-realist characters.

Second, the correlation Wenzel draws is not between literary form and fossil capital writ large but between literary form and the long waves of fossil development.\textsuperscript{126} This correlation asks the literary critic to pluralize their sense of how fossil capital manifests in literary form to accord with its internal waves and these waves’ own internal stages, as well as to accord with their differential emplacement across center and periphery of the global energy production and consumption map. Wenzel’s case studies differ from one another in form as they differ in position along (roughly) the neoliberal long wave. Tutuola’s 1952 text indexes

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\textsuperscript{126} On energy and literary periodization, see Patricia Yaeger, “Editor’s Column”: 305-10 and Graeme MacDonald, “Research Note.”
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the beginning of the eclipse of palm oil by petroleum as Nigeria’s dominant extractive industry, the dawn of a decade that would see the doubling of worldwide oil production as proven reserves more than tripled (the Niger Delta Basin along with Saudi Arabia’s Ghawar Field and Kuwait’s Burgan Field) and thereby lay critical groundwork for the soaring extraction by the century’s end. By contrast, Ben Okri’s short story collection *Stars of the New Curfew* (1988) from which Wenzel draws “What the Tapster Saw” emerges from a severe bust in the 80s’ broader boom-bust tumult. Okri writes ten years after “oil [had] replaced labor as the basis of [Nigerian] national development, producing a deficit of value and an excess of wealth,” built from a boom in oil prices that overlapped by no coincidence “the height of Nigeria’s publishing boom.” Okri’s petro-magic-realism witnesses a postcolonial national economy firmly integrated into and at the mercy of global capital circuits and their petrodollar lifeblood — by this time a net importer of vegetable oil — and the social relations mapped in *Stars* consequently bear stark differences from those depicted in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*.

Thus, although boom cycles are tethered to rather than isomorphic with the long waves Malm outlines, Wenzel offers an analytic for realist form’s warping and reassembling to accommodate petroleum’s political economic and visual alchemy as it plays out from long wave to long wave and across each of them. As La Berge suggests we “follow the money” across the interlocking spheres of production represented in realist texts to determine the


relationship between late capitalism and realism, Wenzel charts a method to “follow the carbon” across representations of transition and crisis points in the neoliberal long wave to determine the relationship between late fossil capital and realism. I turn to this task in the following section, using Kushner and McCarthy’s novels in a way adapted from Wenzel’s use of Tutuola and Okri for the framework of Malm’s long wave.
1.4 Follow the carbon

1.4.a Unpacking La Berge

Let us now connect fossil capital’s “realism” as a set of literary techniques attending shifts in capitalism’s energy economy with fossil capital’s “realism” in the sense employed by Fisher, Shonkwiler and La Berge denoting the neoliberal politics of lowered expectations. How do contemporary novels figure the onset of the neoliberal long wave and especially what will succeed it? What do they teach us about the future of capital’s essential carbon contradiction — to be resolved definitively or merely deferred by yet another upswing in energy consumption in the name of economic realism?

Literary critics have long observed that realism is murky and difficult terrain. As Jed Esty writes, realism presents “always a diffuse and moving target, as difficult to define as it is properly to apply. Even taken in highly specific conditions — stipulated to this or that artifact, artist, medium, epoch, movement, or national tradition — realism perennially eludes strong and stable conceptualization.”

Should its target come into focus through any such stipulation, realism proves nonetheless contradictory, being “at once too factual and too radical… too slavishly descriptive and thus, paradoxically, inaccurate,” a maximal case of what Eagleton calls the “amphibious” quality of the aesthetic under capital. La Berge’s capitalist realism draws from a definition of realism outlined by Lukács, involving such

\(^{129}\) Jed Esty, “Realism Wars”: 316.

conventions as detailed and interlocking social fields, serial time and techniques of spatialization, as well as the organization of narrative primarily around character and community rather than linguistic experimentation. In such formal conventions obtains the Lukácsian “priority of narrative wholeness or verisimilitude over authorial will or agenda” whereby the literary object articulates “the more profound bow of an event” in its plot, typifying broader social conditions internal and external to the lifeworld of the novel.\textsuperscript{131} Yet in keeping with our theme of contradiction and ambiguity, Alfred Kazin points out in his introduction to \textit{Studies in European Realism} that against pure faith in formal symptom, Lukács ultimately prizes “the dynamic opposition of the human spirit to a given social order,” mostly in the hero but of necessity in the writer as well.\textsuperscript{132} With such paradox in what constitutes realism, its forms, settings, origins and political stakes, the safest critical bet may lie in identifying realism precisely where it fails or disappears — \textit{I'll know it when I don't see it.}

La Berge takes this bet in part in defining capitalist realism as a literary mode specific to the post-ideological condition of late capital explored by Fisher, as I do in borrowing from her to define fossil capitalist realism. La Berge arrives at capitalist realism by tracing realism in David Simon’s \textit{The Wire} (2002-2008) from ideological tail to productive head until the latter swallows the former, such that the edges of realism, particularly those delineating it from capital itself, disappear. A Lukácsian masterwork, the series famously demonstrates the general equivalence of the police, state and city government, unions, public schools, and drug trade in neoliberalizing Baltimore. These are less discrete micro-economies with

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\textsuperscript{131} Georg Lukács, \textit{Studies in European Realism}. 10.
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discrete moral codes, social objectives and character types than uncanny doppelgängers of one another, duplicate for-profit enterprises entangled by transnational circuits of capital. That we can “follow the money” among these spheres — never quite seamlessly, even for the camera’s eye, but follow it nonetheless — to reveal their mutual imbrication in value production is what gives the show its reputation for realism, one uniquely gritty and unflinching. As La Berge writes, “Capital itself, then, becomes a kind of apotheosis of the potential of realist representation; and the only narrative of realism must be to follow the money, as the money is the original condition for the realism itself.”

Yet in The Wire’s fifth and final season, La Berge argues, this relationship between money and realist representation turns out to have its own doppelgänger: as money proves to be the condition for realism, realism is also revealed to be the condition for money. The final season “follows the money” to the den of the failing city paper, where we witness the production of realism itself in the reportage of The Baltimore Sun. A major plot follows a rogue detective as he stages a fake serial killing spree in a last-ditch effort to draw media attention and public funding to Baltimore’s chronically dispossessed communities. The realism of poverty and violence as represented by the paper’s coverage of the fake murders seems to direct money as much as Simon’s realism follows it, though not to the recipients intended: the newspaper cashes in on the falsified murders by covering them, and racist inequality continues apace.

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133 Leigh Claire La Berge, “Capitalist Realism and Serial Form”: 125.
The first irony is that the exploitation the detective hopes to rectify with media attention ultimately gains even more ground: now, the *Sun* is on the same payroll as the cops, politicians, union bosses and drug kingpins, as widens the ever-widening embrace of accumulation by dispossession. The second irony, outdoing the first and marking La Berge’s move from realism to capitalist realism, is that the murders in this case weren’t *real*. As much as poverty and violence itself is for sale in Baltimore, so too is the realist representation of poverty and violence — in this case, a spectacular, fake serial killer realism whose realist purchase is secured by the unspectacular, real deaths of Baltimore citizens under late capital’s business-as-usual. And the third irony is, of course, that *The Wire* itself takes part in this dynamic, its plot trawled from real events, institutions and people that confirm our expectations of the genre and our lowered expectations of reality. With these nesting dolls of irony, *The Wire* demonstrates that late capital and realism produce one another, tail and head of a single self-consuming, self-perpetuating snake. If it seems perhaps only possible to identify realism where it fails or disappears — had the series ended with mass public investment in the city’s working poor, viewers would know we had left realism behind — it is by contrast only possible to identify capitalist realism where it proves structurally incapable of disappearing or failing on its own, late capital and realism being fully identical.

I have taken pains to relay La Berge’s analysis because a parallel dynamic is at work in what I want to draw out of Kushner and McCarthy’s novels with “fossil capitalist realism.” The gritty and unflinching realism of *The Wire’s* first four seasons can be found in a range of petrofiction tracking oil’s dubious role in politics on scales micro and macro, not least of
which the aforementioned *Cities of Salt* and *Oil on Water*. Beyond representing the scandal of an oil spill or global warming, these pull out the everywhere unseen thread of the fossil economy, employing variants of the “dark money” mode exemplified by Simon. Petrofiction of the order of *The Wire*’s fifth season, however — heeding the synonymy of fossil capital and realism such that the text locates each at the root of the other and must eat its own formal tail — is different, as crucially as La Berge’s differentiation of capitalist realism from realism. That Munif and Habila’s texts are something like canon in the Energy Humanities owes to the same reason that the first four seasons of Simon’s series are so popular while the fifth was universally slammed: they “follow the carbon” through a broken system readers already recognize and whose representation we are accustomed to consuming as realist. They stop short of representing their own production of fossil capital in their production of this very realism.

1.4.b A second look at *The Flamethrowers*

Enter *The Flamethrowers* and *The Road*, written during the dawn of capitalism’s current downswing. From interregnum conditions defined by widespread anti-corporate sentiment (the banks got bailed out, the oil companies lied about climate change) and the emergence of a promising if fumbling politics of enough is enough (contra Thatcher, it appears there are indeed alternatives), Kushner looks back to fossil capital’s previous downswing in the 70s

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134 See also Upton Sinclair’s *Oil* (1927), Ursula Biemann’s *Black Sea Files* (2005) and Reza Negarestani’s *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* (2008).

135 Malm roughly periodizes this downswing to 2008 — a pregnant “(?)” follows the date. Andreas Malm, “Long Waves”: 162.
and McCarthy speculates on its eventual expiration. Both chart a similar path as that identified by La Berge in *The Wire*’s newspaper season: the interplay of realism and late fossil capital on the level of plot leads to a recursion of form, such that the novels represent the integration of realism — even their own realism — into a crisis-ridden fossil-fueled mode of production.

*The Flamethrowers* follows the carbon across transnational spheres of production during the downswing preceding worldwide “energy deepening” under neoliberalism, where the onset of “labor shedding” technology revolutions contends with severe labor unrest and a parallel sea change in cultural production. The protagonist Reno is nicknamed after her nowhere working-class hometown, where among mechanic and drag-racing cousins she makes art about speed until moving to Manhattan (“It was an irony but a fact that a person had to move to New York City to become an artist of the West”).

We meet her gnawing at the remains of the Fordist economy for aesthetic sustenance in the company of bourgeois conceptual artists whose works mimic in their own seemingly spontaneous production the broader seemingly spontaneous production of the US economy as it attempts to muscle out of stagflation with the help of oil. Much like their petrofiction contemporaries (Harry Crews’s stunningly understudied *Car* [1972] or select works by J.G. Ballard), these artists find inspiration in the iconography of the waning postwar long wave — cars and car parts — and

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in art that autoproduces as these commodities are increasingly autoproduced.\textsuperscript{137} Per the manifestos of Sol LeWitt and others, they understand the art object like any other commodity to have detached from the labor process in favor of automation and to have diffused from a material entity into postindustrialism’s generalized “post-medium condition.”\textsuperscript{138} Rather than the intention of the artist, less their hand in the labor of modernist production, “the idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”\textsuperscript{139} The commodity grows less real with automation, but in representing this derealization, the artwork grows more realist. With their art’s piercing, participatory engagement with the era’s tectonic shifts in economy, the task of representing reality is precisely how they distinguish themselves from the spoonfeed of mass culture or any nostalgic, residual modernist impulse. The neon tube light art of one of Reno’s peers is exemplary: “[Stanley] had forced his own obsolescence. The art made itself. Sandro said that Stanley’s work had outmoded him the way the postindustrial age was now robbing the worker of his place and that this truth made the art more powerful.”\textsuperscript{140} This art is “more powerful” because of its devout representation.


\textsuperscript{139} Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs.” Though they do not self-identify as realists, the New York group’s categorical rejection of “authorial will” in favor of the artwork’s depiction of “the more profound bow” of its conditions resonates strongly, if surprisingly, with Lukács’s realism.

\textsuperscript{140} Rachel Kushner, \textit{The Flamethrowers}: 159.
of the “truth” of the undead economic and cultural condition of postmodernity, even to the point of outmoding the artist himself.

Like any good realist novelist, and as discussed in a previous section, Kushner repeatedly highlights the “energy unconscious” of this commitment to ever more automation and ever more realism: she shows us the Port Arthur petrochemical refinery behind the SoHo loft installation, the “pink gasoline and synthetic red engine oil” behind the experimental photography piece, the “forced labor camps” behind the automobiles that seem like mere movement as they zip by.\textsuperscript{141} Most important, she punctuates the artists’ talk in New York with news from autofactories in Naples, Milan, Turin and Bologna of continual work stoppages, sabotage and wildcat strikes by the very outmoded workers represented by Stanley’s lights. Even as petrodollar infusions from the IMF and oil extraction rates lay the ground for a fossil-fueled upswing, organized labor appears to retain the power to bring capital to its knees. 1970s New York may produce realism, but 1970s Italy appears to house the real of production and its possible contestation in a moment of crisis. And so while Reno’s boyfriend, heir to the Fiat throne, follows the autoworkers’ activities, the oil crisis, inflation and unemployment “the way her cousins read the statistics of a baseball team,” she aspires to represent these tangled roots of late fossil capital without the veil of the sport spectator or that of her artist peers.\textsuperscript{142} Reno’s camera seeks a realer realism, and so her \textit{künstler} journey follows the carbon from Manhattan to the Italian north, from ideological tail to productive head.

\textsuperscript{141} Rachel Kushner, \textit{The Flamethrowers}: 177; Yaeger, “Editor’s Column”: 309.

\textsuperscript{142} Rachel Kushner, \textit{The Flamethrowers}: 109.
But in Italy Reno finds what she understands to be the production of yet another realism. Even as she is guided by a Fiat worker at the heart of labor’s counterstrategy and even as she attributes rioting students and workers in Rome an aspect of “pointillism,” she cannot move past the level of representation signified by the granular accuracy of this tableau. She fixates on the protesters’ costuming, their makeup, their character types, their rehearsed chanting of ironic slogans, filming only when the crowd becomes an audience, falling silent for a musical interlude by a singer whose “face was some kind of counterreality.” Reno’s camera is mirrored by that of a documentary crew filming a young pregnant immigrant, who despite facing truly dire circumstances acquires her film-worthy air of tragedy only through the directors’ coaching: “It was clear she knew them already, that they had instructed her to pretend they were strangers for the purpose of the film, but with her dirty clothes, her unbrushed hair, she looked like a runaway living on the Piazza Navona. I had the feeling she was not an actress. That they were directing her to play herself.” At one point the woman says, “I have nothing to protest. I’m here to be here. … I’m hungry.” Then the cameraman, holding up the lens: “Say it again.” Though the woman herself is uninterested in the Movement, in her performance as la biondina her hunger is suited to its representation, as are the select mise-en-scène elements that Reno records.

Though none of autonomism seems real to Reno, what does is the pervasive gasoline smell. This smell marks the meeting point of tail and head on the fossil capitalist realism snake.

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Immersed in the contradictions of fossil capital, Reno pauses on the gas that returns her to the very scenes that originate her künstler journey — motorcycles, pick-up beds and garages.

I’ll include the passage again:

[The smell] was something I associated with Reno kids, my cousins and their friends, always smelling of gasoline. Scott and Andy returning from the filling station in the back of Uncle Bobby’s pickup truck with pink gasoline in plastic jugs, or siphoning it from unsuspecting neighbors with a segment of old garden hose, their studious expressions … soaking into their hands, soaked into the red shop rags they used to clean engine parts, cleaning these parts in a manner so fastidious it was as if they were cleaning tarnish from expensive jewelry, working the rags over the tiny set-screws of their carburetors. The hands that cleaned carburetor and engine parts, permanently black. That I could draw no connection between that world and this one, the people who stank of gasoline in the Piazza del Popolo, and Scott and Andy who loved its smell, made me sad for Scott and Andy in a way I could not explain.147

In these familiar petrotopian images of a studious, tender, boyish commitment to the automobile, we encounter not only Reno’s failure to resolve the spatiotemporal contradictions of fossil capital — as discussed in this chapter’s first analysis of *The Flamethrowers* — but also the specter of the fossil capitalist upswing, another doubling down on capital’s essential carbon contradiction to postpone terminal crisis. Reno can “draw no connection” between this specter and the very different specter she encounters in Rome — that of a world beyond fossil capital — because the realism she is at pains to develop and refine throughout the novel is tied to cyclical increases in energy expenditure and not their abandonment in the name of some other political north star. Reno’s realism has always aspired to represent fossil capital, and here fossil capital delineates her realism, her camera-holding hands as stained by oil as her cousins’ mechanic ones. The plot of the künstlerroman

folds back in on itself and, with it, the novel's own realist representation of late fossil capital. In resolving its portrait of the artist with a restoration and not an eclipse of her founding realist attachment to fossil fuels, the *bildungs* plot puddle-jumps from site to site of the fossil-fueled production of realism to finally arrive at the beginning, in step with fossil development's leaps from crisis to crisis as if it could lead anywhere but back to crisis.

And much as fossil capital persists despite its structural contradictions, Kushner's realist novel persists as well. Even her canniest version of realist representation cannot quite escape the realism feedback loop of mass energy consumption under neoliberalism (“the art made itself”). In other words, it’s not only that Kushner’s fossil capitalist realists fail to represent fossil capital and so end up with a negative dialectical map of fossil capital, as I argued in a previous section. On top of delivering on this Lukácsian promise for realist form, *The Flamethrowers* additionally follows this map produced in the black gape of her heroes’ art and it leads us right to the production of realism itself. This realism is that just emerging in the early neoliberal 1970s, as fossil capital deepens its grip on economic production and no longer represses alternative visions of society but instead simply insists that it is the only reality available.

1.4.c *The Road* and realist exhaustion

This feedback loop feels more like a zombie walk in McCarthy’s *The Road*, which likewise follows the carbon across spaces of fossil-fueled production, but in relief. In the aftermath of an unspecified apocalyptic event, McCarthy’s father and son protagonists tour the
graveyard of the fossil economy to glean the most meager food, shelter and, importantly, carbon energy. All are in short supply, as is realism itself. If The Flamethrower’s representation of the 1970s’ long wave downswing is overstuffed with the production of fossil capitalist realism from Nevada to New York to Italy and back again, McCarthy’s downswing realism appears on the verge of exhaustion. Much as the protagonists skim a devastated landscape of gas stations, parking lots and train cars to cobble together drops and even whiffs of fossil fuels to keep civilization going (“We’re carrying the fire,” they repeat), McCarthy siphons from climate fiction’s genre soup of sci fi, melodrama, romance, horror, Western and beyond to scaffold a rickety realist representation of this task. The result is contradictions in the novel’s plot and form, with the father’s ostensibly realist fossil-fuel fixation buckling under the novel’s failure to represent unending fossil fuel extraction on realist terms.

Among contemporary novels, The Road has enjoyed a critical traction within the energy and environmental humanities that stands out, appearing with time only more relevant to questions of fossil capitalist crisis. Though often qualified as apocalyptic, entropic or post-abundant, the novel’s realism is central to its continued import to our ecological imaginary.148 Central, in turn, to that realism is the survival journey of the man and boy, circling the civilizational crater for the fossil-fueled means to live and the will to do so. This proves easier said than done in the setting McCarthy constructs: a decimated human population, rampant cannibalism and sexual exploitation, even filicide, within an ecosystem that admits no growth and thus no possibility of agriculture or human settlement. The only commodity more rare

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than human beings is fuel. As precious as parkas and non-botulized food, the dregs of the fossil economy direct the “artistic development of situations and characters,” per Lukács, moving us from scene to scene, rather than play an incidental or secondary role to such plot and character development.149 The man and boy retrace in slow motion the highway meanderings of *On the Road* and *Lolita* per the beacon of a tattered oil company map whose face the two study and memorize like a holy text and through which McCarthy effects a realist spatialization, however cowled by his withholding prose. The father grabs hold of any and all fuel and teaches his son to continue this way of life if he wants to survive. The novel represents social relations as realist only insofar as they are faithful to carbon energy resourcing.150

*The Road’s* own form bears out this strange, contradictory and hollow picture of realism: with no names for our protagonists, no biography, no chapters, indeed, hardly punctuation, it is something like a novel but not quite one, an echo (if you will, a fossil). While so much of climate fiction peddles a feast of catastrophe — trading on the sublime “thrill of watching all those expensive sets come tumbling down,” per Susan Sontag — *The Road* appears, by contrast, “exhausted at the level of style itself,” as Andrew Hoberek puts it.151 The yawning gaps of narrative coherence created by the novel’s refusals of complex characterization, serial time, detailed spatialization and other conventions of realist world-building are reconciled through the incorporation of non-realist tropes. McCarthy offers a kind of


150 See Brent Ryan Bellamy, “The Reproductive Imperative.”

151 Andrew Hoberek, “Cormac McCarthy and the Aesthetics of Exhaustion.” *American Literary History* 23.3 (Fall 2011): 484.
melodramatic murmuring in the place of realist dialogue (“If only my heart were stone”) and restagings of biblical parable in the place of plot development (the Good Samaritan, the Mustard Seed, the Prodigal Son all make appearances, standard catechistic fare). Mr. Rogers meets zombie parade, a horizon-less romance topped with noir voiceover, the lamb’s blood of holy parable pumped through the icy veins of Western anti-dialogue, but with none of the winking pastiche such combinations might suggest and which indeed grow only more self-serious and less convincing as the fossil-fueled plot goes on. As Shonkwiler and La Berge write that capitalist realism “interrupts and disorganizes itself through its incorporation of other genres and through its desire to show the processes of its own commodification,” McCarthy’s retreat into nameless universals and irrealist tropes likewise shows its own integration into fossil capitalist cycles of production and their synonymy with “realism,” however paradoxical the novel’s genre composition.

Lacking the flashy, brimming social taxonomy of its apocalyptic kin, which can be found even in anti-blockbusters like Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (2006) and Lars Von Trier’s *Melancholia* (2011), *The Road*’s spare, minimalist realism feels, by contrast, deflated. Or maybe inflated, like a blow-up doll, with an uncanny quality similar to how Jeff Goldblum describes a bodysnatcher in Philip Kaufman’s 1978 remake of Jack Finney’s and then Don Siegel’s Red Scare classic, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*: “It’s not immature exactly. It’s vague. Hands, everything, but no detail, no character. It’s unformed. It’s got no fingerprints.” With a similar hollowness, McCarthy’s novel does not comfortably fit the term. This is a bit of a

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152 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*: 11.

surprise both because of its realist credentials and because, for its basic structure of a dual backward-forward gaze — a gaze as customary to post-apocalyptic narrative as to McCarthy’s usual genre, the Western — one might expect The Road to embody the historical consciousness that Lukács theorizes for the novel ("germs of something barely beginning") and that in our own era Jameson has assigned to genre and specifically science fiction. Yet, McCarthy’s irrealist realism abandons precisely the specificity — the fingerprints — that secure the mimetic fidelity of the realist novel and, with it, its utopian impulse, even if only symptomatically and even if today from the backseat to other cultural media like serial television. The Road’s realism, then, appears a bit closer to Fisher’s than Lukács’s, more ideological than critical, and that closeness is crucially irrigated by various non-realisms and with the vaguest whiff of postmodernist anti-realist to boot.

Esty hypothesizes that “realism wars” erupt “at the site of struggle between norms of finite social description and half-articulate dreams of expansive political projection,” and this diagnosis seems appropriate here. However, contra James Woods’s diagnosis of a kind of “hysterical realism” at the American century’s end — “overstuffed” and “cranked up to a manic machine” by the likes of Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace and Zadie Smith — McCarthy’s realism comes up sheepish and empty-handed on the impossible realist task of representing fossil-fueled production and reproduction under the generalized crisis of fin-de-siècle American austerity. It compensates with a terra nullius romance that is deeply confused about its own generic roots and ends. And while The Road shares the masculinist bravado of

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late Victorian romantics like Robert Louis Stevenson and H. Rider Haggard grappling with the sun setting on the British Empire in the wake of the Boer Wars, it is less “expansive” in its political vision and less triumphantly experimental in its form than a kind of bodysnatcher realism that doesn’t quite do the ideological trick, keeping realism on an unconvincing genre life support just so it can represent fossil-fueled social relations.

Climate change presents a crisis of externalization with such reach that it undermines the narrative premises of realism, resulting in a crisis of literary externalization characterized by the increased blending of realist and non-realist aesthetics, as noted in one way or another by all of the literary critics I surveyed at the onset of this chapter. As Shonkwiler and La Berge write, “It is almost as though the realist novel, so closely tied to a particular form of capitalism and the kinds of social mobility it enabled, must turn to genre fiction to represent forms outside of it, whether the residual feudal hierarchies that lingered into capitalism’s heyday or the hierarchies of money that characterize an emergent post-capitalist capitalism.” This eye to Raymond Williams’s “emergent” echoes Lukács’s reading of Dostoevsky and elaborating from these conditions a fuller picture of the world being built. McCarthy, perhaps less knowingly than Dostoevsky, elaborates one possible future of fossil capital in a similar way.

As this dynamic pertains to the post-ideological condition named by “capitalist realism,” like La Berge I understand the moment of literary realism’s acquiescence to capital, or fossil

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capital in my case, and the resulting formal contradiction to be the moment of realism's critical purchase on the totality it is obligated to mimetically represent. Like Jameson, the text's formal contradiction marks the opportunity for critique. However, I am eager to explore the limits of such purchase and opportunity in the post-political conditions in which global warming is arriving and showing its teeth, conditions in which neither global warming nor capitalism's general ills are particularly revelatory but rather confirm the tired and obvious lessons of ideology critique from a previous era. As The Road bears the simultaneous exhaustion of energy abundance in its content and of realist aesthetics in its form, the novel nonetheless resolves its fossil-fueled plot (however awkwardly, as I'll discuss in the following chapter) as well as circulates as a best-selling, prize-winning, critically-acclaimed “realistic” narrative of climate crisis, one far from exhausted. Although the novel's realism cannot logically maintain its own fetishized premises without fossil fuels, it nonetheless retains its fossil fuel fetish and as a commodity has done quite well for itself.

Shonkwiler and La Berge write, “capitalist realism denotes the site upon which the limit of the imaginary is constructed. It insists on the circulation between imagination and reality, the ways in which this relationship is produced and disavowed.”157 As a cultural analytic, fossil capitalist realism insists that this site is not without ideology but that such aesthetic resources are bound to its brute material ones and today are second to them. Following Althusser's insistent thesis that “ideology has a material existence,” the reproduction of the relations of

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late fossil capital isn’t, finally, running on ideology. At the end of the day, it is running on fossil fuels, which continue to delimit what is politically and economically realistic even when the inconsistencies of that realism are made plain or are already in plain sight. The implications of this simple fact for literary critical method is not the abandonment of depth and suspicious reading in favor of the surface but rather a reappraisal of the ends and means of academic work occasioned by environmental crisis. I take up this final point more at length in the following chapter and my conclusion, but it is worth mentioning these implications here to clarify the stakes of the literary criticism that occupies this chapter, which does not analyze literary phenomena for their own sake but to index the broader operation of ideology, ideology critique and knowledge production under late fossil capital.

Esty notes that the eruption of realism wars in periods of Arrighian crisis typically pit the domestic, itemizing, reflective mode of social realism against various genres of “political self-universalization,” anxious but boasting visions like the waning British romances of

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158 Althusser writes, “Thesis II: Ideology has a material existence. I have already touched on this thesis by saying that the ‘ideas’ or ‘representations’, etc., which seem to make up ideology do not have an ideal (idéale or idéelle) or spiritual existence, but a material existence. … I now return to this thesis: an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material. Of course, the material existence of the ideology in an apparatus and its practices does not have the same modality as the material existence of a paving-stone or a rifle. But, at the risk of being taken for a Neo-Aristotelian (NB Marx had a very high regard for Aristotle), I shall say that ‘matter is discussed in many senses’, or rather that it exists in different modalities, all rooted in the last instance in ‘physical’ matter. Having said this, let me move straight on and see what happens to the ‘individuals’ who live in ideology, i.e. in a determinate (religious, ethical, etc.) representation of the world whose imaginary distortion depends on their imaginary relation to their conditions of existence, in other words, in the last instance, to the relations of production and to class relations (ideology = an imaginary relation to real relations). I shall say that this imaginary relation is itself endowed with a material existence.” Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes toward an Investigation.” Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays. Trans. Ben Brewster. Monthly Review Press, 1971.
Stevenson and Haggard or the gibbous “hard-bitten naturalism” of postwar US Westerns. This hypothesis seems appropriate for both Kushner and McCarthy’s novels. With its backward glance, Kushner’s realism hedges toward “finite social description” and self-diagnosis, grappling with the contradictions of mimetic fidelity and political radicalism with the help of a truly ambitious historical lens. McCarthy’s “half-articulate dreams of expansive political projection” look forward into a lukewarm, seemingly automatic and never-ending project of carbon resourcing. In both cases, the contradictions of realism’s representative capacity for fossil capital clarify realism’s own production of the common sense of late fossil capital, or its “realization of market imperatives at an ideological level.” This realism is an essential cultural feature of the neoliberal long wave, and fossil capitalist realism offers a name for its literary mediation.

The bearing of these representations on the future of capital’s essential carbon contradiction is ambiguous, as is their academic study. Scholars in the Energy Humanities refer to this feedback loop in criticism as the impasse. La Berge makes plain that this impasse is built into realist representation under late capital, whether the representation of the artist or the scholar, as do the well-rehearsed, lower-your-expectations hot takes on the Green New Deal, pipeline obstruction, privatized disaster relief, walls to thwart climate refugees and other faces of the people and planet versus capital and carbon debate. Will fossil capital’s


161 “Whereas the postmodern emphasizes indeterminacy and ontological uncertainty, capitalist realism acknowledges the limitations of critique — even as it constantly seeks new avenues for it.” Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, “Introduction”: 16.
terminal crisis emerge spontaneously of its own contradictions or via the collectively willed, organized and forced making of decommodified, decarbonized and reparative politics? In either case, realism fails.
2. Tough Oil Realism: Carbon, Genre and Social Reproduction

“With the end of ‘surplus energy’ thus comes the collapse of surplus profit — or so one would think. It may be that the disaster of oil is already prefigured in the temporal shift of the capitalist economy that goes by the name of neoliberalism. The ferocious return of primitive accumulation, now directed not only toward the last remaining vestiges of the public sector (such as universities and hospitals) but also inward into subjectivity, announces, too, a temporal recalibration of capital away from the future to the present. There is no longer any wait for surplus or any attention to the reproduction of capital for the future; instead, as if the future of capital is in doubt, profit taking has to occur as close to immediately as possible, whatever the long-term consequences.”

Imre Szeman, “System Failure”

“No society that systematically undermines social reproduction can endure for long.”

Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care”

Contemporary fiction and film often focalize anxiety about fossil-fueled global warming through the specter of dead children. Alfonso Cuarón’s Children of Men (2006), for instance, depicts a future of species-wide infertility amid deteriorating social conditions nearly

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2 Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care.” New Left Review 100 (July/August 2016): 99.

3 Adeline Johns-Putra makes a similar observation in “‘My job is to take care of you’: Climate Change, Humanity, and Cormac McCarthy’s The Road.” Modern Fiction Studies 62.3 (Fall 2016): 523. Our analyses of this phenomenon, as I’ll discuss, diverge. Additionally, even as my examination here likewise diverges from Lee Edelman’s analysis of the child figure and what he terms “reproductive futurism,” I would be remiss not to cite his No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive. Durham: Duke UP, 2004.
identical to our own. Disenchanted Londoner Theo guides a miraculously pregnant refugee, Kee, among Britain’s militarized borders, gutted social services, failing agriculture, doomsday cults, and the kidnapping tactics of extremist cells. Even after Kee’s daughter is born, Cuarón’s trademark claustrophobic, handheld long takes seem designed to convince viewers that her survival is impossible. Buoys from this infernal cinematography are few and far between. The highest emotional note arrives at the end of the film when the holy family of Theo, Kee and child flees for a boat where rumor has it genomic research to restore humanity’s reproductive capacity is underway. Theo dies from gunshot wounds, we glimpse the hazy ark, the screen goes black, and children’s laughter rings out. Cuarón leaves open the question of the child’s survival, but knowing what we know about the world of *Children of Men*, optimism feels foolish. The children’s laughter sounds like a kind of taunt — a proper laugh-track — rather than a good omen, whatever Cuarón’s intention. Nothing but the worst seems to lie ahead for the child and, by extension, for us all under the social and ecological collapse depicted in the film.

Less literal in its engagement with biological reproduction, though no less apocalyptic, Lars Von Trier’s *Melancholia* (2011) features a gentle and curious child named Leo in its depiction of what Slavoj Zizek has termed “living in the end times” and Roy Scranton “learning to die in the Anthropocene.” Leo is the son of one of the film’s two sister protagonists, Justine and Claire, whose melancholic and anxious dispositions, respectively, form the core of this second installment in Von Trier’s “Depression Trilogy.” Whatever sentimentality can be

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sifted from this otherwise gray film lies in Leo: as the planet Melancholia careens toward the earth in a guaranteed Armageddon, the child appears to be the only person worthy of comfort, or at least the only one from whom the characters don’t rush to steal it. His unknowing, cherubic face summons the bleeding heart of Justine from wherever it hides for the rest of the film, compelling even this brutally dark, brutally honest figure to play make-believe—we’re-all-not-going-to-die rather than repeat to Leo what she has told her sister: “The earth is evil. We don’t need to grieve for it. Nobody will miss it. … We are alone. Life is only on earth, and not for long.” In Leo’s name, rather than his mother’s, emerges some unquantifiable, unexpected, perhaps instinctive impulse to protect and care, some mission stronger than whatever motivates the blank-stare candor of Justine’s diagnosis that our world is ungrievably evil. Melancholia ends as planets collide, mother and aunt clasping the child’s hands and embracing death with ritual tranquility, the family circled together and faces skyward.\(^6\)

Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 novel *The Road* offers perhaps the bleakest of these precious child figures so prevalent in climate fiction. In a “barren, silent, godless” wasteland, a father, son and, as I’ll discuss, a conspicuously absent mother painstakingly scavenge food, shelter and fossil fuels to survive. They venture across plains of macadam and into the diesel tanks of abandoned trains and trucks. They weave through empty parking lots and “long lines of charred and rusting cars” on the interstate, sniffing for paraffin vapor and motor oil, foraging for bic lighters and half-dead batteries. “My job,” the man explains to the boy, as Cuaron’s Theo to Kee and her infant and as Von Trier’s Justine and Claire to Leo, “is to take care of you.” Different from *Children of Men* and *Melancholia*, in *The Road* this social reproductive imperative is indistinguishable from the task of carbon extraction that drives the man and boy’s plot. Page after page, both tasks appear impossible under the conditions

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8 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* 80.
of social and ecological austerity that the family faces: no society, no soil, no water, hardly any life at all (only a cluster of morels, literalizing Anna Tsing’s mushroom at the end of the world). The novel concludes when the single father dies from an infection — one we imagine to be treatable with an antibiotic — leaving his emaciated son on the road to be picked up by whomever, likely cannibals. Like that of *Children of Men*, *The Road*’s open ending cruelly asks us to believe the best about the survival odds for the child and the reproduction of a broader society, but leaves us to anticipate only more of the worst.

Though each in its own way oblique in its representation of climate change and in its relationship to the category of climate fiction, the dystopian family dramas of *Children of Men*, *Melancholia* and *The Road* register concern that warming temperatures and rising seas throw the future of life into question. It is at least in part this concern — whether resolved by Cuaron’s triumphant UN-like Human Project or Von Trier’s spectacle of ruling class martyrdom — that accounts for the two films’ critical success. They boast a fawning reception by the judges at Cannes, a spread of Oscar nominations and otherwise rave reviews from the usual suspects, and their regard by popular audiences runs parallel (for example, each is “Certified Fresh” on Rotten Tomatoes). McCarthy’s novel is likewise a runaway success, with a Pulitzer, a thumbs-up from Oprah and a successful Hollywood adaptation. It has been hailed “the first great masterpiece of the globally warmed

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“generation” and, even more grand, “the most important environmental book ever written,” praise that reflects “a growing exegesis of the novel as a document of and for a climate-changing world,” as Adeline Johns-Putra has observed.12

These three texts have evidently hit a zeitgeist nerve. Central to their warm reception in general and more specifically to their reception as important environmental works is how their apocalyptic portraits of adults grieving children and struggling desperately to keep them alive are more credibly “realistic” than the forecasts of technoutopian fantasy or even the research-backed projections of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.13 A slew of “ten years later” retrospectives on Children of Men pointed to the film’s “alarming realism,” its battlezone setting and brink-of-death cast appearing “disturbingly familiar” and “chillingly real” rather than a strange and grim forecast.14 Per its title, the realism of Melancholia appears rooted in its representation of what Renee Lertzman calls


13 See Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, “Global Warming of 1.5 °C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty.” World Meteorological Organization (2018).

14 Nicholas Barber, “Why Children of Men has never been as shocking as it is now.” BBC Culture (December 15 2016); Oscar Hjelmstedt, “Children of Men — Alarmingly Relevant Ten Years On.” Medium (March 20 2017); Christopher Weingarten et al. “The Top 40 Sci-Fi Movies of the 21st Century.” Rolling Stone (August 22 2017); Alissa Wilkinson,“It’s time to revisit Children of Men, whose near-future British dystopia feels achingly close.” Vox (June 28 2017).
“environmental melancholia.”¹⁵ As Amy Taubin observed in a review for *Artforum*, Von Trier “subverts popular movie genres (here, the wacky wedding comedy and the disaster-from-outer-space flick) through the blatant imposition of an aesthetic that at once heightens and decimates the conventions of realism on which those genres depend,” showing us in dutiful, banal detail an extinction event that might otherwise seem hyperbolic and asking us to grieve our own deaths by climate change with a more mundane aspect.¹⁶ Despite *The Road’s* carnival of horrors — cannibalism, fossil fuel scarcity — its readers likewise often cite the novel’s realism in praising its picture of eco-catastrophe.¹⁷ Mark Lynas, author of *The God Species* (2011) and other popular non-fiction works on climate change, wrote of *The Road’s* 2009 film adaptation, “Cormac McCarthy’s apocalypse is unstated … and is all the more realistic for it.”¹⁸ A *Guardian* review similarly asserted “*The Road* brings fictional ecological disasters into

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¹⁸ Mark Lynas, “*The Road*: A film that every one of us needs to see.” *Independent UK* (December 16 2009): web.
the here and now.” Having myself taught all of these texts in university classrooms, I might add anecdotally that undergraduates take to them precisely for this realism, what Debra Shostak calls the novel’s “relentless realist tragedy.” Unlike the didacticism of Bong Joon-ho’s *Snowpiercer* (2013) or the winking irony of Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* (2003) — speculative narratives much like the three discussed here, and all standards of climate fiction syllabi — the endangered children at the heart of Cuarón, Von Trier and McCarthy all bring something to the cli fi table that registers in readers’ minds as verisimilitude or truthfulness.

In this sense, what Imre Szeman terms in this chapter’s epigraph the “anticipation of disaster” under late capitalism and its imagined catastrophic future invites a bit of a paradox, with political economic and literary dimensions alike: how can we anticipate what is already real?

In the epigraphs above, both Szeman and Nancy Fraser insist that neoliberal strategies of accumulation inhabit and inflame this precise paradox of mutually constituting present and future disasters, producing value through it and continually exacerbating its material contradiction. Both ever-heightening fossil fuel extraction and ever-privatizing social reproduction are disasters today and disasters tomorrow, exchanging immediate profit for consequences that grow only more acute and which foreclose on capital’s own future along with that of the people and planet upon which it predates. Following their analyses, it is my

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sense that crucial to the productive character of this paradox is its own commodification as realism, whereby capital — understood here as both a fossil-fueled system and a system dependent on cheap social reproductive labor — sells the ongoing disaster of its contradiction as realist and realistic.

For Szeman and other Energy Humanities scholars, and as discussed in the previous chapter, capital’s ability to overcome structural crises via “temporal recalibration” is won by what Jeff Diamanti terms “energy deepening” and what Andreas Malm periodizes as “long waves of fossil capital.” Whether by labor automation, infrastructure development, speculation and finance, the Global South relocation and expansion of industrial production, or the Global North rise of logistics and the digital, neoliberal production’s compressed time and spatial fix, like capitalist production in the longue durée, has survived on a diet of surplus energy. This diet presents a contradiction to capital’s premise of continual and self-sustaining growth, as up- and downswings in fossil fuel consumption correspond to cycles of boom and bust and overall require a “linear increase in energy stock” incompatible with the thermodynamic limits of the planet, its vital ecosystem processes and the conditions whereby human communities may thrive.

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For Fraser, no neoliberal strategy of accumulation has been more essential, nor more transformative, punishing and unsustainable, than the privatization of social reproduction. Indeed, as Jaime Acosta Gonzalez, Jess Issacharoff and Jacob Soule write, “Insofar as neoliberalism names the set of principles which seek to transform social relations themselves into commodified life forms, it is not just the case that social reproduction provides an interesting lens through which to study neoliberalism, or vice versa, but that they are mutually constituted theoretical entities.”

Public goods from water to education to firefighting are sold to the highest bidder; housing prices balloon while household incomes stagnate; increasing numbers of teachers, nurses, domestic workers, retail workers and fast food workers finish one underpaid shift in social reproductive labor just to go home and work a second one for free; medical, student loan and other consumer debts underwrite all. Under neoliberalism, capital extracts our cost of living as its surplus value; not only is our labor power a commodity — as Marx writes, the “special commodity” — but the production of our labor power is more and more commodified as well. Fraser writes that social reproduction marks a fundamental contradiction in capital, whereby “capitalism’s orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies.”

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27 Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions”: 100. Both the family wage and two-earner household are normative configurations of social reproduction rather than actually existing universals. As Fraser examines, these norms have historically been afforded by the exclusion and labor exploitation of non-white and immigrant communities, who less frequently enjoy the “breadwinner” paradigm of the postwar period and often rely on “care chains” beyond the single-family household.
warming, proceeding since World War II by way of “long waves” that attempt to contain and defer the fundamental instability of capitalism’s required “linear increase” in social reproduction “stock.”

The replacement of the family wage of postwar state-managed capitalism by the two-earner household of neoliberalism’s capital-managed state is the latest such postponement of the system-wide contradiction that Fraser identifies. Notably, Matthew Huber has suggested that this neoliberal household’s enterprise form takes hegemonic root in the increasingly fossil-fueled geography of US middle-class life under the Great Acceleration. As he writes,

> During the postwar period[,] petroleum became the critical material and energetic basis of everyday life centered on single-family homeownership, automobility, and the nuclear family. And oil’s imbrication within a vision of entrepreneurial life is not singular. It not only provided the gasoline to propel masses of atomized individuals through the dispersed geographies of social reproduction (home, work, school), but also provided the material for much of this sociospatial infrastructure — asphalt for roads, vinyl siding for homes, countless plastic commodities to fill the home.

Though Huber does not thread his analysis through the category of social reproduction nor the body of criticism called Social Reproduction Theory but rather through Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, I want to build from his insights in *Lifeblood* to suggest that the fossil-fueled social reproductive regime of Fordism laid key groundwork for the more and evermore fossil-fueled, commodified and hyper-extractive social reproductive regime of

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28 In figuring capitalism as requiring a “linear increase” in its social reproduction “stock” similar to its requirement for more and more carbon energy, I limit my analysis to the Fordist and post-Fordist periods, rather than include the Victorian period, as Fraser does.

neoliberalism.\textsuperscript{30} In so doing, I suggest that neoliberal accumulation tethers social reproduction to fossil energy, thereby tethering the contradictions each presents to capital and life alike.

What makes the reproductive crises of Cuarón, Von Trier and McCarthy seem realistic, then, is that they depict neoliberal capital’s linked disasters of care and environment as they exist now rather than only as they will in an imagined future. From the sprawl of transnational care chains that disarticulate the single-family household and send workers by car, bus and plane across continents and oceans as a condition of employment, to the disappearance of clean water and arable land at the hand of pipelines, fracking, rising temperatures, droughts, floods, wildfires and hurricanes, communities today reproduce life by means of and despite the deepened fossil-fueling of labor power under contemporary capitalism. The endangered children at the center of climate fiction index less a new threat to social reproduction at the hand of climate crisis than a continuation of neoliberalism’s ongoing threat to such reproduction on twin fronts of ecological and everyday life. They narratively displace the enclosure of the “social factory” under late capitalism and its rippling economic destabilization onto visions of apocalyptic infertility, ecosystem collapse and other figurations of the disappearance of “home.”\textsuperscript{31} Or, rather, they thematize how this enclosure


\textsuperscript{31} The “social factory” is thought to have been first conceptualized by Mario Tronti and Raniero Panzieri in the pages of the \textit{Quaderni Rossi} or Red Notebooks between 1961 and 1965, with further and diverging elaborations by Antonio Negri, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James. On this conceptual genealogy, see David Palazzo, “The ‘Social Factory’ In Postwar Italian Radical Thought From Operaismo To Autonomia” (doctoral dissertation). City University of New York, 2014: web.
of social reproduction intertwines with environmental enclosure, such that there is no such thing as society nor an environment for it to reproduce and inhabit.\textsuperscript{32}

Fraser describes today’s crisis of care as “one aspect of a ‘general crisis’ that also encompasses economic, ecological and political strands … which intersect with and exacerbate one another,” refusing any “critical separatism” in analyses of neoliberal environment, production and social reproduction.\textsuperscript{33} In this chapter, I attempt to outline more clearly how fossil-fueled environmental destruction and the privatization of social reproduction “intersect with and exacerbate one another” through examinations of contemporary literary form and political praxis. I draw from scholarship on these historical relationships to determine how they are represented by literature and by working class movements, as a way of evaluating how these relationships shape contemporary political subjectivity and what passes colloquially as our political or economic reality. Following my exploration of capitalist realism in the previous chapter, the mediation of commodified social reproduction and of perpetual fossil fuel extraction as “realism” works to interpellate subjects in a particular way. Hence this chapter is part of my broader investigation into the ideological formation of the contemporary era that I am referring to as fossil capitalist realism.

In literary terms, Social Reproduction Theory argues that reproduction is incorrectly cast by classical and Marxist political economy alike as setting, seeking to demystify the “special

\textsuperscript{32} Margaret Thatcher famously quipped “There is no such thing as society” in an interview with Douglas Keay for Woman’s Own (1987): margaretthatcher.org/document/106689.

\textsuperscript{33} Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions”: 99.
commodity” of labor power whose production constitutes this background to the plot or drama of production.\(^\text{34}\) The Energy Humanities has likewise newly foregrounded energy in analyses of capital and its cultural and social forms, more than incidental setting or neutral input to accumulation but fundamental its operations as a whole (as Szeman writes, uncannily, fossil fuels are the “ur-commodity”).\(^\text{35}\) I believe this shared receding from critical view of social reproduction and energy — the special commodity and the ur-commodity — and their recent reappearance across political analyses inside the academy and out is both structurally parallel and materially bound. Each has been indispensable to labor power, differentially across capitalism’s \textit{longue durée}, and through this necessity introduces recurrent crises for capital to overcome. Today, their contradictions converge and heighten as the

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consequence of neoliberalism’s primary strategy of accumulation to deepen this extraction from reproductive labor and carbon energy. Fossil-fueled global warming, which undermines “the planet’s ability to renew itself,” as Alyssa Battistoni describes it, dovetails with our own undermined ability to renew ourselves.\footnote{Alyssa Battistoni, “Bringing in the Work of Nature: From Natural Capital to Hybrid Labor.” Political Theory 45.1 (2017): 19.} Taken together, these undermined abilities signal a profound social reproduction crisis within fossil capital, one with implications for how we understand the political subject today and thus how we conduct radical strategy today.

My analysis draws on insights from the Energy Humanities, Marxist feminist theory, literary criticism and, importantly, the diagnoses and strategies of recent and promising “boundary struggles” in organized labor and energy justice in the US.\footnote{See Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode.” New Left Review 86 (March/April 2014).} My guiding questions: How does the concept of fossil capital help us understand social reproduction, and in particular its commodification during the fossil-fueled Great Acceleration? In turn, how does Social Reproduction Theory help us understand climate crisis, largely the result of skyrocketing emissions rates during the neoliberal period? How can we learn about these intersecting crises of care and environment from, on the one hand, reproduction-anxious climate fiction and, on the other, the recent surge in “bargaining for the common good” by organized labor in social reproductive industries like education and by pipeline obstruction efforts at
Standing Rock and elsewhere? Finally, how can academics, who are workers in fossil capital’s social reproductive economy, mobilize these analyses as praxis for our bound crises of environment and care? Ambitious questions for a single chapter, but my hope here is to consolidate these conversations across the academic literature and between such scholarship and political struggle so as to invite others to answer them with me.

My first section, “Wages for Arbeitskraft,” continues my examination of *The Road*, a novel of neoliberal social reproduction structured by the mission of energy resourcing that Jeff Diamanti and Brent Bellamy identify at the heart of capitalist labor power, or *Arbeitskraft.* As mentioned, McCarthy’s father painstakingly keeps his son alive by scavenging fossil fuels and fossil-fueled commodities, the scant remains of the “easy oil” dynamics of Fordist social reproduction. These offer the only apparent means of life under post-Fordism’s economic and environmental austerity sublimated through the novel’s post-apocalyptic setting, what Fraser summarizes as “externalizing carework onto families and communities [while] simultaneously diminish[ing] their capacity to perform it.” This plot figures the reproduction of life as a kind of “tough oil,” one attesting to the increasingly privatized and

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40 Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions”: 104.
fossil-fueled character of social reproduction under neoliberalism. I consider how this “tough oil” depiction of care complicates the goal of “species survival” so frequently invoked in discussions of climate crisis and climate fiction, linking it to the deflationary slogan of political realism identified by Fisher and La Berge. More, I analyze the novel’s post-Fordist figure of the absent mother and wife, reading her absence not as a depressive resignation to species extinction, as is common in the critical literature on *The Road*, but as a refusal of work in the mode advanced by the Marxist feminist “wages for housework” movement during the early days of neoliberalism. Without interest in granting political subjectivity to energy materials nor in equating their role in capitalist accumulation with exploited human labor, I explore how the novel’s representation of carbon substitutes for life and the “women’s work” that reproduces it indexes the interwoven roles of fossil fuels and social reproductive labor under neoliberal *Arbeitskraft* resourcing.

Then, in “Boundary struggles,” I follow the woman’s refusal of work in the novel to examine how a fossil-fueled understanding of social reproduction might inform organized labor and energy justice praxis today. Tithi Bhattacharya writes,

Let us rethink the theoretical import of extra-workplace struggles, such as those for cleaner air, for better schools, against water privatization, against climate change, or for fairer housing policies. These reflect, I submit, those social needs of the working class that are essential for its social reproduction.

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42 Nancy Fraser develops the concept of “boundary struggles” in “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode” (March/April 2014) and “Contradictions of Capital and Care” (July/August 2016).
They also are an effort by the class to demand its “share of civilization.” In this, they are also class struggles.43

Marxist feminist strategies for such extra-workplace class struggles — namely, the refusal of work and the demand — are alive and well today in the “bargaining for the common good” fights waged on the terrain of environmental crisis and carework, for the latter principally by pink collar workers like teachers and nurses.44 Although Red Nation and other groups leading the Standing Rock encampment did not “bargain” against pipeline construction in the sense indicated by a “collective bargaining unit” of unionized workers, this coalition articulated a political vision around opposition to the Dakota Access Pipeline that exceeded the #NoDAPL fight to integrate oppositions to land and water enclosure, ongoing

43 Tithi Bhattacharya, “Introduction.”

ecological crisis, mass incarceration, settler colonialism and US empire worldwide. In this way, their strategy resonated strongly with the “common good” strategy of such a collective bargaining unit as United Teachers Los Angeles, whose January 2019 strike demanded free lunches, public parks, affordable housing, an end to police brutality and an end to ICE raids for their students and communities alongside bread-and-butter wage and hiring demands specific to their contract negotiation. The social reproductive core of these varying “bargaining for the common good” agendas demonstrates that the single boss fight or single


pipeline blockade can organize to win a more transformative political program concerning
the distribution of labor, resources and power in the reproduction of life. Essentially
underlining what these workers and community organizers have already demonstrated, I use
the Marxist feminist lenses of Silvia Federici and Kathi Weeks alongside the decolonial
Marxist ones of Nick Estes and Glen Coulthard to contend that a reappraisal of social
reproduction and energy justice, each through the other, offers profound political promise
for a resolution to fossil capital’s social reproduction crisis on socialist, feminist and
decolonial terms.  

As I have indicated, I believe the formal function of both reproductive labor and carbon
energy to the continual provisioning of labor power for capitalist accumulation — what
Althusser terms “the reproduction of the relations of production” — is particularly apt to a
literary critical approach. As explored in the previous chapter, certain literary critics have
defined “petrofiction” by oil’s structural role in capitalist production and resultant structural
role in literary depictions of the capitalist world. In a parallel move, Bhattacharya describes
Social Reproduction Theory as “a methodology that privileges process,” citing Marxist

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literary critic Georg Lukács in his prizing of art and criticism sensitive to “the developing tendencies of history [that] constitute a higher reality than the empirical ‘facts.’” If this higher reality — the defining purview of Lukács’s favored literary form of realism and especially the historical novel — is not the one through which McCarthy’s protagonist, nor perhaps McCarthy himself, interprets women’s work and fossil fuels, then my analysis of The Road here insists it is one that nonetheless registers in the novel’s setting, character and drama. Capital’s “higher reality” is dependent on labor power that may appear as “empirical ‘facts’” — natural and infinite — and I find the contradictions that this dependence produces in literary form useful for thinking about the contradictions it produces in the reality of our collective lives. I hope that by pairing this literary analysis with an examination of on-the-ground political praxis, I make this utility as clear as possible. I also offer it in part as a defense of a version of the humanities under threat by the commodification of higher education within neoliberalism’s broader commodification of social reproduction, a version wherein the humanities are uniquely fit to train students to think as bad capitalist subjects and so must be defended. I hope that this chapter gestures even further at another version of the humanities fit for the habituation to critique named by capitalist realism, one that correlates this bad thinking with bad collective struggle.

The ticking clock on fossil capital and the ticking clock on capitalist social reproduction are one and the same. From the eyes of capital, their metronome anticipates a future, unlivable disaster to be continually deferred. From the eyes of the workers whom I draw on in this chapter, such unlivability is already real, with little time to anticipate rent and loan payments,

50 Tithi Bhattacharya, “Introduction”: 4-5.
untreated health problems, multiplying environmental threats and the violence of racist state power, among other everyday extractions of our life and our cost of living by capital.

Likewise real are the conditions to transform this world that our labor reproduces, so that we might “live, not just survive.”

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2.1 Wages for Arbeitskraft

2.1.a Survival or momentum?

I taught The Road for a class on climate fiction. The course topic was an awkward fit for the summer semester (so much of cli fi literally ruins the beach in “beach read”) and it was made even more awkward by this wintriest of wintry novels. A few days into our study, I suggested to my students that we avoid the words “depressing” and “hopeless” in describing the novel’s plot, its form, our reading experience, and what we imagined the purpose of climate fiction to be more generally. Those familiar with the novel will not be surprised to hear that these descriptors had become a crutch. With this restriction in place, conversation wilted somewhat, already flagging under the weight of the novel’s glum, gasping affect and the sweltering heat of North Carolina in June. Denying the vocabulary of hopelessness seemed to deepen rather than alleviate our need for its recourse. Nobody had much to say. And who could blame us? As Kevin Kearney observes of The Road’s unrelenting despair, “The future of life itself is certainly put into grave doubt. There is overwhelming evidence that the ever-encroaching clouds, the receding sun, and the deepening winters will make the scaled earth even more inhospitable to life, facts that the man tends to admit to himself but mostly shields from the boy.” McCarthy, in turn, does not shield them from readers.

Spirits revived, however, when we arrived at The Road’s famously vague ending and speculated on the prospect of survival for the boy and for McCarthy’s furtive, reptilian

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human species. As described earlier, *The Road*’s ending suggests that the boy will survive and, more, will survive on a long-term basis and in the care of a family. After three days by his dead father’s side, the boy returns to the road and encounters a bearded man in a parka with a shotgun, an ambassador on behalf of a group of people who appear to kindly take in the boy with no threat of abuse or cannibalization: they carry the boy’s blankets and suitcase, bundling him for warmth; they refuse the boy’s offer of his pistol, telling him to keep it for protection; they allow the boy to bury his father in private; the mother figure “put[s] her arms around [the boy] and [holds] him,” teaching him about God and the boy’s sharing in God’s breath.53 They tell the boy that they too are “carrying the fire,” McCarthy’s mythic heuristic for whether someone will eat you or not (as fire-carriers, they will not).54 In the final paragraph, this new family encounters trout in a mountain stream, a rare sign of life and of a future. Presented this resolution, my students’ energy picked up. They had lots to say. And not because they were suddenly hopeful. Quite the contrary: they didn’t buy it.

Our conversation grew truly heated in response to McCarthy’s injection of such blind, blindsiding hope into the novel. To my students, that the boy would settle into more of the same steady, plodding survival — further, with seemingly more security and with his mother

53 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* 286.

54 Kevin Kearney writes: “Fire is like a soul but more like a story that the father needs to constantly tell. The signification of this fire is open to a number of interpretations. It could be read to signify the spark of civilization, or the life breath of god, or the promise of regeneration (or his ‘seed’ more crudely), none of these being mutually exclusive. Throughout the text, this ‘fire’ seems to carry transcendental implications: despite the falleness of the world that surrounds him and the encroaching abyss of death, death to seemingly every living creature, the father repeatedly promises that the fire is held somewhere within the boy, an everlasting fire, almost akin to a soul. However, this guarantee of the fire takes the form of a story the man weaves, a tale of eternal promise that continually confronts a world marked by total collapse and with almost no hope of passing on the fire.” Kearney, “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*”: 162.
restored — and that McCarthy seemed to expect us to suddenly regard this survival with optimism and gratitude rather than with the skepticism and defeat the novel trains us in, either a) indicated bad writing, far too sunny of a resolution to fit the rest of the plot; b) offered a momentary relief that would soon give way to the boy’s much more likely cannibalization by the family or someone else, off-page; or, c) signaled that the man and the boy had already died, and in these final pages we were reading about heaven (this seemed like the best possible outcome for the pair, all things considered). I think we ended up with seven working theories about the conclusion, all of which disbelieved McCarthy’s implication that the boy would and, most dissatisfying, should survive. We even resented that the boy should be made to live in a world that had been up until the novel’s ending represented as having no room for life, with the purpose or mere possibility of life eclipsed such that as a class we barely knew how to discuss the novel. McCarthy’s unexplained reversal on what had been throughout the book upsetting and torturous seemed disingenuous. It was as if everyone had gotten pregnant in *Children of Men* or *Melancholia*’s colliding planets changed course at the eleventh hour. McCarthy’s final triumphant note contradicted the novel’s own narrative framework, its characters, setting and drama, and the expectations these cultivate in readers as the story goes on.55

I’ll note here that we were not alone in this assessment. Allen Josephs and Alan Noble have characterized the resolution as a *deus ex machina*, or as Noble writes, “a paradox, irrationality,  

55 It is unclear to me to what degree *The Road*’s interpretation as “realist” or “realistic,” however qualified or genre-fied, takes into account the novel’s resolution. In other words, do the novel’s fawning critics locate its realism in the gut-wrenching drear of its plot, in this drear’s sudden and surprising resolution at the novel’s end, or in both? On resolutions, see: Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981; Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.
or at the very least a tremendous complexity” within the novel’s “stark, unrelenting fatalism.” Shelly Rambo has similarly written that “McCarthy catches the reader in a schizophrenic, and distinctly American, post-apocalyptic crisis of meaning: between the craving for a happy ending (for resolution, for redemption) and the recognition of its impossibility.” Gerry Canavan offers this ending as the exception that proves the rule of what he calls the novel’s “entropic realism”: “There is nothing in the book before the last six pages that suggests any sort of non-disastrous resolution to this story is possible, nothing in the world McCarthy makes that gives us license for this sort of hope.” Canavan notes that the father himself indicates this narrative logic when he looks at the sleeping boy one night and thinks, “Please dont [sic] tell me how the story ends,” ventriloquizing the novel’s readers whose hope likewise grows only dimmer.

Given the terms of survival in McCarthy’s “barren, silent, godless” world, the too-happy-to-really-be-happy ending that my students both wanted for the boy and yet were too smart to trust did not seem believable on the novel’s terms nor on our own. (One student: “I just wish the little boy could die.”) I suggested to the class that we take seriously this shared suspicion of The Road’s resolution, the incongruence of it, which we all had intuited before coming together in the classroom. What did it mean that none of us believed that survival

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58 Gerry Canavan, “Entropic Realism and The Road.”

59 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*: 63.
alone was an end worth writing about or fighting for? Why did it seem to present a fate worse than, rather than preferable to, death? I mean, how weird was it that we wanted to shake our hero’s shoulders, snap him out of a narrative arc that dissatisfied us merely because — precisely because — he keeps on living just in order to keep on living, in the barest and most foot-dragging, sunken-eyed version of life? Aren’t we supposed to root for our protagonists’ survival, at the very least?

The intention of my provocations, and one I disclosed to my students without delay, was not to stump us all into admitting that hope is pointless, that quitting is smart, that climate change is too big for climate fiction not to fail at convincing us to believe in a livable future. Rather, I meant for us to probe the limits of our conviction in the biological instinct to self-preserve that McCarthy’s ending seems to rely upon to maintain its premise of realism in lieu of such realist narrative conventions as rounded characterization and historical or geographical specificity. Jane Elliott has identified “life-interest” as a biopolitical strategy of the neoliberal 21st century and locates it squarely in the “survival games” represented by contemporary dystopian fiction like *The Road*. Like Elliott, I am interested in historicizing this literary phenomenon as a technique of power, but with a further interest in how it animates climate fiction narratives, especially those centered on endangered children, as well

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as how “the combined abstraction and extremity” of eco-apocalyptic varieties of the survival game may fail to secure some readers’ confidence in their realist credentials.\textsuperscript{62}

Can we trust the realism, even a minimal or “entropic” realism, of such plot-movers as survival instinct or human nature in the conditions that McCarthy depicts, ones that are utterly hostile, utterly inhospitable to anything but the day-by-day, white-knuckled, hollow-cheeked non-death that the man and boy eke out? By extension, in our own nonfictional world — where the precarity of debt peonage policed by a racist state is matched only by the precarity of our increasingly underwater, on fire and unbreathable climate — why put stock in the narrative premise that the biological show must go on? Is it really self-preservation that impels us onward yet, down the road indefinitely? And if it is, why can’t this march withstand realist aesthetics, but instead resolves its matter-of-fact zombie horror with sugar-sweet melodrama? Last, why despite these contradictions in form and plot is \textit{The Road} continually interpreted as a work of realism?

One student, having read the novel alongside Hobbes in a previous class and willing to play devil’s advocate, argued that McCarthy’s man and boy illustrate that self-interest is innate and bottomless, that the pair will survive at all costs and against all odds — and we would, too, if put in similar circumstances. Another student condensed the thought: “To survive is human.” A third countered these state of nature interpretations to argue that the boy survives only because of the father, and the father survives only because he is accustomed to

\textsuperscript{62} Jane Elliott, “The Microeconomic Mode”: 214. It is worth mentioning that Elliott identifies a social realist element in only one of her objects, Gillian Flynn’s 2012 novel \textit{Gone Girl}, while the others range from horror and dystopia to memoir and reality television.  

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it: he survives not because he needs nor desires to, nor even to secure his son’s survival, whom we learn he is prepared to kill to avoid a number of fates-worse-than-death, as he repeatedly coaches himself to “crush that beloved skull with a rock.”\textsuperscript{63} Rather, the student argued, the man survives because he was already surviving. The habits were already in place, everything set in motion much earlier. Survival is more a matter of momentum than instinct or will. If you’re already going, you keep going.

In describing \textit{The Road}’s narrative logic in terms of Newton’s law of thermodynamics — an object in motion tends to stay in motion, an object at rest tends to stay at rest — this last student identified precisely what makes the novel’s version of realism a perfect index of late fossil capital, whose law is to consume energy without cease and to continue doing so without reason beyond how such continual energy consumption secures perpetual economic activity. Try as McCarthy may to feed us a narrative of the indomitable human spirit, some species-being abstracted beyond specific material historical conditions, he delivers a novel fundamentally ordered by the imperative of energy resourcing, fossil and human alike. More, he represents this imperative such that its motivation and end-goal are entirely unclear to readers, and even seem contrary to the narrative instincts we develop over the course of his dead-eyed novel. Why survive? To extract fossil fuels. Why extract fossil fuels? To survive. “Carry the fire” indefinitely.

\textbf{2.1.b \textit{Arbeitskraft} and energopolitics}

\textsuperscript{63} Cormac McCarthy, \textit{The Road}: 120.
I am reading *The Road* against the novel’s common analysis through such themes as human nature, human survival, or other universalizing frameworks. *The Road* is frequently taken up as a paragon of what Dipesh Chakrabarty has termed “contemporary moods of anxiety and concern about the finitude of humanity” or, less elegantly, if not more memorably, what Michael Ruse has termed “the doom boom.” These frameworks interpret the novel through crisis conditions particular to the contemporary (whether a crisis of climate, faith, knowledge, or representation, among others) but nonetheless offer transhistorical or ahistorical analyses of such crisis rooted in something called “humanity.” There are scores of religious and ethical interpretations of the novel, engagements with its epistemological and philosophical implications, even its psychoanalytic tropes, and/or readings that understand its primary narrative mode to be didactic and intended to instruct a universal audience, teaching “us” about eco-disaster or the perils of nuclear technology. Within the Environmental Humanities, these ethical, epistemological and didactic considerations blend,

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with the novel’s apocalyptic setting both a metaphor for some ethical failing or spiritual loss with regards to “nature” as well as an attempt to mimaetically speculate on our planet’s near future, its themes of despair and hope both particular to the novel’s production amid today’s climate crisis and eternal points of contest and reflection crystallized in this moment of “emergency.”

It is because of these analyses’ commitment to a human subject — as who this book is about and who it is meant to be read by — that they can blend and harmonize despite disciplinary differences, and against the kind of historical materialist reading suggested by Elliott above. In this scholarship, environmental disaster appears to ask questions of us as humans, as a species, and thus so too does The Road. A reading of the novel by Adeline Johns-Putra is exemplary: “In other words, the setting of the novel is not just a devastation of the natural environment; more importantly, it is a devastation of what makes humans humane. Against this, the bond that the man shares with his son, accompanied by his valiant efforts to remember the past, is an attempt to salvage a common humanity. … The man and the boy are not humans in a dead world as such; they are humans in an inhuman world.”

Indeed, a central thread of Johns-Putra’s argument is that the novel is “no global warming

66 Adeline Johns-Putra, “‘My job is to take care of you’”; 521, 529. See also Styles of Extinction: Cormac McCarthy’s The Road, eds. Julian Murphy and Mark Stevens. London and New York: Continuum, 2012; Kearney, “Cormac McCarthy’s The Road.”
jeremiad” and indeed cannot be said to be about climate change, per se, yet is nonetheless deeply relevant to ecocritical debates precisely because of the universal themes it engages.

I believe the novel’s invitation to consider such themes as human nature and species survival are the premises of its realism. More, the abstraction of fossil-fueled environmental catastrophe into various theological, philosophical and above all ethical considerations of “humanity” that predominates scholarship on the novel inside the Environmental Humanities and out is an interpretive and representative move learned from the particular political culture of late fossil capital and the synonymity of ongoing fossil capitalist production with “reality.” Fossil fuels lies at the heart of capitalist accumulation in the longue durée, its first planet-wide crisis of externalization in the form of today’s global warming and its insistent aesthetic containment strategy that we “think of the children” and plod on. Fossil fuels are the matter of species ideology — as McCarthy’s humanist slogans of “keep going” and “carry the fire” metaphorically point to and yet overlook in favor of some transcendental figure like the soul or instinct — and they have been so since long before climate change had a name but certainly now that it does, as climate change’s frequent qualifier, “anthropogenic,” indicates.

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67 Adeline Johns-Putra, “‘My job is to take care of you’”: 520. She goes on: “This essay argues that at the heart of climate-change discourse resides an anxiety about whether we have cared enough, not just about and for each other and the planet but about and for the future. It is, furthermore, children who — not unproblematically — serve as shorthand for the future and therefore as a particularly emotive marker of the problem of climate change. I sketch this collective disquiet — this increasingly apparent sense of failure of stewardship for the planet and its species (including, paradoxically, for humanity), and a growing shame at having so completely reneged on obligations not just to the current inhabitants of the biosphere but also to future generations — as the context for the popular reception of The Road.”

68 I review this history in chapter three.
This longstanding entanglement of species and carbon energy emerges in McCarthy’s text as crossed wires of plot and genre — spun most tightly around the father and son, such that readers are encouraged to mistake the family for a biological unit or an ethical unit and not a social one, one that is reproduced by labor and marshaled ideologically to political ends rather than governed by a universal value or biological fiat like care. This is an essential and primary insight of Marxist feminism’s denaturalization of “love” and “care” and one I will engage at length in my upcoming analysis of The Road’s mother figure. As discussed in this chapter’s introduction, while climate fiction’s themes of parental love and child endangerment are often interpreted as symptoms of “intergenerational guilt,” as Lydia

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Cooper argues, or as a symbol of a stewardship or care ethic; even vaguer, a threat to species survival; or, vaguer still, our forever lost or perhaps redeemable “humanity,” the narrative logic followed by familial care-taking in The Road is one not of biological instinct nor a quest for our united environmental redemption but a story of fossil-fuel resourcing specific to Fordist and post-Fordist regimes of accumulation and their particular arrangements of domesticity and a broader social reproduction apparatus. Which is to say, the text and its predominant interpretation are symptomatic and ideological but can be read suspiciously with an eye both toward contradiction and to the narrative’s negative space — what it doesn’t say and doesn’t depict — to unpack the subjectivity regime of late fossil capital and to raise consciousness toward the struggle for another one.

The world of The Road takes shape through, along and around the road. In an uncanny inversion of the “petrotopia” exemplified by such novels as Kerouac’s On the Road (1957) and Nabokov’s Lolita (1955), The Road depicts extreme “tough oil” conditions where life is reproduced on scavenged dregs of tar, oil, gas and other fractal distillates. McCarthy’s readers pass billboards, motels and Levittowns; we measure time by the wear on plastic tarps, trash bags, grocery bags, gallon jugs, synthetic rainwear and other oil products; we visit

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70 Lydia Cooper, “Eating at the Empire Table: Cormac McCarthy’s The Road and the Anglo-Irish Gothic.” Modern Fiction Studies 63.3 (Fall 2017): 547. Johns-Putra writes: “Humanity has as its lodestone the love of a parent for his child, for in the world beyond, children are raped (as the boy’s mother fears he will be) and killed; worst of all, they are eaten. Paedophagy — the most extreme and visceral opposite of parental care — lies at the heart of this inhuman world. … By aligning the death of the nonhuman world with the rise of inhuman humans, the novel enables — though it never says as much — an alignment of environmental disaster with the loss of (parental) care.” Johns-Putra, “‘My job is to take care of you’”: 530-531.

house after house which together comprise a palimpsest of US home-making since early colonization and its varied methods of labor power exploitation, whether blood, sweat or petroleum. In this graveyard of the fossil economy — itself already quite literally a planetary graveyard put to work — the father scrimps, siphons and funnels with makeshift tubes minuscule quantities of fuel to make food, stay warm and “keep going.”

An instance of the ruin porn associated with rust belt and Appalachian postindustrialism but rendered positively lunar in its starkness, McCarthy’s world is apportioned as charcoal, diesel, gasoline, paraffin, motor oil. In a novel so sparing with words, these recur, the imperative to extract tougher and tougher oil the only guarantee amid the setting’s extreme unpredictability. Here, McCarthy’s boy is an uncanny inversion and foil to Nabokov’s own precious child: where H.H. imagines the endless Taylor production of Lolitas — with the “hidden abodes” of 1950s households and schools so prevalent his mission is to evade rather than pine for their watchful motherly eyes, as in *The Road* — McCarthy’s readers struggle to picture even a barebones social reproduction, to picture even one child surviving, even as the novel unfolds according to this task. This doubt is handed to us in plain terms: amid *The Road*’s undead funhouse picaresque, a most vivid image is one of “a charred human infant headless and gutted and blackening on the spit.”

The boy’s likely death at the hand of the novel’s trademark cannibalism draws its horror content from posing not an ethical dilemma but a thermodynamic fact: the boy’s life is dependent on and itself a source of fuel. Literal and grotesque in its staging of human life’s

72 I borrow “hidden abode” from Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode.”

73 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* 212.
conscription as means rather than ends, *The Road* denies the heart of darkness narrative more typical of the post-apocalypse genre, and one we might prefer. To succumb to the heart of darkness, we must be more than matter — willful, intentional — but in *The Road* we are nothing more, our lives bluntly interchangeable with energy materials: we are the last drip of diesel; the gas valve left fatally unwound; the charcoal that can’t stay dry; the mouthful of cornmeal that’s mostly dust but when cupped from a barn floor fills the tank for a few more excruciating hours. In these and other close calls with death, McCarthy makes the equivalence between human life and energy matter unmistakable, mathematical in its precision and unflinching in its representation. Surveying convenient store shelves, sagging pantry wares and “cities occupied by dead matter rather than living people,” McCarthy’s man has learned to interpret environments so as to extract what matter is required to keep he and his son alive.

A flickering light in the novel’s howling winds of misery and decay, the child is repeatedly depicted as energy matter. His “candlecolored skin” indicates as much, as does the father’s ultimate fear: not death, but cannibalism, whether roasted on a spit or slowly butchered cut by cut. As Lydia Cooper notes, “Throughout the novel the man is haunted by images of insatiable starvation, such as when he dreams of his son laid out on a table and dressed for some other to devour. … Women do get pregnant and bear children, but those children are most frequently turned into comestibles.” Kevin Kearney writes, “Most young life is either

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74 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* 62, 107, 114, 176, 103, 71.
75 Kevin Kearney, “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*”: 161.
76 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* 129.
77 Lydia Cooper, “Eating at the Empire Table”: 548, 563.
used as food or seen as a potential meal. … The child is reduced to nothing but ghastly sustenance.” McCarthy seems at pains to communicate the boy’s perfect convertibility with such “comestibles” and “ghastly sustenance.” More, the high price put on children, women (for their childbearing capacity), and foods like the above mentioned cornmeal or the rare jam jar extends to their exchange rate with diesel, gas, coal, and other fossil fuels. Much more so than the boy’s death, the man is terrorized by the boy’s possible conversion into fuel by “the truck people”: a parade of cannibal men who march the road with women and children on leashes, masked and wielding pipes and clubs, flanking a diesel truck, its “ropy” and “muttering” engine “running on God knows what.” With such fossil-fueled characterizations of the family form, the calculus between a human’s worth as means and ends, setting and character, energy and life, is the novel’s central and irresolvable conflict, and the one that horrifies and exhausts us as readers. Marx wrote, “Life itself appears only as a means to life.” In The Road, such life is secured by extracting alive, dead and fossil energies so indiscriminately that life often appears as a means to carbon.

Policing the line between human and fossil energy has never been the priority of capital, so argue Bellamy and Diamanti with their interpretation of Marx’s Arbeitskraft. Indeed, as they explain, the dialectical collapse of precisely this line subtends capitalist production in a fundamental way. What early thermodynamics discovered in the convertibility between “the work of the body and the work of the machine” was systemized into political economy via

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78 Kevin Kearney, “Cormac McCarthy’s The Road”: 161.

79 Cormac McCarthy, The Road: 60-66.

the value form, and in Capital, Marx’s term labor power, or Arbeitskraft, identifies the
dialectical abstraction of human labor by both early coal-powered steam technology and
capitalist value. Bellamy and Diamanti write, “labor power simultaneously names the
objective consistency between the worker’s caloric output, the coal power expressed in
machinery, and the abstraction of both forms of Arbeitskraft by the value form of capital at
a more general level.”

Bellamy and Diamanti present what is surely a significant reappraisal of the labor theory of
value, one that appears both perfectly symptomatic of today’s fossil-fueled crises in
environment and production as well as profoundly necessary for them as it involves the
social reproduction crisis described by Fraser. As it concerns McCarthy’s novel, that The
Road’s carbon setting and human characters in description and plot development appear
horrifyingly indistinguishable registers in literary form the Arbeitskraft commodification that
moves fossil capitalist accumulation, moved in turn by Arbeitskraft-fueled social
reproduction. The object-oriented among us might be tempted to treat the prominence of
McCarthy’s fractal distillates as a case of vibrant matter — carbon-based “characters in a
speculative onto-story” equally as agential as any human — but the novel is less interested in
enchanting the object than in disenchanting the subject. We learn through the shared
“tough oil” figuration of all life and matter in the novel that labor power exploitation has

My fourth chapter examines the literary dimensions of new materialist ecocriticism at
length.
always been object-oriented, that energy materials and human subjects are commensurate means to accumulation in capital’s eyes: *Arbeitskraft’s* modest proposal.\(^{83}\)

In this way, McCarthy’s novel can be thought of as a representation of what a 2014 special issue of *Anthropological Quarterly* terms “energopower.” Exploring the intersection of Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower, the management of population, with the extraction and distribution of energy, Dominic Boyer writes, “biopower has always plugged in.”\(^{84}\)

Energopower draws our attention to the role of electricity and fuel in the modern disciplinary apparatus spearheaded by the state, or as Foucault defines biopolitics in *Security, Territory, Population,* “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of political strategy.”\(^{85}\) In Imre Szeman’s conclusion to the issue, he observes that energopolities is less a correction to biopolitics than a clarification that the population becomes an object of modern political strategy principally in service of capital accumulation. As he writes,

> If some aspects of Marxist thought — Foucault’s *bête noire* throughout the late lectures — too quickly assign the political to eschatological fate in the mode of the *Grundrisse* (1993), Foucault’s thought tends to avoid the hard slog of the political by focusing on the “how” of biopolitics rather than attending to its “why.” The employment of disciplinary power and the constitution of healthy populations have a clear end: the bottom line, the

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bringing into being a situation of always more, more, more. It is a bottom line of perpetual growth and expansion that is not only unsustainable, but ferociously destructive for all life. … the twin problems of energy and environment unsettle the “why” of contemporary power as a result of their challenges to its “how.”

If biopower names the management of environment and population, energopower names how biopower is a technique of capitalist accumulation.

Evaluating the pressure put on this biopolitical imperative by environmental crisis, Szeman writes, “But when population becomes species becomes life-as-a-whole, the operations of biopolitics begin to falter and break down.” While Szeman suggests here that states fail to address the threat posed to life by global warming in ways that appear contradictory to their biopolitical north star to make live or let die — retooled from sovereignty’s make die or let live — my analysis of life’s tough oil status in *The Road* through the lens of *Arbeitskraft* reframes both make live/let die and make die/let live as different iterations of modern power’s ultimate end-game to *make productive*. Energopolitics helps to clarify this. Biopolitics in the era of climate change, late fossil capital, does not put a premium on species’ longevity for its own sake, but rather for the continued production of surplus value that has been historically secured through the dually abstracted labor power of human workers and carbon energy materials, extracted at higher and higher rates, and under neoliberalism primarily through the commodification and fossil-fueling of labor power’s own production (social reproduction) in addition to the labor power exploited at the site of production. The life named by biopolitics is of interest to capital only insofar as it is cheaply if not freely

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86 Imre Szeman, “Conclusion: On Energopolitics.” *Anthropological Quarterly* 87.2 (Spring 2014): 460-461.

87 Imre Szeman, “Conclusion”: 459.
reproduced or reproduced at a profit. As I’ve suggested, this reproduction enlists, indiscriminately, human and fossil labor power, ideologically obscured through categories like the species or the human, which lend neoliberal *Arbeitskraft* resourcing its realism under the multiplying crises this resourcing itself produces.

2.1.c Bad mothers

Regarding this chapter’s interest in social reproduction, that *The Road* figures climate fiction’s precious dying child as tough oil signals the *Arbeitskraft* commodification underpinning the capitalist reproduction of life as much as the production of value. Bhattacharya writes that Social Reproduction Theory identifies “the relation between labor dispensed to produce commodities and labor dispensed to produce people as part of the systemic totality of capitalism.” If Marx’s labor power names the dialectically bound fossil and human resources of this labor, an account of fossil capitalist social reproduction would determine how such *Arbeitskraft* is dispensed to “produce people” in the social factory.

As one attempt at such determination, let me return to Fraser. Echoing accounts of social reproduction by Bhattacharya, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, Silvia Federici, Susan Ferguson, Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner, Lise Vogel, and many others, she writes that “the capitalist economy relies on — one might say, free rides on — activities of provisioning, caregiving and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds,” producing

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cycles of crisis. A “tough oil” analytic for these transformations would identify how they involve changing dynamics of energy extraction, especially as they concern neoliberalism’s “temporal recalibration” away from the future that reproductive activities are ideologically associated with and toward an increasingly finite present. Fraser offers an evocative fossil-fueled image: “In a context of severe time poverty, double-cup, hands-free [breast] pumps are considered the most desirable, as they permit one to express milk from both breasts at once while driving to work on the freeway.”

Likewise, Huber’s work suggests that neoliberalism’s privatized care deepens the fossil-fueled commodification of domestic life already underway in the consumerist reproductive regime of state-managed capitalism. The fossil fuel industry’s equation of fossil fuels and life is captured in Esso’s 1950s tagline “petroleum helps to build a better life.” Catalytic cracking technology for tough oil during the 1940s sought to get as much profit mileage out of heavy, tar-like crude as out of light, sweet varieties, tough oil cracking yielded new olefins that an emergent petrochemical industry put toward plastics, pesticides, synthetic fibers and a “sprawling multiplicity of uses” for a new reproductive regime anchored in the white, suburban, single-family household. This refining process opened up the fossil-fueled commodification of everyday life in the US now understood to be standard: what we eat and how we resource, prepare


90 Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions”: 115.

91 Matthew Huber, “Refined Politics”: 305.

92 Matthew Huber, “Refined Politics”: 304.
and store it; what we wear and how we make and wash it; where we live and who we live with, what housing is made of, how it is arranged in space, how it is cleaned and maintained inside and out; the medicine that keeps us healthy, the water that is treated and heated for domestic consumption, the cars we drive to work and school, the public transit we don’t build and the highways that we do.

Although only one aspect of a broader system of social reproduction, “women’s work” in the single-family household that McCarthy’s novel centrally represents is a useful foothold for thinking about commodified social reproduction in its staged development and bipartite material basis: under the Keynesian family wage and public disinvestment under neoliberalism, domestic labor is yoked to an ever-deepening production of petrotopia, from station wagons and housewives to double-cup breast pumps and waged careworkers. Battistoni offers the analytic of “hybrid labor” for the similarly “structural and historical” social reproductive function of women’s work and the “work of nature” under capitalist production. In an extension of Battistoni’s argument (indeed, “Wages for *Arbeitskraft*” reframes her clever “Wages for *Oikos*-Work?”), my incorporation of *Arbeitskraft* into this analysis means to demonstrate how these lines of care and environment do not merely parallel but converge in energy: privatized social reproduction is bound to the Great

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93 The single-family household is one face of a broader fossil-fueled privatization of care including the proletarianization and transnationalization of care work; the fossil-fueled automation of traditional “factory and farm” breadwinning to the detriment of household incomes; the centrality of household debt to finance capital and, in turn, the centrality of fossil futures to finance; and more. On these subjects, see Nancy Fraser, “Behind Marx’s Hidden Abode”; Malm, “Long Waves”; Lisa Adkins, “Social Reproduction in the Neoliberal Era: Payments, Leverage, and the Minskian Household.” *Polygraph* 27 (2019); Ivis Garcia, “The Two-Income Debt Trap: Personal Responsibility and the Financialization of Everyday Life.” *Polygraph* 27 (2019).

Acceleration surge in fossil fuel consumption. As the Arbeitskraft production of value rests ever more on the Arbeitskraft reproduction of life, capital extracts more recklessly from reproductive workers and from the energy stores of a fast destabilizing planetary ecosystem, itself the home of all other homes identified by Social Reproduction Theory.

In this sense, the mediation of privatized care in The Road's ecosystem collapse is both metaphorical and not at all. McCarthy’s devastated environment registers the veritably post-apocalyptic scarcity imposed by the neoliberal commodification of social reproduction on the majority of US workers. In reproductive conditions that are utterly hostile, utterly inhospitable to anything but the day-by-day, white-knuckled, hollow-cheeked non-death that the man and boy eke out, the novel clarifies that the family is ever “a privatized machine of social reproduction,” as Weeks writes, but in no capitalist era more so than in the past fifty years. The novel likewise literalizes how the commodification of family life and broader social relations under neoliberalism has been made possible by capital’s Arbeitskraft core, which rots outward into ecological collapse as fossil capital unmakes all homes. The Road offers a contrary response to Nancy Armstrong’s question “What is the future of the novel once the household no longer shapes the future in novels?”: rather than the household no longer shaping the future, its neoliberal form maps ever more totally onto the earth’s ecosystem. The Road’s “imaginative access to what comes after the family” reveals only the ticking clock of reproductive contradiction in capitalism’s Arbeitskraft resources: when the means of reproduction have been fully externalized onto communities and yet withheld from them, the time available for life evaporates, as the zero-sum equation of the workday is

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95 Kathi Weeks, The Problem with Work: 121.

packed with multiple “gigs” to offset casualization and stagnant wages and the zero-sum equation of the atmosphere’s carbon capacity brims in the absence of energy transition and climate rehabilitation.97

On this note, I turn from *The Road’s* scavenging single father to its post-Fordist figure of the absent mother and wife, whose refusal of work, in step with Marxist feminist tradition of wages for housework, offers a model for social reproduction political praxis that careworkers and water protectors are already demonstrating. The exception to the novel’s gritty, haunting scenes is a nuclear bunker brimming with petrotopian wares where the man and boy spend a few nights taking hot baths and feasting on the canned and plastic-wrapped preparations of anonymous Cold War doomsdayers. With its food, soap, bed linens, folded laundry and abundant fuel supplies — practically characters themselves — the bunker is, essentially, a housewife, and specifically a stand-in for the boy’s absent mother.

The safest we feel throughout the novel is in this bunker — even for my disbelieving climate fiction students — which makes the woman’s denial of its comforts to the man and boy all the more contemptible. While *The Road* is replete with monsters in the form of marauders and truck people and mirages of the dead, its true villain is this traitorous woman, who takes her own life in the early days of the world’s fade, a foil to the man’s dutiful parental care. “You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like,” the woman tells the man in a recalled memory, commenting on the unlivable hand they have been dealt and her intention to commit suicide.98 And many critics take up her offer. Scholarship on the novel routinely

98 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*: 57.
accuses the mother of “abandoning” the man and boy with her “self-centered suicide,” succumbing to the “siren call of nihilis[m].” While “the protagonist implores his wife not to commit suicide and to keep the family together,” the mother demonstrates an “abject lack of pity for or emotional connection to her child.” She is, in Lydia Cooper’s words, “an embodiment of the egocentrism and faithlessness that are swiftly killing the planet.”

Echoing here Johns-Putra’s equation of environmental ruin with the lack of a care ethic and locating this ruin squarely on the shoulders of women, Cooper further writes, that the “disease, given voice by the mother … is a catastrophic loss of faith in the human endeavor. That loss of mental and emotional commitment to others results in dissociative behavior ranging from the mother's rejection of her son to people devouring their own infants.” A society of bad mothers, abandoning the care and hope required of true parenthood and climate stewardship.

These critics’ assessments of the woman — not simply lacking the man’s strength, selflessness and optimism but a shade from outright infanticide — take their cues from McCarthy himself. Kearney rightly notes that as the reader sees “godliness attached to regeneration and the boy,” the mother is characterized by consistently “slanderous and

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100 Lydia Cooper, “Cormac McCarthy’s The Road”: 223; Kearney, “Cormac McCarthy’s The Road”: 161.

101 Lydia Cooper, “Cormac McCarthy’s The Road”: 223.

102 Lydia Cooper, “Cormac McCarthy’s The Road”: 223.
gendered diction.”103 “My only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope for it with all my heart,” the woman says, against the man’s “I am begging you” and “I wouldn’t leave you.”104 (Never mind that he says she is “talking crazy.”105) Resolute, she takes death as “a new lover.”106 She leaves in the night to commit this infidelity: “She was gone and the coldness of it was her final gift.”107 The silence of her departure is broken by the woman’s reappearance in the man’s dreams, haunting him with the same “siren call” that willed her to selfish death. Reading the novel in the Anglo-Irish Gothic tradition, Cooper argues that in dreams the woman appears as either devouring female, corpse bride or a version of Mother Ireland, but in all cases a “grotesque” figure.108 Particular to the question of environment and echoing again Johns-Putra, Cooper notes “the wife’s inversion of the generative earth mother.”109 Indeed, the woman is associated in cruel irony with environmental bounty, as McCarthy writes early in the novel, “In dreams his pale bride came to him out of a green and leafy...”

103 Kevin Kearney, “Cormac McCarthy’s The Road”: 173.
104 Cormac McCarthy The Road 58, 56.
105 Cormac McCarthy The Road 56.
106 Cormac McCarthy, The Road: 56.
107 Cormac McCarthy, The Road: 58.
108 Cooper writes, “[The woman] inverts the positive stereotype of the genetrix: she is described instead as the Lilith-like corpse bride, and she tells her husband that the moral choice would be to murder their child rather than leaving him alive to be raped and murdered by others. At one point the wife tells her husband that women dream of danger to others and men only of danger to themselves, a reference to common twenty-first century sociocultural stereotypes about women being nurturers and men being individualistic and less connected to the domestic (to children, specifically). Yet in the novel it is the wife who is incapable of ‘sorrow’ and who wants to kill her son while the man, of course, dreams only of danger to others, most commonly of danger to his son.” Lydia Cooper, “Eating at the Empire Table”: 562.
109 Lydia Cooper, “Eating at the Empire Table”: 562.
Cooper continues: “The woman’s refusal to grieve her child is a refusal to love, but she also refuses to consume him. In this one aspect she is not the image of the devouring mother, the maternal land that consumes her sons for her own regeneration. She is instead a masculine mother, demonstrating the will to action (suicide) that her more passive and nurturing husband cannot.” A cold and dead siren, devouring or perhaps just masculinized: in any case, a bad mother. Her apparent lack of love and care is indistinguishable from the unyielding environment itself, and at root responsible for it. Her appearance in memory, in dreams, or in the relief cast by the nuclear bunker and other temporary safe-houses where the man and boy roost only sharpens the austerity of their inhospitable world.

For Jane Elliott, The Road is an example of the “microeconomic mode” of contemporary literary culture, which “reconfigure[s] existing genres of survival and self-preservation in order to register the peculiar experience of domination” under neoliberal governance. Coercing the “suffering agency” of its characters not against but precisely through their entrepreneurial subjectivity, the microeconomic mode clarifies how in our choices between healthcare and diapers, an Uber shift or a skipped dinner, we are “hostage to an interest in self-preservation… and nightmarish choices [we] can neither escape nor endorse.” McCarthy’s father is a paradigm suffering agent, and in ennobling the man and vilifying the

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110 Cormac McCarthy, The Road: 18.

111 Lydia Cooper, “Eating at the Empire Table”: 563.

112 Jane Elliott, “Suffering Agency: Imagining Neoliberal Personhood in North America and Britain.” Social Text 115 30.2 (Summer 2013): 84.

woman, *The Road* naturalizes this suffering agency under privatized social reproduction such that readers might overlook the political alternative presented by the mother, who refuses the “tough oil” terms attached to the reproduction of life under neoliberal austerity. (As a friend recently quipped to me, “the prisoner’s dilemma is that they’re in prison.”) Analyzing an interview between McCarthy and Oprah Winfrey and the guiding question for their exchange — “How far would you go to protect your child’s life?” — Arielle Zibrak argues, “*The Road* is not a simple parable of a man’s love for his son but an alarming and complicated portrait of an American climate of fear and aggression wherein punishment — not love — is the guiding virtue.”\(^{114}\) It is through the father’s interest in the child, not himself, and the dialectic of fear and punishment this interest animates that this suffering agency is imposed upon the father. As the mother says to the father before she takes her life, “The one thing I can tell you is that you won’t survive for yourself. I know because I never would have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body.”\(^{115}\) An early draft of *The Road* has the woman justifying her death to the man by saying “I’ll be absolved of responsibility.”\(^{116}\) The father, by contrast, is imprisoned by it.


\(^{115}\) Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*: 57.

\(^{116}\) Allan Chavkin and Nancy Feyl Chavkin, “The Question of Suicide”: 196.
Reading this abdication of responsibility, Kearney writes, “For the woman, regeneration offers nothing but the dread of impending death, not the hope for a tomorrow.” I am suggesting that it is not impending death that the mother refuses but impending work. This reading dovetails with the insights provided by the concepts of *Arbeitskraft* and energopolitics as well as with the essential insight of Marxist feminism: life-making is *work*. “Pregnant women are held as slaves,” Kearney writes. This is what the mother refuses. It is commonplace to naturalize such care labor as child-rearing such that the mother’s refusal is interpreted as an abandonment of ethics altogether, a defiance of biological instinct, “nihilistic belief in the pointlessness of human survival.” In both the narrative and the critical literature alike her unwillingness to “keep going” and “carry the fire” is framed as a moral failing in the ideological trap of privatized and gendered reproductive work, punishing her for “not act[ing] in a motherly way but extinguish[ing] the life fire” even as this false choice identifies precisely that the labor of mothering is what keeps the fire lit.

This is made further clear because even as gender-based critiques of the novel understand it to offer “an extreme form of a masculine fantasy world” — as one critic writes, “the almost pristine phallocentrism of the road” — the man is nonetheless “drawn to domesticity,” a draw indispensable to the plot as the man escorts the reader from house to house, moved by

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117 Kevin Kearney, “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*”: 173.

118 Kevin Kearney, “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*”: 173.

119 Lydia Cooper, “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*”: 223.

120 Kevin Kearney, “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*”: 173.
what one critic identifies as “the need for regeneration and for feminine nurture.”121 By this narrative logic there is no doubt that the mother’s refusal does not simply leave the man and boy to die but leaves the man to work, offloading the domestic labor associated with food, shelter, clothing, cleaning and comfort onto the man. The “need for … feminine nurture” is the brute material need for reproductive labor to reproduce life, rather than a “need” of a care ethic that readers must take note of to avoid both the total environmental destruction depicted in The Road as well as the “siren call” of pessimism, of opting out — of, in essence, going on strike. Reading the novel as a masculinist fantasy is obvious but misses the point: any bravado arises precisely because of and takes on an even more pronounced aspect in light of the feminization of the man’s position as worker. He is a domestic worker now, part of the broader feminization of labor under late capitalism named by Fraser and others.122

121 Lydia Cooper, “Eating at the Empire Table”: 561. Cooper writes, “The violence of the road, that quintessentially post-domesticated space, is countered by the father’s recurrent attempts at (and concurrent anxieties about) domestication ... The father in The Road represents the tension between the hypermasculine fear of domesticity and the rejection of the feminine, on the one hand, and, on the other, the need for regeneration and for feminine nurture in a world predicated on consolidating power around images of undomesticated, violent, and aggressively acquisitive masculinity. The terror of domesticity is likewise subverted: the wild road is not a place of freedom but rather of utter deracination, and that deracination results in apocalyptic self-annihilation.” Cooper, “Eating at the Empire Table”: 561-563.

The mother reflects before her suicide, “They say that women dream of danger to those in their care and men of danger to themselves. But I don’t dream at all.”¹²³ She both refuses this gender essentialism and its ideological command to distribute care labor along gender lines and as well as refuses to perform such labor without cease and without question amid unlivable conditions.¹²⁴

Distinguishing the worker’s exploitation by capital from her power to, collectively, refuse the terms it attaches to life, Weeks writes, “Workers should be seen not as capital’s victims, but as its potential antagonists and even saboteurs.”¹²⁵ The wages for housework movement emerged in the transition between Fordist and post-Fordist care regimes to contest capital’s extraction from gendered household labor and a wider social factory. This free labor, Marxists feminists contended, was indispensable for the production of value: per Federici, “To say that we want wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital.”¹²⁶ More than a literal demand for a wage relation, the demand of “wages for housework” claimed reproductive labor as labor subject to refusal like any other: “Refusing domestic work . . . mandates an interrogation of the basic structures and ethics that govern this work and the struggle for ways to make it, as it were, unproductive.”¹²⁷ To refuse care is not to denigrate its worth or necessity; rather, it is to contest this care’s extraction on terms determined by capital rather than by careworkers themselves. This

¹²³ Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*: 57.


politicization rather than moralization of care is particularly important to emphasize given
the centrality of an ethics of care to Environmental Humanities research from a number of
disciplines, both related to this specific novel and well beyond it, as I have described.
Abandoning her post as wife and mother in this refusal — going on strike — *The Road’s*
woman interrogates the privatized-life-or-death choice made by suffering agents of
neoliberal social reproduction.\(^{128}\) In a world emptied of its life-making capacities beyond the
scraps foraged through unending work, it is no surprise that the woman’s exemplary
“feminist dysfunctionality” is often misread by or entirely missing from analyses of *The Road*
in favor of the man’s unflagging fatherhood.\(^{129}\) The woman’s refusal is depoliticized by the
novel’s narrative logic, with an unspecified apocalyptic premise that both omits the causes of
social and ecological collapse and denies the possibility of collective action. McCarthy’s
characterization of the woman as selfish and uncaring is thus as damning as antifeminist,
scabbing rhetoric launched at careworkers (if you *really* cared about your children/students/
patients, you’d keep working!). Despite these narrative constrains, the woman’s refusal of the
minute-by-minute, fossil-fueled conditions of neoliberal reproduction gestures at a similar
refusal of the *Arbeitskraft* extraction from life-making today, to halt the momentum of “keep
going.”

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\(^{128}\) John Marx and Nancy Armstrong suggest that the neoliberal novel is characterized by
“the collapse of strategy and tactics,” which “requires subjects capable of figuring out how
to cut off their own arms but not how to run their own countries.” I understand the actions
of McCarthy’s father and mother to diverge on this exact line. Marx and Armstrong,

2.2 Boundary struggles

2.2.a Long-term goals

Fraser writes,

Is it any wonder that struggles over social reproduction have exploded over recent years? … Community movements for housing, healthcare, food security and an unconditional basic income; struggles for the rights of migrants, domestic workers and public employees; campaigns to unionize service-sector workers in for-profit nursing homes, hospitals and child-care centres; struggles for public services such as day care and elder care, for a shorter working week, for generous paid maternity and parental leave. Taken together, these claims are tantamount to the demand for a massive reorganization of the relation between production and reproduction: for social arrangements that could enable people of every class, gender, sexuality and colour to combine social-reproductive activities with safe, interesting and well-remunerated work. Boundary struggles over social reproduction are as central to the present conjuncture as are class struggles over economic production.130

In one scene toward the end of The Road, the boy asks his father, “What are our long-term goals?”131 Apropos of nothing, this line provides a rare laugh in The Road, verging on absurdist in its blood-coughing picture of the world. Accustomed to the deadened march of Arbeitskraft that drives the novel’s plot, readers may dismiss the boy’s question as naive or irrelevant. Or, it may provoke a sigh of relief, a breach in The Road’s otherwise cowled, claustrophobic perspective. When I taught The Road, my brilliantly frustrated students repeatedly asked versions of the boy’s question: What is the point of all this? What do they want? What are their long-term goals?


131 Cormac McCarthy, The Road: 160.
This question marks the extension of my critical analysis of energy and social reproduction into a political strategic one. It builds from Fraser’s description of contemporary boundary struggles — and similar formulations by Battistoni and Bhattacharya — as well as the political promise of the Energy Humanities, which aims to not just understand but to rethink and transform how and why energy is used. My guiding questions: What does a politics of refusal look like for an Arbeitskraft understanding of social reproduction? What models of such a politics are available to us? How can they be replicated and strengthened so that, as Bhattacharya writes, we can make “a society where the social reproduction of life no longer depends upon the social reproduction of capitalism”? And what role is to be played by academics in answering these questions — tenured and tenure-track faculty and increasing numbers of undervalued adjunct faculty and graduate students, one corner of higher education’s social reproduction workforce?

2.2.b The perspective of winning

The recent surge in community organizing against gentrification, deportation and pipelines and the revitalization of rank-and-file organizing in education, healthcare, and service indicate powerfully that today’s social reproductive crises in care and environment do not require the spontaneous invention of an entirely new set of praxes and goals, as various

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132 Tithi Bhattacharya, “Three Ways.”
“emergency” environmentalist discourses suggest. Living and working conditions as they are today and have been for four hundred years — climate change marking not the sudden appearance of capitalist ruin but rather its creeping total mapping onto planetary life — we have been keeping life alive despite exploitation and extraction for some time, and therefore have the benefit of a rich legacy of political study and struggle from which to draw.

Wages for housework’s strategies of the demand and the refusal are one part of this legacy and take what Selma James calls “the perspective of winning.” Their radical purchase for today’s social reproduction crises lies in their dually pedagogic and instrumental theory of political change. As a demand, “wages for housework” agitates and mobilizes reproductive workers around a specific aim (getting paid) as well as supplies a structural analysis of their labor’s undervalued but nonetheless essential social and economic function (wait, why don’t we get paid?). The demand employs a technique of “cognitive mapping” to raise consciousnesses. For the refusal, this analysis fills in less through interpreting the demand than by halting production, as Boots Riley has observed: “[The strike] is [] not just a point of leverage. It is those kinds of actions that teach the people involved and the onlookers how capitalism works. … It’s a spectacle that teaches. It is also one that has the potential for

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exacting compromise from power. It can grow and people can duplicate it.”

Like the demand, the strike teaches its participants and onlookers, builds onlookers into participants, but it cognitively unfurls the roadmap to worker power by “exacting compromise,” enforcing a demand like “wages for housework” and revealing its winning position. Labor’s refusal makes its necessity for production materially plain and compels its compensation, creating for the boss an emergency in profit-making like that which workers experience as a condition of life-making. It presupposes workers’ power in a kind of interpellation, or counter- or proto-interpellation, which hails the subject as collective and winning: our labor makes the world, and because we make it on capital’s unlivable terms, we can make it on our own. Refusal aims to, finally, reorganize social reproduction, distributing care to preserve life outside of labor rather than sanctify their synonymy or defend life’s mere possibility amid multiplying deaths-by-privatization.

Such a method is apt for boundary struggles amid today’s crises in Arbeitskraft social reproduction, since crises can tend toward immediate survival tactics at the expense of a larger project of equitable labor distribution and emancipation from unending work. Rather than simply emergency measures, the demands of the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) 2019 strike and the Standing Rock protest in 2016-2017 testified less to impromptu solidarity amid “critical conditions” than to ongoing community organizing to deepen authentic solidarities already present and to lay ground for both short- and long-term fights for the means to live. Jane McAlevey observes that “real organizing … helps people to connect the dots between the critical, solidarity-affirming moment and the larger system it challenges,

136 Chip Gibbons, “In the World of Film, We’ve Edited out All Rebellion: An Interview with Boots Riley.” Jacobin (August 2018).
and gives the people in crisis, the workers, a new way of seeing themselves … that persists long after the strike is over.”137 In the context of such organizing, the demand for wages or weekends is equally the “demand for the power to make further demands,” as Kathi Weeks writes, necessary to exact concessions on any timescale and to expand their scope beyond the shop floor and into the social factory.138 “Neither the policy proposal, with its aura of neutrality, nor the plea, with its solicitousness,” the demand thus addresses workers themselves rather than capital, the state or the imagined sideline of allyship, demanding that we reorganize the given terms of life and work according to our long-term goals.139

_Arbeitskraft_ identifies a shared commodified status among human and fossil labor power. Labor and community organizing likewise draws on our common power as labor “as a basis for asserting collective power against economic logic” and “to limit the scope of commodified labor itself.”140 Models of such boundary struggles around reproductive labor abound, and represent not a pivot from the character and momentum of US organizing today but mobilize it precisely as it is: bargaining for the common good. Bhattacharya calls

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137 Jane McAlevey, _No Shortcuts_: 208.

138 Kathi Weeks, _The Problem with Work_: 133.

139 Kathi Weeks, _The Problem with Work_: 131.

these movements “insurgent caring,” and their demands and refusals model the “massive reorganization of the relation between production and reproduction” named by Fraser.141

The six-day teachers strike that swept LA in January 2019 exemplified the power of bargaining for the common good, called by 34,000 social reproduction workers in the name of 500,000 students and their families. The success of this refusal of work testifies to the strength of a social reproductive framework to win demands that affect the life-making environment of working communities. Amid rampant charterization, the strike appeared “a battle for the soul of public education” and the public therein named, wherein the dividing line was not left and right — like the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike, LA indicated that Democrats have pushed privatization as much as the Republicans targeted in 2018’s “red state rebellion” — but between those whose labor constitutes the very fabric of social relations and those who profit from it.142 Because the strike and its demands employed nuts-and-bolts organizing tactics and emphasized “long-term authentic partnerships with parents, students, and [the] community,” they presented a material roadblock to the neoliberal commodification of life in LA.143 From local businesses contributing breakfast to UTLA’s provision of brown bag lunches for students who rely on school meals, a militant


community-wide picket line solidarity amplified reciprocity where privatization seeks to capture it, such that “when teachers take to the streets, they have parents willing not just to join them, but to take risks of their own.” This solidarity mobilized ongoing partnerships between UTLA and grassroots groups that address racial justice issues for students facing deportation threats, police brutality and gentrification, through which UTLA distributed union funds to DACA recipients and pushed the district to form a defense fund for families facing ICE raids. These actions were matched by demands at the bargaining table to decrease “random searches” at school, repurpose vacant district property for affordable housing, protect immigrant students and their families, and expand green space missing from low-income neighborhoods. UTLA bargained for the means to life itself, indivisible from wage and staffing demands, expanding a shop fight to a community fight and employing the refusal and demand to exact concessions from power.

At the intersection of labor exploitation and oppression by hierarchies of race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, UTLA’s example, itself drawing from the examples of careworkers elsewhere, has encouraged teacher strikes in Oakland and Denver and in LA charter schools, the second ever charter school strike; prompted the district school board to cap charter expansion and support a statewide moratorium; and pushed the Schools and Communities First initiative onto the 2020 state ballot to potentially raise commercial and industrial property taxes for state education funding. These are signs of a sea change for social reproduction in the world’s sixth largest economy, and as such, the UTLA strike must be

144 Sarah Jaffe, “The Radical Organizing.”

understood as an alternative to privatized Arbeitskraft extraction at the expense of any and all life and thus an energy justice politics. Indeed, the teachers and other careworkers who comprise an increasing share of US labor and who are at the helm of bargaining for the common good victories are precisely those “already doing the work that will be foundational to a low-carbon society oriented toward the flourishing of all”: ed and med jobs, which are neither resource-intensive nor waste-producing but instead “sustain and improve human life.”

An Arbeitskraft analytic for social reproduction clarifies that the struggles for well-funded public goods and for clean water and air are the same struggle. I analyze the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) blockade’s rallying cry of “Water is life” as a demand, one explicitly contraposing fossil-fueled production to the reproduction of life. There is a rich critical literature on energy systems as they concern production, and my sense is that Standing Rock’s social reproductive framework complements such analyses. Both in its common good demands and the pipeline blockade’s refusal of work — to deny capital the fossil labor power that secures accumulation is, effectively, to stage a strike — the encampment presents a template for energy justice praxis wedded to social reproductive justice.

The Dakota Access Pipeline means to transport half a million barrels of Alberta tar sands tough oil across the Missouri and Mississippi River systems to refineries in Illinois and the Gulf of Mexico. Indigenous groups have organized to oppose its construction since 2014,

146 Alyssa Battistoni, “Living.”

147 In addition to Andreas Malm and Jeff Diamanti, see Timothy Mitchell, Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil. New York: Verso, 2011.
and from summer 2016 to winter 2017 “more than three hundred Native nations planted their flags in solidarity at Oceti Sakowin Camp, the largest of several camps that also included Sacred Stone Camp, Red Warrior Camp, Two-Spirit Camp, the International Indigenous Youth Council, and various allied Indigenous and non-Indigenous camps,” with solidarity from over 300 other Native nations and thousands of allied forces. DAPL is the latest stage in the Missouri’s colonization, which includes the Louisiana Purchase’s “largest real estate transaction in world history” in the 19th century and the federal Pick-Sloan Plan in the 20th, which ceded hundreds of thousands of acres of Native land to the Army Corps of Engineers in violation of the Fort Laramie Treaties. Much as the ACE dammed, condemned and forced mass relocation from Native territories for Pick-Sloan, it rerouted DAPL from its initial path through white-dominated areas to primarily indigenous areas. And much as the legislated genocide, legislated ecocide, eminent domain, illegal invasion, warfare and murder of the settler colonial project has been met with organized resistance at every step, so too was DAPL matched by opposition forged over centuries of anticolonial, anticapitalist struggle. Most immediately, the #NoDAPL fight built from past pipeline blockades, such as the Keystone XL, which Nick Estes writes “proved the transformative power and potential of anticolonial resistance to successfully mobilize poor people against the rich and powerful — and win!”


This history clarifies the demand made by the Lakota “Mni Wiconi” (“water is life”) and the common good it both cognitively maps and materializes by way of refusal. Standing Rock enacted what Estes calls an “unsettling countersovereignty,” meeting the profit drive of Energy Transfer Partners, an oil-rich governor, Homeland Security, Border Patrol, the National Guard and Blackwater with a project that defends people and environment as well as constructs an alternative social reproduction paradigm to their enclosure by capital and state. “Water is life” directly contradicts the Esso tagline analyzed by Huber, offering an Arbeitskraft analysis of the contradiction in capitalist social reproduction where fossil fuels oppose life, and the anticolonial reclamation of land and anticapitalist reclamation of labor both militate for just social relations amid environmental crisis. In so doing, Standing Rock fought to win. #NoDAPL is an exemplary instance of Social Reproduction Theory attuned to capitalist extraction from human and fossil labor power as well as a model translation of such analysis into strategic praxis. Like the solidarity built for strike day in LA, the pipeline camp takes “the perspective of winning” and demands a shared, reparative, regenerative organization of life.

2.2.c The call to question

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151 Matthew Huber, “Refined Politics”: 305.
Energy Humanities scholars have identified an “impasse” between the field’s rich critique and the political transformations such critique seeks. Our scholarship has yielded no shortage of evidence that fossil capital and its attendant social forms commit profound and unlivable violence against the vast majority of people on earth and indeed all earthly life; yet this diagnosis alone has supplied no cure. Graeme Macdonald has thus wondered “Can cultural and theoretical work help to evolve distinctive replacements for [oil capital]? To this degree our criticism, like our technology and terminology, might not be sufficiently refined.” In a different assessment of the same problem, Jennifer Wenzel writes that, contra contemporary knowledge production’s north star of continual critical novelty, “our goal is not the endless (and endlessly pleasurable) proliferation of neologisms that begin with *petro-* , but instead a future under the sign of some other prefix.” This “some other prefix” would signify “a new labor ecology,” beyond Arbeitskraft extraction. If this is our “long-term goal,” and I believe it is, how can the social reproductive work of academics help us reach it?

The boy’s “What are our long-term goals?” approximates what labor organizers often refer to as the “call to question.” This is the moment when, after identifying the unfair labor conditions at a job, the inadequacy of managerial compromise and the necessity of collective


156 Tithi Bhattacharya, “Three Ways.”
action, you ask someone, “What do you want? How are you going to get it?” McAlevey notes the “long uncomfortable silence” that follows this question, which itself can feel like an impasse separating current circumstance from change.\textsuperscript{157} To overcome the critical impasse noted above, Marxist feminist strategy and the examples of UTLA and Standing Rock instruct that our critical mapping of production and reproduction is only as politically useful as it identifies opportunities to call to question, to refuse work and to demand its reorganization vis-a-vis life. Thus, while my analysis of \textit{Arbeitskraft} could be interpreted to suggest a new energy revolutionary subject of history, I will insist against such a reading in favor of class struggle, which is always, finally, a struggle over social reproduction. “The fundamental insight of SRT,” Bhattacharya writes, “is that human labor is at the heart of creating or reproducing society as a whole.”\textsuperscript{158} Only such labor, and here especially social reproductive workers, can organize to refuse this world and make demands for another one, can pose the boy’s question and answer it on terms that make rather than unmake life.

John Marx and Nancy Armstrong write of the neoliberal moment, “At best, both novelist and political theorist perform ‘a resurrection that does not restore to life.’”\textsuperscript{159} In my mind, scholars and critics can restore life to a socialist, feminist, decolonial order of social reproduction but only through a critical reorientation toward the struggle for power rather than the “imperative of \textit{originality} in scholarly production,” which Wenzel correctly identifies

\textsuperscript{157} Quoted in Alyssa Battistoni, “Spadework.” \textit{n+1} (May 2019).

\textsuperscript{158} Tithi Bhattacharya, “Introduction”: 2.

\textsuperscript{159} John Marx and Nancy Armstrong, “Introduction”: 159.
as a fossil capitalist enterprise.\textsuperscript{160} The combined instrumental and pedagogic strategy of the demand and refusal is instructive for how academics can compel such a reorientation in the university’s social reproduction function toward life. Could all journals published by Johns Hopkins University Press publish a collective demand for the university’s divestment from fossil fuels, the abolition of tuition and an increase in full-time faculty hires, and thereafter refuse their total editorial and publication work until such a commitment was made? The recent closing of Stanford UP might disincline many from the approach, especially those of us in the cost-cut humanities, but the precarity at the heart of such hesitation is precisely why the approach is needed: university investments are often at arm’s length from the principles we imagine our scholarship to abide and the world we imagine it to build. As Jonathan Basile has observed, “It is no coincidence that the disciplines capable of critiquing neoliberal capital are those being downsized”: contesting austerity requires academic workers to double down on rather than dilute such critical analyses if we wish to materialize them in a university whose social reproductive labor serves the good of all.\textsuperscript{161} Could the faculty, adjunct faculty, administrative staff, campus housekeeping and food service staff, graduate students and work-study students at my home institution of Duke University strike from all of our varied work duties until living wages and benefits were promised to all of these workers, all of whom are critical to the university’s own reproduction and profit-making as

\textsuperscript{160} “It’s worth thinking about scholarly production as production, and the demand for originality (and scholarly ‘productivity’ itself) in terms of hyper consumption, planned obsolescence, and the eternal lure of the ‘new and improved’ as strategies for managing capitalism’s own imperative — grow or die — which has for more than a century been premised on cheap energy. … By ‘more… more… more,’ all of us mean a qualitative difference, new thinking adequate to the seemingly infinite power of this finite power source. Yet our critical desire (for another kind of originality) veers uncomfortably close to oil’s love affair with quantity, its mantra of \textit{more}.” Jennifer Wenzel, “Taking Stock”: 32.

well as its broader economic function? Here, too, there are risks, but no more than those borne by striking workers at public institutions like Kent State and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. As implied by the title of Alyssa Battistoni’s essay on university labor organizing, “Spadework,” these possible collective refusals are made possible on a dedicated and long-term basis, via “hard labor [that] prepares the ground for dramatic action.”

Spadework is, appropriately, an image of reproductive labor, and this is how to think of the “no shortcuts” task demanded and promised by labor and community organizing, per UTLA and Standing Rock and contrary to such frameworks as “activism” or “allyship”: it makes and remakes the world, on our terms, so that we can keep living in it. Essential to any just resolution for today’s social reproduction crises is such spadework — by you and me and everyone we know — both as a means to post-fossil capitalist ends and as an end in itself, a mode of collective world-making against and beyond the extractions of capital.

McAlevey writes, “Every good organizing conversation makes everyone at least a little uncomfortable.” In naming JHU Press, my home institution Duke, and you and me and everyone we know as spadeworkers, rather than allies or theorists, in the struggle for a new social reproductive order, my notes here may provoke such discomfort in the reader,

162 Jane McAlevey, No Shortcuts; Alyssa Battistoni, “Spadework.”


whether as surprise, guilt, or perhaps a kind of embarrassment on my behalf. It's one thing to analyze social reproduction, and another to suggest a faculty strike in my own academic writing. To do so breaches a kind of reality held to the margins of peer-reviewed discourse, and it smacks of naive earnestness or, worse, grad student angst, each unprofessional in its own way. Yet to bring within the margins of professional critique the concrete and lived political implications of our analyses is to refuse what Battistoni rightly notes is a kind of emotional labor — one we are accustomed to performing in the maintenance of a properly academic way of talking about politics distinct from how we think about and struggle in their practice, and a labor that in its command over the terms of academic work reproduces capitalist social relations rather than bargains for the collective good. Battistoni writes,

For a long time my biggest weakness [as a university labor organizer] was my tendency to shy away from making sure people knew that winning the things they said they wanted was up to them. Too often I tried to gloss over the discomfort instead of letting it sit. It was a lot easier to talk about our brilliant plan or how much support we had from our allies than to insist with the people I was organizing that whether we won our own union or not depended on them. … To soften the ask seems compassionate, but like any other protective measure, it condescends, and like any other shortcut, it makes things harder in the long run.165

The call to question: what are our long-term goals?

2.2.d The last big thing

*The Road*'s maddeningly serene final paragraph shows us the backs of trout, which bear “maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put

165 Alyssa Battistoni, “Spadework.”
back. Not be made right again.” In an interview with Joel and Ethan Coen, who adapted McCarthy’s 2005 *No Country for Old Men* for the screen in 2007, the author notes, “[I]t’s hard enough to get people to believe what you’re trying to tell them without making it impossible. You have to make it vaguely plausible.”

Lydia Cooper notes that while the novel’s “excesses of carnage and apocalyptic horror… may stretch the limits of credulity,” it remains nonetheless a “viscerally realistic” read. How do we make sense of *The Road’s* ending, with its glittering trout and happy family resolution to the apocalyptic horror that fills its pages, and especially as it relates to McCarthy’s own command that his novel be “vaguely plausible”?

Realistic despite its continual siphoning from non-realist genres, the zombified realism of McCarthy’s novel denies the man and boy the deep interiority associated with realist character development, deploying instead stilted Western dialogue, the occasional melodramatic twist of phrase and one catechistic episode after another — as I termed in chapter one, a climate fiction genre soup — as a way of rounding out their otherwise shallow characterization. Throughout these episodes and in the dull march between them, the father obligingly takes care of his son by securing the most meager of life, as well as, importantly, by attempting to raise the boy with certain laws and rituals that supposedly connect them to the prelapsarian world: give thanks, don’t steal and don’t eat people. As discussed, most of *The Road’s* minor characters do not observe these rules, going so far as

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166 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*: 287.


168 Lydia Cooper, “Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*”: 218 and 225.

193
paedophagy, and because of this the man and boy appear different, moral. Readers suspect they are more like us than the other survivors, who are by contrast thankless, thieving cannibals. This like us quality is central to the novel’s “vaguely plausible” effect: it is central to the novel’s pretense to a kind of social realism and to its believability as a future version of the reader’s own world and not some purely imaginary otherworld rendered in sharp, “visceral” detail. These minor characters arrive and disappear in close calls and lessons learned, anchoring the novel’s effecting of an “investment in scenes of the everyday, an accumulation of detail, and/or the moral encounter of the individual with social forces,” as Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge write of social realism. All the while, McCarthy constructs the man and boy to be recognizable as developed and developing subjects more by withholding interiority from the plot’s sideshow players than by granting it in depth to our protagonists. As a result, what might feel like individual moral growth in the model of the bildungsroman or the picaresque finally, paradoxically, is more like a piece-by-piece reification of universal types and their unspoken political obligations: “the man,” “the boy”; dutiful parent, precious child.

Rather than allow the pair to draw from the past to build a future, their commitment to pre-apocalyptic values like refraining from theft and cannibalism, shadowy in their formulation and half-hearted in their execution, simply memorialize the notion of “right and wrong” as a luxury no longer available, confirming the death of the world-gone-by in their tone-deaf pantomime of its life. Again and again whenever the man and boy attempt to act toward an

end greater than mere survival — acting in a way we might imagine to be political, as they debate, interrogate, resist and remake the terms of life — circumstances force them to rein in their aspirations. Life beyond the brute struggle for resources is, like most species, extinct, and glimpses of anything more serve merely to tease McCarthy’s characters and readers with nostalgia rather than offer an alternative or horizon to the facts on the ground. Regardless of what worlds we hope for or principles we stand by, these hangovers of life-before-catastrophe deny reality, seeking to put back “a thing which [can]not be put back.”

With only survival and non-survival on the menu, rather than anything we might actually want, McCarthy’s reader is, understandably, more preoccupied with what happened to make the world like this rather than what will happen to or by those still living in it. This what happened is militantly unidentified. Asteroid? Nuclear war? Climate change? Divine retribution? Scholarly interpretations and internet fan theories abound, and McCarthy himself has waffled in describing his own intentions for the novel’s setting. McCarthy’s reader thus

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170 There are a range of ways to interpret this ambiguity. Adeline Johns-Putra: “The Road refers to the pastoral not to inspire its narrative with possibility but to haunt it with loss. … precisely because its setting is so resolutely empty, [the novel] offers up the present not as unknowable or limitless and therefore as an excess of place, but as not to be known … The tenor of most of The Road, then, is neither hopeful nor speculative; it is elegiac.” (Johns-Putra, “My job is to take care of you”: 526). Kevin Kearney: “In a text that is often defined by the imperceptible, the very cause of this apocalyptic downfall, the trigger event itself, also remains obscured. The reader is afforded only a partial vision of events… This ambiguity leaves one only the capacity to speculate upon the event.” (Kearney, “Cormac McCarthy’s The Road: 160). Reading The Road in the tradition of the Anglo-Irish Gothic, Lydia Cooper identifies a “social nationalism” and “nostalgic romanticism” similar to Jonathan Swift and Edmund Burke, who too were interested in, in her words, “lost causes.” (Cooper, “Eating at the Empire Table”: 550).

171 David Kushner reports in a 2007 interview with McCarthy, “While McCarthy suggests that the ash-covered world in the novel is the result of a meteor hit, his money is on humans destroying each other before an environmental catastrophe sets in.” David Kushner, “Cormac McCarthy’s Apocalypse.” Rolling Stone (Dec 27 2007): web.
plays out a dead-ended version of what Mark Fisher calls capitalist realism’s “weak messianic hope,” whereby the expectation of novelty or redemption (culture or politics) “lapses into the morose conviction that nothing new can ever happen,” oscillating between these two reactive modes without cease.¹⁷² In this torturous ping pong, writes Fisher, “The focus shifts from the Next Big Thing to the last big thing — how long ago did it happen and just how big was it?”¹⁷³

Scholars of postmodernism and/or neoliberalism often shorthand this “last big thing” as 1968, 1973, 1989 or 1991 (contra the hopeful Arrighian and Wallersteinian watersheds of 2001 and 2008, which promise an end to the long century of US hegemony rather than its perpetuity, as Fisher’s and other diagnoses imply).¹⁷⁴ These dates mark what Francis Fukuyama famously called “the end of history,” after which all political and cultural change is fixed in place by capitalist hegemony, repeating and recombining its forms without promise for the new or better. Jacques Rancière has named this phenomenon the end of politics, Slavoj Zizek the end of ideology, Jason Read “capitalism without capitalism.”¹⁷⁵ Following David Harvey’s account of how state and non-state institutions have transformed to both lead and respond to this “end of everything,” David Tyfield prefers the term


¹⁷³ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*: 3.


neoliberalism, which he defines as a “political project of fundamentalist market
epistemology,” a worldview and a strategy that denies any horizon to a market form of social
organization. Eva Cherniavsky’s “neocitizenship” identifies the subject of this veritably
ontological regime, following Foucault’s account. Jane Elliott and Gillian Harkins aptly
summarize this post-ideological neoliberal subject as the following:

As Foucault points out, neoliberal microeconomics does not attempt to render the inside of the human in a sophisticated way or mold it via ideology, since it works on a principle of nonfalsifiable and incontestable individual interests. Rather than attempting to alter the individual’s pre-existing and incontrovertible sense of his or her interests, neoliberal microeconomics focuses on shaping the available options from which the individual chooses how best to pursue those interests.

All of these formulations approximate something similar to the shift in ideology away from Althusser’s vertical model in the order described by Shonkwiler and La Berge’s version of “capitalist realism” and discussed in this dissertation’s introduction — though, ironically, these various analytics often pronounce this triumphant shift of capitalist hegemony with the same sober, knowing lowering of political expectations named by Fisher’s own capitalist realism. And all are given voice in The Road’s post-everything narrative, jump-started by a phantom apocalyptic premise and kept going by protagonists who are finally only themselves minor characters and an endless carousel of permutating, permutable images for this reality’s


“lyrical emptiness,” to quote Johns-Putra: “cauterized terrain,” “ashen scabland,” “a colorless world of wire and crepe,” “the crushing black vacuum of the universe,” “everything as it once had been save faded and weathered.”

One might suggest that Kushner, too, is in search of the last big thing, returning to the 1970s for some political clues about her own post-Occupy moment. While her historical novel abounds in reference points — minor characters who resemble obscure players in some obscure artistic movement or political cadre; based-on-true-events events that are half-heard on the radio or the gossip mill; a glimpse of some long forgotten laundry detergent jingle or candy bar logo — McCarthy’s past is by contrast in fog. It is a heavy read for how light it is on detail, how insubstantial its prose looks on the page. Of course McCarthy offers trinkets of what has disappeared — a can of coke, a Spanish galleon — which are meant to signify the novel’s historical consciousness. But in tokenizing history in this way, the objects echo to only amplify the empty space around them, cavernous, stale and cold. In Kushner’s graveyard of history, every tombstone is labeled — the who, what, where, when and how of things passed — with a twinge of how Fisher uses “hauntology” to describe such obsessively nostalgic objects as Stanley Kubrick’s The Shining (1980), following Jacques Derrida. McCarthy’s graveyard is like a great anonymous pit, vaguely gesturing at the presence of bodies, to whom we might limply call down, “What happened?” This doesn’t make the book feel vast, unnavigable, as with Kushner, who grabs your hand and slams a

179 Adeline Johns-Putra helpfully catalogues McCarthy’s best turns of phrase. “‘My job is to take care of you’”: 526. Cormac McCarthy, The Road 14, 16, 123, 130, 8.

helmet on your head just as the motorcycle flies off, dispelling any hunch that her novel may just be a trip down memory lane with the sincere, however cynical, hope that drives her plot. McCarthy’s reader feels like they are being dragged along, maybe leashed as in one of The Road’s more disturbing images, endlessly circling the historical crater. There is absolutely nothing fun about The Road. But more than fun or not fun, Kushner’s deep dive into one possible last big thing — autonomia — is motivated by the possibility of determining where the next big thing might be found or how we might build it. The Road, on the other hand, is an elegy for change, or, more neoliberal, an elegy for our belief in change. This elegy is at once critical and affective, or suspended between the two, and most of all played out — as Elliott writes, neoliberalism is only matched by “neoliberalism fatigue.”

Even as McCarthy tempts readers with the yearning possibility of naming the who, what, where, when and how of his novel’s apocalypse, he ultimately evades the question such that we can only guess, and with the same weak hope, the same “resignation and exhaustion,” named by Fisher. As Kearney writes, “Underscored by the narrative’s refusal to name the cause of the collapse, The Road continually frustrates our desire for symbolic closure. This

181 As Cooper writes, “The novel’s insistent ambiguity about the cause of the disaster evokes the same conundrum as Robert Frost’s epigrammatic ‘Fire and Ice’ proposition: whether by natural disaster or specifically human-caused disaster, the end comes anyway, and the destructive bent of humans in the twenty-first century makes that disaster not a potentiality but an inevitability.” Lydia Cooper, “Eating at the Empire Table”: 559.


183 Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, “Introduction”: 6. Indeed, although Stephen Joyce has observed that “the apocalypse is an ancient genre, yet the post-apocalyptic is relatively new,” the feeling that we have missed the apocalyptic plot exactly captures an early Lukácsian definition of the realist novel as driven by “the sense of loss of an earlier, absent epic totality and the continually failed attempts to imitate it.” Colleen Lye, “Afterword: Realism’s Futures.” Novel 49.2 (2016): 351.
point seems to be missed by critics who … tend to ‘fill in the blanks,’ so to speak, in order to provide symbolic resolution.”184 With The Road’s father and reader alike squinting backward in this way, the civilizational “fire” that the son is expected to carry forward signals not a future of novelty nor progress but one of endless “reiteration and repermutation” of the social forms that the last big thing cemented in place, like petrified lightning.185 Following his father’s lead, the boy’s sole and binding social obligation is to “take care” of these old, outdated forms beyond their vitality and without belief.

The Road is thus an apt capitalism without capitalism, post-everything, end-of-everything narrative, per the diagnoses of the above critics: nothing new, all past, keep your head down, be realistic. The moral high ground, the search for meaning and the greater good are all admirable aims, but not ones we envy nor encourage beyond a certain age. You don’t have to eat other people, of course, but you certainly can’t expect them not to eat you. In this world, you can lock the door on a pantry of the already-partially-cannibalized as they beg you for help, or strip a man naked and leave him to die, and still claim the torch of civilization.186 Technically we didn’t chain those people up, and technically we didn’t kill that man. We are still “the good guys,” and we must continue down the road. With the exception of the mother’s refusal, the novel’s political imaginary is fully captured by such shrugging lesser evil self-assurances — per Zizek, “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing

184 Kevin Kearney, “Cormac McCarthy’s The Road”: 164.

185 I use the term “squinting” drawing from Kearney’s analysis of The Road’s motifs of vision and blindness. Kevin Kearney, “Cormac McCarthy’s The Road”

186 Cormac McCarthy, The Road: 106-113; 253-260.
Even then, the novel damns her, convincingly enough that critics do too. *The Road* is late capitalism’s utopia deficit rendered in novel form.

**2.2.e The best deal you’re going to get**

This historical amnesia and the resulting preoccupation with at least survival, at most ethics, but never politics, inculcates a particular form of entrepreneurial subject at the unhappy intersection of ideology and post-ideology, belief and post-belief, depth and surface. This subject is caught between the rock of survival and the hard place of knowing that this survival is always only temporary and cannot be counted on beyond the most immediate obstacle in neoliberalism’s austerity games (as a minor character in *The Road* counsels, “Beggars can’t be choosers”).\(^{188}\) The neoliberal critic reading such a profoundly symptomatic and post-symptomatic text as McCarthy’s is likewise caught between reading to demystify it and reading from within the fatigue of demystification, which seems neither useless nor useful for understanding the particular indeterminacy and precarity of life-making today, no less changing it for the better. As Elliott and Harkin write, “Neoliberalism presents analytic challenges at least in part because it has adopted and adapted earlier modes of representation and (re)production even as it has introduced new mechanisms and practices of geopolitical economy.”\(^{189}\) *The Road* tells us stone-faced the world is a wasteland and hope is for fools, yet insists upon this world’s fossil-fueled reproduction and only half-resolves its

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\(^{188}\) Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*: 169.

own self-contradicting narrative with a pretty picture of what will obviously never result from the plot that leads up to it, a kind of ideological gaslighting that does not flag as you call it out.

Convincing us that this is reality only as much as is required to ensure our labor power but not our actual buy-in, this realism is a central feature of late capitalism as well as its particular form of environmentalism in the face of fossil capitalism’s accumulating environmental contradictions. With the novel’s phantom last big thing premise, minute-to-minute recursive plot, and flat typed characters amid a setting of total ruin, McCarthy’s realism hedges to the crisis imaginary that Kate Crawford, Larry Lohmann, Leerom Medovoi, Leon Sealey-Huggins, Erik Swyngedouw and most famously Naomi Klein have located at the heart of late fossil capital’s redoubled grip on reality. With a barrage of crises great and small, this environmentalism directs our attention to survival first and politics second, if ever, even as the latter entirely conditions the former and without hiding that it does so. Faced with another drought-fed war or wildfire, another hurricane or hurricane relief gone doubly disastrous, another climate accord that fails to curb emissions whether all parties stay in or pull out, one asks, how did we get here? What can we do to prevent this from happening again? Good questions, but not now — for the moment, we need to focus on the crisis at hand and the good of the species, the good of humanity.

Dismissing historical analyses, deep structural reform or collective political will as practical impossibilities under all-out emergency conditions, all that such crisis offers is the well-trodden “road” of privatization measures and deflationary economic realism put into force by some unidentified last big thing, whose identification is more a matter of intellectual curiosity than readymade political strategy. And so down the road we alongside father and son dutifully continue, scavenging “charred and limbless” prose in search of something akin to but always emphatically shy of political sustenance, our expectation and will to find it limpening with each page.\textsuperscript{191} The Kyoto Protocol, the Paris Agreement, COP twenty whatever, Emissions Trading Schemes at various scales with various ratios of incentive to sanction and various degrees of urgency in their assessment of climate change’s rising public health toll: when Trump bows out and Merkel strides in, we boo and applaud and none of it matters, obviously. Short of putting the book down, however, there is no alternative. \textit{The Road}’s capitalist realism for times of fossil-fueled crisis dictates that we either stay put or opt out into something much worse: sure, you grow weary of making the boy live, but are you willing to let the boy die?

In the Environmental Humanities, as my next two chapters will examine at length, the Anthropocene and various new materialisms and object-oriented ontologies likewise analyze climate change as a sort of last big thing, exemplified by Timothy Morton’s declaration in \textit{Hyperobjects}: “The end of the world has already occurred.”\textsuperscript{192} Though Morton evades a version of environmental emergency described above, he does so by simply leaning into the

\textsuperscript{191} Cormac McCarthy, \textit{The Road}: 8.

notion that we have recognized emergency too late, after the fact, post-apocalyptic. As I'll
discuss, this too is a version of fossil capitalist realism, another strategy of accumulation that
feeds the “suspicion that the end has already come,” in Fisher’s words, such that culture and
politics take on a primary narrative form of elegy.193 As Bellamy and Diamanti write, such a
post-political approach, knowingly or no, aspires to be “the final nail in the coffin for
anything resembling revolutionary will.”194 *The Road* is in large part conditioned by the pivot
of American hegemony to this post-ideological in its encounter with a specter of climate
change that both reveals the unstable environmental footing of US empire and hands it its
perhaps most powerful emergency prerogative yet in the form of imagined species
extinction.

I discussed La Berge’s analysis of *The Wire* in the previous chapter, and my students’
dissatisfaction with *The Road*’s conclusion brings her comments on happy endings to mind.
The neat wrap-up for McCarthy’s boy is as frustrating for its seeming non-realism as those
that meet the series’ characters. The world of *The Road* appears as unending as that of *The
Wire* and as allergic to everything working out for the best. But unlike *The Wire*, no reader
could possibly want another season of *The Road*. In *The Wire*, late capitalism feels like a
waiting room at a murder clinic; in *The Road*, we no longer fear the boy’s name being called,
and neither does he. In one scene, he hallucinates another boy, a phantom twin and
companion, and resists his father’s urgency to continue moving down the road because he
hopes that he’ll glimpse the boy again, talk to him, even play with him. “There’s no one to

193 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*. 3.

“Do you want to die? Is that what you want?” Sobbing, the boy repeats, “I don’t care, I don’t care.” The man’s refrain throughout the novel, “You have to come on” is continually met with the boy’s “I don’t care;” and later, a repeated “I don’t know what we’re doing.” Yet still he goes on. The boy here is a foil to another hallucinatory figure from one of his nightmares, a wind-up penguin, which unlike the boy’s protest and resistance to the father’s urges to “come on” and “carry the fire,” flaps as if on its own accord: “I had this penguin that you wound up and it would waddle and flap its flippers. And we were in that house we used to live in and it came around the corner but nobody had wound it up and it was really scary. … The winder wasn’t turning.” The penguin stages a primary question Althusser asks in “On Ideology”: “How is it that subjects ‘go’ — or rather: how is it that they manage to ‘go all by themselves,’ without a cop standing behind them, without (for the most part) the need of Repressive State Apparatuses?” No one has wound them up, but they still “go.” This is what fossil capitalist realism names: the “going” of continued fossil-fueled capitalist accumulation despite disbelieving subjects and a planet unmade by that “going.” As I have attempted to explain, this “going” is sustained by the “empirical facts” that Social Reproduction Theory demystifies and which has been historically secured by increasing rates of fossil fuel extraction. “God knows what” and so do the fossil capitalist realists of The Road: the truck and its tribe run on Arbeitskraft, a cannibalism better known as the value form, and it’s this continued, indefinite running rather

195 Cormac McCarthy, The Road: 85.
196 Cormac McCarthy, The Road: 99, 244.
197 Cormac McCarthy, The Road: 36.
than where we’re told we’re running to or for or from that fossil capitalist realism is obligated to represent. Anti-Kerouac, anti-Nabokov, *The Road* delivers Romero-meets-Steinbeck if the struggle for ideological terrain that both authors use motifs of undead labor and petrotopian infrastructure to wage were no longer necessary and maybe not even worth the time: the ghouls chase the gasoline truck, the Joads chase the wage, the man and boy chase a pre-cannibalist past that never was, we all chase our own fossil-fueled social reproduction tail, and this reality cannot comfortably suffer the sunny belief in agency that is the premise of critical methods which rely too heavily on either depth or surface in exploring and identifying reality. Late capitalism isn’t running on ideology, it’s running on fossil fuels.

In one encounter on the road, the boy narrowly convinces the man to feed an old man who “looked like a pile of rags fallen off a cart” named Ely, “like some storybook peddler from an antique time, dark and bent and spider thin and soon to vanish forever.” When the boy suggests they take him in (“Can we keep him?” like a stray dog), the man establishes strict terms on what’s possible: a tin of fruit cocktail, a fireside coffee, one night’s sleep all together (the first sentence is spoken by the man to the boy, with each line break signifying a switch in speaker):

That’s the best deal you’re going to get.
Okay.
Okay means okay. It doesn’t mean we negotiate another deal tomorrow.
What’s negotiate?
It means to talk about it some more and come up with some other deal.
There is no other deal. This is it.

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199 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* 162; 174.
The Road captures a contemporary order that has been backed into feeble, only half-believed consensus by decades of nonstop emergency and kept there by holding hostage the very species future that capitalist ecocide itself jeopardizes at a steady profit. Neoliberal environmentalism is largely insensible as a project of class war, though it is precisely the novel’s fidelity to this project that secures its realism. The father continually, feebly attempts to “take care” of his son without becoming the truck people. However, when the means of reproduction have been both fully privatized and scaled back to drips and drops rather than thousands of barrels per day, some truck people-like behaviors appear necessary: the man and boy poach, scavenge, hoard, hide and slam the door on anyone who might compete for resources or slow them down, which is everybody. Nobody chooses to be the truck people; you draw a line in the ethical sand half-knowing that circumstances will eventually push you over it, redraw and repeat, and the half-knowing becomes utter, blank-staring certainty. To survive is to give up the high road for the long one, to sustain the species is to embrace the truck people. The Road does what all frontier narratives do: clear the ideological ground. That this process resembles so strongly the literal content of this barebones narrative and its barebones form at the edge of what would be recognized as social realism in a past era is what makes it such a striking document for our contemporary. As readers tour the infrastructure of petromodernity, we see the world through a windshield but at a walker’s pace.

An anti-road trip novel, The Road offers a photo negative of US hegemony at its

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200 Cormac McCarthy, The Road: 165.

201 Something similar is effected in Ilija Trojanow’s The Lamentations of Zeno, where we tour the warming world from on board an Antarctic cruise ship. Trojanow, The Lamentations of Zeno, trans. Philip Boehm. London: Verso, 2016 (orig. 2011).
Fordist petrotopian height — highways we cannot speed down, cars we cannot drive, single family homes we cannot live in, consumer products we cannot buy from supermarket shelves long ago picked clean, but which McCarthy’s realism cannot help but return to, represent, reproduce, haunt. The notable exception to these ghostly scenes is the aforementioned nuclear bunker brimming with wares, indicating that Fordism’s only true realists were the twitchy obsessives of disaster preparedness, already experts in the worst-case-scenario, all-against-all mindset that the father cannot quite assimilate and that appears in the novel as a form of thinking at once residual and emergent within the long twentieth century’s excess and optimism. Such objects as the man and boy’s shopping cart (the squeaky-wheeled trusty steed) and a can of soda gone flat but still sweet with nostalgia for coca-colonization, as well as a broader plastic cornucopia of tarps, trash bags, grocery bags, gallon jugs, bic lights — these assemble the setting into a Fordist commodity hangover, less bequeathed to survivors (McCarthy calls it “the intestate earth”) than a haze placed over their eyes.

The rubble here is a twin for that in Jan Zalasiewicz’s “Human Event Stratum” to be discussed in chapter four, abstracting history into commodity gumbo even as it gestures toward a more historical materialist sense of how and why such commodities are made. More specific to McCarthy’s novel, however, these remaining trinkets of fossil-fueled globalization are represented as precious and dependable. The road, the shopping cart, the tarp, the lighter: these are capable of supporting life and structural to the novel’s aesthetics, whereas the remaining humans must be regarded with skepticism, fear and hate, supporting life only as lone wolf marauders or truck people and aesthetically structural only by
inversion, only insofar as we avoid seeing and thinking about them.\textsuperscript{202} With additional rubble cameos by prior regimes of accumulation running back to mercantile capital, modern history in all its glory and trivia appears to collapse into a single flash, while space seems to extend indefinitely. A Bakhtinian account of this contraction-distention and its mapping onto the pair’s nomadic, withering bodies would hold \textit{The Road}s chronotope to be as unwieldy as a Rabelaisian one. Just as \textit{The Wire}’s capitalist realism represents capitalist totality by following the money through multiple interlocking abodes of production until coming upon the production of realism itself, McCarthy’s fossil capitalist realism follows the road in the hyperpresent tense of bare life until Arrighian waves appear a single fossil-fueled swell. The “last big thing,” maybe the only big thing, was fossil capital, both firmly, inalterably in the past as well as determinant of all material and narrative moves in the future.

Thus, what may be different about crises under late fossil capital — even as they are overcome and deferred through the same strategy of “energy deepening” — may not lie in the “top layer” of capitalist strategy that Arrighi explores in \textit{The Long Twentieth Century} and that predominates Harvey’s investigation. Rather, it is this transformation in the ideological apparatus from obscuring the actual contradiction and violence of capitalist accumulation to no longer doing so. This is, again, not to downplay the political economic mechanism of recurrent crises across capital’s various empires or the ruling class project to shore up power through each. As Arrighi writes, “the formation of these more powerful blocs has always been an integral aspect of the crisis and contradictions of the previously dominant bloc.” It is merely to highlight that what has changed since the early 1970s is neither capital’s endemic

\textsuperscript{202} My formulation of McCarthy’s props here mimics that of Jane Bennett’s “speculative onto-story” in \textit{Vibrant Matter} that I will examine at length in chapter four.
tendency to crisis nor class war but instead the ideological face, or rather post-ideological face, of these logics. As named by Mark Fisher and Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge’s “capitalist realism,” the disappearance of “actually existing” alternatives to capitalism in the wake of the Soviet Union’s fall has been accompanied by a generalized resignation to capitalist reality. Critiques and contradictions are “ceaselessly metabolized,” reinforcing its realism — the air we breathe, the weather — precisely through their diagnoses of capital’s ills and the absence of viable alternatives. Capital’s critics may follow ideological tail to productive head only to find that the latter swallows the former, such that the edges of realism and reality, particularly those delineating it from capital itself, disappear. The narrative lock-in of this representation of fossil-fueled global warming’s apocalyptic arrival is as formidable as the “carbon lock-in” of our fossil-fueled infrastructure, and on McCarthy’s road, the two precisely meet.

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203 Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism: 6.

3. The Tragedy of Climate Change and Anthropocene Realism

“Whereas the postmodern emphasizes indeterminacy and ontological uncertainty, capitalist realism acknowledges the limitations of critique — even as it constantly seeks new avenues for it. Under capitalist realism the postmodern skepticism toward systems and paranoia about agency control give way, certainly not to a restored faith in systems but to a recognition of the ruling order of capitalism as both more banal and more encompassing.”

Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, Reading Capitalist Realism

“Who is the we? We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. … Even if we were to emotionally identify with a word like mankind, we would not know what being a species is, for, in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species as indeed would be any other life form. But one never experiences being a concept.”

Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”

It it at this point a cliché to use the fall of Icarus as a conceit for climate change. In the version that appears in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, the myth is already an overdetermined allegory for the hubris of technology, in which Daedalus “turned his mind to arts unknown,/ and changed the face of nature.” Today, as the plot template for popular climate change treatises

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like Alan Weisman’s *The World Without Us* or as an object of meditation for university climate research (the Initiative on Climate Adaptation Research and Understanding through the Social Sciences, for instance, pays homage to Icarus in acronym form), the myth satisfies all criteria for the environmentalist’s favorite rhetorical mode: the call to action, or fable.\(^4\)

Daedalus’s coaching to “keep to the middle course” — to fly neither too low nor too high, but to fly nonetheless — prefigures the limp, generalized plea for moderation that one hears emanating from various institutions of governance in our age of daunting climate extremes.\(^5\)

Indeed, Charles Martin’s translation of *Metamorphoses* here (“the middle course”) mirrors the language of an environmental “middle road” or “Third Way” that insists the economic reality of unending fossil capital and the environmental reality of fossil-fueled climate crisis

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\(^4\) ICARUS’s co-founders write, “As our society risks a scorching from the sun, Icarus is an appropriate cautionary tale to inspire for social-science engagement. Maybe, with advance planning, Daedalus could have invented the parachute, providing Icarus a soft landing — [a] well-adapted ending… We need cool and engaged social science reflection to identify the causes of risk and adaptive pathways forward — so we might guide society to land standing.” (Agrawal, Arun et al. “Cool heads for a hot world — Social sciences under a changing sky.” *Global Environmental Change* 22.2 (2012): 329-331). Reflections on the myth also appear in the blog sections of university climate institutes like Stanford’s Millennium Alliance for Humanity and Biosphere and in environmental legal criticism, such as Raymond Biering and Brian Biering’s “*Massachusetts v. EPA*: Rescuing Icarus with Environmental Federalism.” *Journal of Environmental Law and Litigation* 23 (2008): 35-72. Last, a photo series by Paul Lloyd Sargent entitled “Landscapes with the fall of Icarus” feature close-up shots of garbage — a KFC bag, a half-empty plastic water bottle, a discarded newspaper — taken during a clean-up event in Manhattan’s the lower east side. See the series at <http://recycledcarbon.com/falloficarus.html>.

\(^5\) Ovid, *Metamorphoses*: 209 (Book VIII, line 281).
can find a happy medium in individual behavior modification and smart growth. If you care, you will take action. Keep flying, but not too high. The planet is in your hands!

Paradoxically, in its circulation as environmental metaphor, the Icarus myth is likewise shot through with tropes of original sin, fogged in an affect of preemptive grief, which ennoble climate change by casting it as the tragic, inevitable outcome of human development. Here, Icarus’s flight relocates from King Minos’s prison island to a paradise lost, and his fall is as much a shared fate to witness as an individual moral to heed. It is essentially, inescapably human, we are told, to have developed productive capacities such that carbon emissions exceed the thermodynamic limits of the planet. Technology is our species-being, industrialization and economic growth a genetic certainty. Our destiny is fixed and always has been. Even as common sense environmentalism in the Global North encourages responsible consumerism to offset this destiny, it describes global warming, mass extinction, water pollution and other standout features of our destabilized planetary ecosystem just as Ovid describes Daedalus in the moments leading up to his son’s flight — gripped by an undoubting expectation of doom:

And as he works and as he warns the boy, the old man’s cheeks are dampened by his tears;

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the father’s hands are trembling as he gives
his son a not-to-be-repeated kiss,
and lifts off on his wings into the air.⁷

As Daedalus prepares his son for flight, he is already tearful, already trembling, aware that he performs a “never to be repeated” act and that Icarus will die. Daedalus is robbed of a sense of hope even as he instructs and cautions Icarus and leads him into flight — long before, in other words, the consummate spectacle of disaster occurs. His anticipation prompts us to wonder when exactly his son’s fate was sealed: when Daedalus built the wings? When he and his son first arrived at Crete? At Icarus’s birth? At Daedalus’s? Earlier? Regardless of precisely when Icarus’s fall was set in motion, Ovid leaves no doubt of its inexorability. As Daedalus recovers the body from the sea that now bears Icarus’s name, father and son fulfill roles assigned long before.⁸ Ovid compares this patrilineal drama to that of birds leaving nest, a rhetorical move that signals at once both humanity’s status as one species among many and the Promethean streak that makes our own species determinism exceptionally easy to underestimate and exceptionally impossible to avoid. What other species engages in such “transgressive art”?⁹

Half fable and half tragedy, Icarus presents, on the one hand, an injunction to choose more wisely, and, on the other, a diagnosis of our species’ inevitable fatality that contradicts any suggestion of the subject’s capacity to choose or act. Since long before climate change had a name, this generic mix has characterized the Western environmentalist imaginary, structuring

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⁹ Ovid *Metamorphoses*: 210 (Book VIII, line 300).
such pathbreaking texts as Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. These texts seek to mobilize readers around a set of values and actions while at the same time insisting that the destruction of the natural world is something encoded in human DNA. This is the ruling genre of “man meets nature” under modernity, and its structuring presence in climate change discourse — from the left to the right, inside the academy and out — marks a certain generic apotheosis. Given that today’s solar rays threaten to melt much more than makeshift wax-and-feather wings, one might say that the stakes of this narrative have never been higher.

This chapter inaugurates an answer to the question: what is the role of university knowledge production under late fossil capital, and specifically to how we think about mounting environmental crisis? How do the representations of fossil capital and fossil capitalist crisis produced by scholars and critics relate to what I am terming fossil capitalist realism? The first part, this chapter, I will examine a prevailing critical discourse in the Environmental Humanities, the Anthropocene. The second part examines New Materialism, which like the Anthropocene enjoys a privileged and influential position within the Environmental Humanities. Though the peak *vogue* moments of both the Anthropocene and New Materialism have subsided, their emergence during the decade or so when the Environmental Humanities consolidated as a field has ensured that their fundamental

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arguments about scale, object and method retain a kind of hegemony within the critical literature. Today these arguments about method function as premises to Environmental Humanities scholarship as much as they themselves are taken as arguments about method for Environmental Humanists to dispute or refine; they imprint even works that do not explicitly cite them. It’s for this reason — the common sense that the Anthropocene and New Materialism now constitute in the field — that I examine them here as a node of fossil capitalist realism in the realm of knowledge production. The final part of my discussion of fossil capitalist realism’s role in university knowledge production arrives in the conclusion chapter, where I chart the emergence of interdisciplinary climate and sustainability institutes in American universities, situating them as a counterpart to the Environmental Humanities discourses examined here.

Altogether, these chapters offer fossil capitalist realism as a name for a structuring ideological formation in university knowledge production that normalizes the heightened fossil fuel extraction of neoliberal accumulation and social forms as the “reality” within which academics and students work, study and attempt to understand or solve the climate crisis. I treat Anthropocene and New Materialism as forms of “postcritique” that shun the hermeneutics of suspicion as a method of analysis for climate crisis — for Anthropocenists, because climate change is an apparently post-historical kind of object; for New Materialists, because demystification presumes a human subject — and thereby heed the tautological loop of ideology under late capitalism named by capitalist realism. These post-critical methods are seized upon by interdisciplinary climate and sustainability institutes to naturalize late fossil capitalist production and relations of production, incorporating the post-critical stance that suspicion isn’t a “realistic” critical posture nowadays into the commodified research agendas.
that predominate in these institutes. These chapters additionally offer a method for identifying how our scholarship produces and reproduces fossil capital as realism, per the definitions of capitalist realism offered by Mark Fisher and Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge.

As mentioned in the introduction, education is a key Ideological State Apparatus as theorized by Louis Althusser, vital to reproducing the relations of production under capitalism and, specific to this dissertation, late fossil capital. This period has been characterized by the evacuation of public K-12 education funding, the corporatization of higher education teaching and research, and today the requirement of a specialized college degree to exercise any amount of autonomy as a worker in the formal economy. These phenomena have all amplified the importance of the university in the educational ISA under late fossil capital relative to primary and secondary education, and especially as it concerns climate change-related research and training. As Mark Olssen and Michael A. Peters write, under neoliberalism universities are understood by governments and private industry alike to be “a key driver in the knowledge economy” in its production of human capital and knowledge capital alike.11 These phenomena are present across the Global North but are nowhere more extreme than in the US, where public school district inequalities skyrocket, college tuitions skyrocket, research is frequently contingent on external competitive funding, and university endowments often rival the purses of other more overtly corporate entities.

and sometimes even exceed those of the municipalities where they are located and function as main employer.

Within this system, and similar to the Keynesian system, the university in its pedagogic function reproduces labor power, instructing students in the skills and rules they practice in the world as workers. As Althusser writes, “All the agents of production … must in one way or another be steeped in ideology in order to perform their tasks conscientiously.”12 The conscientious tasks required of skilled, college-educated labor power in capitalism’s encounter with climate change essentially and ultimately contribute to continued capitalist growth despite the climate change that indicts it. Workers are thus “steeped” in knowledge produced within and for a neoliberal mode of accumulation whose economic conditions of possibility and horizon of political imagination are defined precisely by the mass exploitation of carbon energy. Fossil capitalist realism names how this exploitation is reproduced by knowledge production in the neoliberal university, which alongside the literary and cultural ISA previously discussed helps to delineate what approaches to climate change are “realistic” in the sense indicated by Gramsci’s hegemony. Per the lowered political expectations named by capitalist realism and adapted here to the economic “reality” of ever-heightening fossil fuel extraction, this knowledge production today includes the increasingly common sense assessment that critique itself has “run out of steam” and ought to be thus abandoned, an abandoning further encouraged by the dual emergency conditions of climate crisis, which supposedly obliterates all existing critical paradigms, and of higher education austerity, which

targets humanities departments above all and requires the demonstration of “research output,” namely a kind of political transformation that critique no longer delivers or the humanities’ relevance in interdisciplinary settings concerning the study of environment and climate.

What is the relationship between the Environmental Humanities and late fossil capital? Does the Anthropocene theorize environmental crisis in ways that reify or demystify fossil capital’s “reality”? In either case, how and to what end? To answer these questions in this chapter, I perform a literary close reading of a representative work from the Environmental Humanities canon, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s 2009 essay “The Climate of History: Four Theses.”

I begin with a discussion of the periodization debates concerning the Anthropocene, which turn on the question, when did this geologic epoch begin? With the help of Tom McCarthy’s 2015 novel Satin Island, I find that these debates reproduce what Rob Nixon has called the “muscular tag team” of tragedy and fable, a narrative mode employed by neoliberal capital to secure its pretense to “reality.”

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14 Rob Nixon, “Neoliberalism, Genre and the Tragedy of the Commons”: 593.
seminal text of the Anthropocene’s entry into humanities scholarship, and find a similar
generic mix at work. Chakrabarty argues that climate change requires the substitution of the
humanist subject — whether that offered by modern liberalism or its critics — with the
figure of the species. As he suggests early in the essay, “As the crisis gathered momentum in
the last few years, I realized that all my readings in theories of globalization, Marxist analysis
of capital, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism over the last twenty-five years, while
enormously useful in studying globalization, had not really prepared me for making sense of
this planetary conjuncture within which humanity finds itself today.” In abandoning these
suspicious critical rubrics for one apparently more adequate to the theoretical task of climate
change, Chakrabarty provokes a dilemma in his own method: between the historical
materialism that explains climate change through the subject-driven capitalist world-system
and a new universalizing discourse of the species that describes climate change as humanity’s
technoapocalyptic destiny.

Along the lines of what Toni Morrison has described as a poetics of evasion, Chakrabarty’s
prose attempts to repress the Marxist analysis of climate change that underpins his argument
so that his endorsement of the species as the true subject of history can win the day. The
modern subject that begins his essay quietly converts into a universal subject of species: in
the Anthropocene’s fable dimension, we are hailed as believing, acting individuals capable of
critique and change; in its tragic dimension, our individual subjecthood is nullified by the
species subject finally responsible for climate change. Despite and even because
Chakrabarty’s argument symptomatizes its historical materialist roots, his case for the species

appears historical — and politically progressive, even liberatory — while actually representing merely an aesthetic resolution to climate’s essential carbon contradiction, forged through the tragedy-fable told by the Anthropocene. This evasive dynamic demonstrates how the Anthropocene as a concept affords the environmental humanist critic the benefit of the critique of fossil capital, as required by the job, while subsuming such critique back into the project of capital accumulation that has historically deployed an ideology of the species to justify ever-increasing fossil fuel consumption. In this way, Chakrabarty’s essay provides a privileged view of how fossil capitalist realism structures university knowledge production about the competing realities of fossil capital and climate change so as to erase the raced and classed dynamics of fossil-fueled global warming.

On method: I have chosen my objects here and in the chapter on New Materialism that follows — works by Chakrabarty, Jane Bennett and, less extensively, Timothy Morton — to represent broader assumptions in the Environmental Humanities, however baggy the field may be. Why these scholars? Morton had a spread in Newsweek, my GoogleScholar alert for Bennett yields copious results nearly every single day, and Chakrabarty’s “The Climate of History” is so frequently included on graduate syllabi that is is not uncommon to hear it referred to in seminar rooms as “the Chakrabarty essay,” even by those researching outside the Environmental Humanities.¹⁶ This type of circulation on bibliographies, in classrooms and among non-academic audiences is exceptional and signals an influence that requires evaluation by those in the field. Not everyone gets a Newsweek interview, after all, and not everyone gets taught so frequently, if at all. At the same time, I should mention that other

works might have sufficed to think about the significance and stakes of the Anthropocene and New Materialism’s popularity. For example, given his similarly frequent citation, I considered a section on Bruno Latour before growing wary of my page count. I can also imagine a version of this chapter where I examine texts that cite all three of Bennett, Chakrabarty and Morton rather than examine these authors themselves.

In the end, to assess an entire field, or a dominant strain of thought in a field, these works by these authors appeared ideal testing ground for my hypotheses concerning the development and state of Environmental Humanities scholarship vis-a-vis late fossil capital and the defeating realism of late capitalist post-ideology. In my mind, they are unavoidable on bibliographies and syllabi for good reason: their work presents in distilled form the primary methods and interventions one must study to research and teach in the Environmental Humanities today. I read them as both symptomatic of broader trends in the field and in environmental thinking in the twenty-first century, as well as as landmark scholarly texts that have encouraged these trends in a particular direction. This chapter intends to diagnose and challenge that direction rather than rebuke specific scholars, and I write in a spirit fundamentally guided by my investment in the field and in the role to be played by university education and research in a just energy transition.
3.1 Narrative lock-in

3.1.a Failed parachutists

The “Anthropocene” retells the Icarus myth, but with the added intrigue of an ontological transit: man-as-artificer overestimates his brilliance, underestimates his consequences, and stumbles into a new role as more-than-human, no-longer-human, a force of nature, properly geologic. Icarus’s fabulous and tragic fall has been lent scientific credibility through the “Anthropocene” nomenclature, officially adopted by the high priests of geology or no.

Species and planetary fate converge in the proposed new epoch for our geologic timeline: “The mastery of fire by our ancestors provided humankind with a powerful monopolistic tool unavailable to other species that put us firmly on the long path towards the Anthropocene,” writes chemist Will Steffen. Following Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer's seminal argument, Steffen here contends that the combined consequences of population growth, greenhouse gas emissions, agricultural development and other related phenomena constitute a “global geologic force” unlikely to diminish in influence for the distant future in the absence of a cataclysmic volcano eruption, epidemic, asteroid collision or nuclear war. “Anthropos” is written into the geologic record. And, apparently, we have


been walking down this “long path” since discovering and harnessing pyrotechnics. The story goes: the moment that humans seized fire — a seizure that itself made us “human,” children of Prometheus, both our choice and destiny — was the moment we sealed our fate and the fate of planet earth for untold millennia into the future.

Or, as Crutzen and Stoermer first proposed when introducing the Anthropocene, this fate seals around 1800, when advances in steam power fostered production and transportation technologies essential to industrialization.20 This dating, though still under review by the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS), is more widely accepted among scholars than the domestication of fire as the point of no environmental return. It finds support in a number of correlative studies, both scientific and historical, that spotlight the emergence of our globally integrated fossil economy as the necessary and primary condition for global warming, itself predominant among climate change’s constituent features.21 The timeline of Andreas Malm’s masterful Fossil Capital, for example, harmonizes with Steffen et al’s examination of Haber–Bosch agricultural production (modernity’s most stunning feat of alchemy, using fossil fuels to “create fertilizer out of air.”22 Likewise, Jan Zalasiewicz et al’s “anthroturbation” nominates the vast subterranean presence of humanity resulting from

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21 As Andreas Malm writes in Fossil Capital, “Fossil fuel combustion is only one cause of global warming, just as the sun is only one of the bodies in the solar system and the American president only one in a larger team: the others, puny by comparison, revolve around it... the burning of fossil fuels is the hard core of the problem, quantitatively dominant and qualitatively determinant. It deserves special focus.” London: Verso, 2016: 11.

fossil fuel extraction and transportation as sufficient evidence for the Anthropocene to be ICS-certified.\textsuperscript{23}

In the humanities, studies of climate change often contend that, as Malm forcefully puts it, “the fossil economy is an altogether historical substance” rather than the outcome of some species destiny, making 1800 appear less susceptible to the fable-tragedy of \textit{Homo pyrophilis} that the Anthropocene usually totes.\textsuperscript{24} Less susceptible to an Icarus logic, perhaps, but not immune. To bridge the gap between the absence of a clear point in the geologic record marking the first human use of fire and the much clearer markings of fossil fuel use in early industrialization, a phased pyrogeographic periodization has emerged for the Anthropocene. Under this framework, the epoch has a soft opening during the fire use of early pre-humans and then hunter-gatherers, followed by the more distinct stratigraphic profiles of agricultural and then industrial fire regimes.\textsuperscript{25} As Michael Raupach and Josep Canadell write, “exosomatic energy was, and still is, an \textit{essential catalyst} for [global warming], and the \textit{primary reason} for its availability is that, long before the industrial era, a particular primate species

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learned how to tap the energy reserves stored in detrital carbon."26 The Anthropocene: a straight, however delayed, shot from Prometheus to Watts. This phased structure concedes that most climate change data is coincident with modernity but nonetheless features man-as-fire-ape as the Anthropocene’s protagonist. It meets both the disciplinary mandates of geology for identifiable Global Stratotype Section and Points (GSSPs) and the ideological mandate for an explanation of climate change that appears historical while hedging to a concept of species destiny. That this pyrogeographic approach was first articulated by one David Bowman — who shares a name with the protagonist of Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey, the Icarus retelling par excellence — renders these narrative-scientific entanglements truly uncanny.27

Half a million years ago and/or 1800? And what about the stratigraphic profile of the dawn of agriculture in 10,000 B.C.E.? Or that of the Columbian exchange and the massive deforestation of the Americas that European colonization had effected by 1610? Or that of the atom bomb drops on American indigenous lands and then Hiroshima and Nagasaki in

26 Michel Raupach and Josep Canadell, “Carbon and the Anthropocene”: 211.
27 See David Bowman, “What is the relevance of pyrogeography to the Anthropocene?”; Bowman, Balch et al, “The human dimension of fire regimes on Earth”; and Bowman, Balch et al, “Fire in the Earth System.” Kubrick’s famous jump cut from the ape’s club to a spaceship is the filmic equivalent of the pyrogeographic Anthropocene narrative.
These competing dates for the Anthropocene’s beginning find voice in Tom McCarthy’s 2015 novel, *Satin Island*. McCarthy offers a double of the Icarus cyborg-angel figure: the failed parachutist. The novel’s protagonist, U., is fixated with a local news story of a parachuting accident in which foul play is suspected. In his obsessive digging through police reports and parallel cases of parachuting deaths, he struggles to decisively locate and time-stamp this possibly criminal, possibly tragic event. Is the scene of the crime, he wonders, the field where the parachutist landed and instantly died? Is it the plane from which the parachutist jumped, at which point gravity guaranteed the worst? Is it the sky itself, where the life-saving parachute, having been sabotaged, failed to deploy? As the Anthropocene’s discussants continually ask, where and when did death become inevitable?

28 Simon Lewis and Mark Maslin explore competing proposals for the dating of the Anthropocene in “Defining the Anthropocene”: the agricultural revolution, New World colonization, the advent of industrialization and the Great Acceleration. Conceding that differences of a few centuries or decades hardly matter on the aeonic timescale of geologists, Lewis and Maslin nonetheless conclude that 1610 and 1964 most convincingly meet GSSP criteria. 1610 marks the “swift, ongoing, radical reorganization of life on Earth without geologic precedent” ushered in by colonization. This is comprised of Earth’s first largely homogenous planet-wide biotic system, with a unified transoceanic fossil record unseen since Pangea, and the massive decline from 61 to 6 million in the Western hemisphere’s human population via disease, war, enslavement and famine, with corresponding decreases in atmospheric methane and carbon dioxide levels. Lewis and Maslin’s 1610 harmonizes with Crutzen and Stoermer’s 1800, a year whose significance for the Global North was made possible only through the dispossession of the Global South, as Marx’s “primitive accumulation” famously diagnoses. As for 1964, GSSP-worthy phenomena include sharp rises in worldwide human population levels, a consistent stratigraphic signature in locations across the globe from nuclear fallout, a similar planet-wide presence of fossil pollen from genetically modified crops, and the entrance of synthetic materials like plastics into the technofossil record. Lewis and Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene.” *Nature* 519: 171–180 (March 2015). On the various “-cenes,” see Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. London: Verso, 2015; Nils Bubandt, Scott F. Gilbert, Donna Haraway, Noboru Ishikawa, Kenneth Olwig and Anna Tsing, “Anthropologists are talking — about the Anthropocene.” *Ethnos* 81 (2016): 535-564; and Donna Haraway, “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin.” *Environmental Humanities* 6: 159-165 (2015). Haraway reports in her essay that Andreas Malm first used the term “Capitalocene” as a graduate student in 2009.
The question remained, though, of timing. In other words: at what precise point in time had [the parachutist] actually been murdered? ... As at least one article I read stated, the man's death was, in this instance — in this country devoid of tall pine trees, this terrain quite unamenable to upgusts, this snowless season — a foregone conclusion from the moment the cords had been cut. Thus, although he hadn't actually been killed until the moment of his impact, to all intents and purposes, he had. For the last hours — days, perhaps — of his life, he had ... been murdered without realizing it. I tried to picture him walking around in that state: already effectively dead, his body and his consciousness, his experiences, and, beyond these, his experience of his experiences — his awareness of himself, his whole reality — mere side effects of a technical delay, a pause, an interval.

The Anthropocene appears to name such a “technical delay,” and disputes over its periodization do not seek to explain or critique this delay so much as merely measure it.

Another of McCarthy’s motifs, the buffering video, makes the same point. Much as the parachutist is a dead man walking, the Anthropocene insists that climate change was always in the cards, a function of the human species and inevitable. “Already effectively dead,” our collective oblivion to what lies ahead rules the day until it is already too late — splat.

Even while invoking such political economic phenomena as the mainstreaming of steam power at the dawn of industrialism, the colonization of the Global South, or the Great

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30 It is precisely this “awakening” narrative that Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptise Fressoz attempt to debunk in their cheeky-titled *The Shock of the Anthropocene*. As they argue in their defense of historical materialism, there are any number of “-cenes” we might invoke to narrate the emergence of climate change without resorting to “shock”: the Thermocene (energy use), the Thanatocene (warfare and military expansion), the Phagocene (consumerism and desire), the Phronocene (neglected environmentalist grammars, deemed anti-progress or romantic and quaint), the Agnotocene (intellectual constructions that have enabled us to ignore environmentalist critiques and planetary limits), the Capitalocene (uniting world-systems theory with the science of earth systems) and the Polemocene (suppressed socioecological struggles against industrialism on behalf of working people). Bonneuil and Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene*. London: Verso, 2015.
Acceleration of our fossil-fueled economy in the 20th century, the Anthropocene fingers all of these back on *Homo sapiens* itself. This species fixation is precisely the “telltale trope of Anthropocene theory.” Who cares when and where — the parachutist was always going to die. Malm gently satirizes this position: “My learning to walk at the age of one is the reason for me dancing salsa today.” In an article in *The Anthropocene Review* co-written with Alf Hornborg, he similarly provokes that to attribute global warming to an evolutionary behavioral development like the use of fire is “like explaining the success of the Japanese fighter pilots in terms of the fact that prehumans evolved binocular vision and opposable thumbs.” These comparisons are pithy and tongue-in-cheek but point out the flawed logic that McCarthy’s parachuting riddle also makes plain. Climatic destabilization by fossil fuel consumption is not so eternal and inexorable a force as the gravity that pulls the parachutist to the earth. While signaling historical-mindedness, the Anthropocene date debates do nothing to defy the fatal conventions of Ovid, Weisman, Kubrick and all the others, but rather shuffle and reshuffle the same narrative deadweight of Promethean tragedy. The search for climate change’s “prime mover” — a combined God-type, metaphysical, “original and unmoved impulse” like human DNA or a more mechanical “initial agent” like the steam engine — circles us back to always-already tearful, trembling Daedalus. Fate has no historical dimension to speak of, and neither, it seems, does human interaction with the

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31 Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital* 32.


34 Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital* 37.
natural world. This narrative lock-in is perhaps as formidable as the “carbon lock-in” of our fossil-fueled infrastructure.35

3.1.b The Great Report

In *Satin Island*, the failed parachutist isn’t the only mystery that McCarthy’s protagonist tries to solve. U. is charged with locating something like a prime mover for contemporary social totality in his position as a corporate anthropologist for an unspecified but big-time, capital-C Company. U.’s boss, Peyman, is the Company’s Steve Jobs or Jeff Bezos, a TedTalking mad-scientist-entrepreneur with global fame and prestige. And Peyman’s next big thing — a #disruptive #innovative #paradigm-shifting but eternally unilluminated venture named the “Koob-Sassen Project” — requires something obliquely referred to as The Great Report, the Document, the First and Last Word on our age. Peyman instructs U. to mobilize his anthropologist’s arsenal to write “this beautiful, magnificent Report; this Book, the fucking Book, that was to name our era, sum it up; this book that left the format of the book itself behind, this book-beyond-the-book.”36

U.’s mission takes its form from the postmodern failed detective plot perfected by Thomas Pynchon. The Great Report promises to name, map and demystify an elusive power-truth akin to Trystero or The Golden Fang, some ubiquitous, invisible puppetry implicating phenomena as varied as parachute accidents, post-match interviews, shark attacks, alien

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sightings and scam emails. For U. and McCarthy’s reader both, each of these phenomena appears more or less unremarkable on its own, but assembled into proliferative “dossiers” and strung together, they promise to be meaningful, connecting the granular stuff of everyday life to some global scheme or telos. Available only at a partial, sideways glance and always doubly mediated by still or moving image and the protagonist’s overzealous conspiracy-sniffing M.O., the “spectral presences” that The Great Report is meant to represent utterly obsess U.37 However, a few chapters in, he soon finds the haphazard picture they paint to be paralyzing for all that it encompasses, “un-writable,” and abandons hope of producing his Report.38

Like Pynchon, McCarthy suggests here that suspicious readers might be doomed. To “crack the case” is a fantasy that usefully orders the world, but a fantasy nonetheless.39 Fredric Jameson famously writes that such exercises in cognitive mapping “may be taken to constitute an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century whose abominations are heightened by their concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality.”40 For Jameson, the significance of such conspiratorial works as Pynchon or McCarthy’s lies not in their achievement of a “definitive verisimilitude” with the world but rather in what “the intent to hypothesize [and] the desire called cognitive mapping” index about ideology under late

37 Tom McCarthy, Satin Island: 63.
38 Tom McCarthy, Satin Island: 133.
39 Tom McCarthy, Satin Island: 37.
capitalism. The content of conspiracy is not meaningless — suspicion populates, thickens and enriches plots even as it fails to solve them — but, for the hermeneutics Jameson offers with cognitive mapping and the broader political unconscious that draws them, what presides is form, which does not merely gesture at or reveal a repressed outside but instead mediates that outside’s conditioning of the text. The failure of social realism to represent late capitalist “abominations” that are at once hidden and in plain view provides the reader, inversely, a kind of realist representation of late capitalist social totality, insofar as this totality overwhelms at once the subject’s ability to map or change the conditions of their life and the novel’s ability to represent these conditions besides through its own formal contradictions.

Significantly, despite this initial formal echo between Pynchon and McCarthy’s texts, Satin Island ultimately diverges from its forebear and from the necessarily failed project of cognitive mapping. Where Oedipa Maas awaits the titular crying of lot 49 at the end of Pynchon’s novel, eager to continue her search for a smoking gun that she has come to recognize does not exist, U. arrives at a different conclusion: “Write Everything Down, said [Bronislaw] Malinowski. But the thing is, now it is all written down.” For U., it is not the case that the world cannot be represented and yet we still try, as with Maas; rather, it already has been represented, and indeed represents itself. U. continues,

Pondering these facts, a new spectre, an even more grotesque realization, presented itself to me: the truly terrifying thought wasn’t that the Great Report might be un-writable, but — quite the opposite — that it had already been written. Not by a person, nor even by some nefarious cabal, but simply by

Fredric Jameson, The Geopolitical Aesthetic. 3.
a neutral and indifferent binary system that had given rise to itself, moved by itself and would perpetuate itself: some auto-alphaing and auto-omegaing script — that that's what it was. And that we, far from being its authors, or its operators, or even its slaves (for slaves are agents who can harbour hopes, however faint, that one day a Moses or a Spartacus will set them free), were no more than actions and commands within key-chains. This Great Report, once it came into being, would, from that point onwards, have existed always, since time immemorial; and nothing else would really matter.\textsuperscript{42}

Splat, indeed! Rather than exposing a bogey-man, a central thread that if tugged unravels the ideological fabric of reality, McCarthy suggests that notions of belief, intention and choice fundamentally mistake the order of the age. In so doing, the novel identifies capitalist realism’s deflation of political expectations in the eclipse of “reality” by capitalism and various post-suspicious, post-symptomatic and other post-critical strains of critique, each responding to dead-ending of demystification on the brick wall of capitalist power. Unlike Maas, who elects to continue operating in an agent-based narrative even as she confronts the capitalist totality that exceeds and nullifies it, and unlike scholars attempting to forge novel critical methods adequate to the totality of capitalist power we confront today, U. ascribes the Great Report ontological weight. Such political and economic subject positions as author, operator and slave do not obtain because the Great Report — enacted rather than acted, a set of computations, patterns, technoneural pathways — subsumes historical event, cause and change into an eternal, seemingly self-perpetuating past and an eternal, seemingly self-perpetuating future. Not nature, exactly, but a reality unto itself.

The Anthropocene is such a Great Report. The deep time lens it employs flattens historical contingency in general and the historical development of capitalism in particular — with its

\textsuperscript{42} Tom McCarthy, \textit{Satin Island}: 133-134.
plain authors, operators and slaves — into “the auto-alphaing and auto-omegaing script” of *Homo sapiens*. Similar to the pyrogeographers, Steffen et al write in “The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives,” “The story begins a few million years ago with the genus *Homo erectus*, which had mastered the art of making stone tools and rudimentary weapons.” An omnivorous diet, the development of spoken language, the agricultural revolution, early fossil fuel extraction in Song dynasty China (960-1279), and only a few paragraphs later we’re in a British coal mine shattering the Holocene’s upper limit of CO2 concentration variability with the Great Acceleration already in sight. Like a computer program, the Anthros enshrined by the Anthropocene has “given rise to itself, moved by itself and would perpetuate itself.” Each landmark in the “long path towards the Anthropocene” is, per Chakrabarty in my epigraph, “an instance of the concept species” — an accumulative though fungible data point in our species’ destiny to devote mass quantities of carbon energy to the material enrichment of a superminority ruling class. The “more profound how of an event” like global warming, as Georg Lukács’s defines the task of realist representation in “Narrate or Describe?”, hardly makes sense when the event and its cause or conditions are identical, when there is no agency or point of intervention possible to distinguish them. What could U. write?

To return to the environmentalist fable-tragedy made available by the fall of Icarus, Bruegel’s painting “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” (c. 1555, included below) lends itself to a particularly Anthropocenic interpretation of the myth. In this composition, inverted from Ovid’s, the plot of the myth is miniaturized as background oddity. Without the title cuing us

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43 Will Steffen et al, 846.
to look at the faint splash of Icarus’s plunge into the sea, we would likely never notice it amid the activities and seascape represented, nor indeed recognize it for what it is.\textsuperscript{44} Bruegel’s foregrounded pastoral figures form a scene in which the fall is not action but just another scenic element, \textit{of} rather than \textit{within}, enacting a script rather than acting in the world. These laboring figures and Icarus alike are the unthinking “actions and commands within [the] key-chains” of common country life. His fall means as much as and no more than their casual attendance to horse, cart and crop. W. H. Auden famously offers this reading of the painting in his poem “Musée des Beaux Arts.” Encountering the painting in a museum in Brussels, he writes, “About suffering they were never wrong,/The old Masters [such as Bruegel]: how well they understood/Its human position: how it takes place/While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along.”\textsuperscript{45} Icarus’s fall at the hand of a technological streak gone one step too far is just another automatic routine of the “human position,” homologous to and quotidian like eating, walking or opening a window. You could no more intervene to stop it than you could stop a “neutral and indifferent binary system.” U. begins his search as a modern subject who ascribes such action a political content to be uncovered, perhaps rectified; he ends it by deciding not to visit Staten/Satin Island, his best shot at “cracking the case” of the Report. Like Bruegel’s shepherd and ploughman, he “turns away/Quite leisurely from the disaster” and settles for the Report already written.\textsuperscript{46} McCarthy suggests that we treat Auden’s statement not as an indictment against a callous or

\textsuperscript{44} It is still today unknown whether this title is Bruegel’s or an art dealer’s of the period. See Ruth Yeazell, “The Power of a Name: In Bruegel’s Icarus, for Instance.” \textit{Raritan} 33.2 (Fall 2013): 110-127.


\textsuperscript{46} W.H. Auden, “Musée”: 87, line 14.
cruel failure to act but as a structurally mandated fact or, as my upcoming discussion of New Materialism will explore, an ontological condition.

“Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” (c. 1555)

Even if we were to suppose that the “suffering” of Icarus’s fall deserves intervention, U. and Auden both indicate that the subject is in no position to intervene. Keeping in mind how the boy’s fall functions as a metaphor for species-created global warming, the Anthropocene likewise denies the species subject it calls into being any chance to intervene in unfolding climate crisis. Environmentalist discursive formations as varied as grocery bag taxes, “calculate your carbon footprint” interfaces and, as Imre Szeman sharply diagnoses, climate change documentaries are all animated by the assumption that each of us, on a spectrum
from unknowingly to unwillingly, plays a part in the rise in global temperature two degrees celsius above average and that, if given the chance to think differently, we can act differently to change it. To the contrary, and in chorus with McCarthy and Auden, Szeman observes that as enlightened citizen-consumers of such climate change media, “we’re given no sense of how or even if we are supposed to use [this] knowledge for some form of political intervention.”47 Similarly, eco-subjects hailed by the Anthropocene have little options available. After all, as Chakrabarty notes, no individual subject is the species. What is often described as a failure of political will to reduce fossil fuel consumption or eliminate plastic waste is instead a structurally produced foreclosure on meaningful political redress by any individual. Once you listen to its story, eager for its fable’s instructions, you understand the tragedy of *Homo sapiens* to already be fixed. You might believe in climate change, but what can you do? You’re not the species.

### 3.1.c What’s a ploughman to do?

The degrees of removal between the subject hailed by the Anthropocene’s fabulous call to action, the liberal individual, and that called into being by its tragedy, the species, are many and politically prohibitive. For McCarthy’s U., this removal from the position of author and confinement to key-chain command takes root and becomes clearest to readers through his media immersion. The items that comprise his Great Report appear only via the screens of his phone, his laptop, projected video, photos, representations of representations. A similar

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media strata structures Auden’s ekphrasis: the event of the fall or its original telling, its my. 

thologization, its transcription, its multiple translations, its rendering in oil on wood, its relegation to the corner of the canvas, the loss of the painting’s date or author, museum spectatorship, the interpretation of the painting, the poem. Both “Musée des Beaux Arts” and Satin Island locate the individual subject (whether a reader, museum-goer or the canniest of anthropologists) on a different plane from the one where the world takes shape, at a distance of endless representations of representations.

Here, Icarus’s tragic streak fully eclipses its moralizing one: rather than interrupt, divert or right wrongs, we dwell in an “auto-alphaing and auto-omegaing script,” which permits regret, perhaps, but no deviation. Under the Anthropocene, there are no “slaves” and can be no freedom. From the final octave of Auden’s poem: “The ploughman may/Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry [of Icarus],/But for him it was not an important failure” — or maybe the ploughman does find the failure important, but even then, what’s a ploughman to do?

No ploughman is a species; every ploughman is an island. He is party to sublime processes orchestrated by no one. Everything is as it is, as it was always going to be. There is no action to speak of, no protagonist and setting. Within species history, we are all at best minor characters.

Relevant here is my epigraph from Shonkwiler and La Berge:

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48 It is uncertain whether Bruegel himself is responsible for the work, with undated and unsigned versions at Brussels’ Musée des Beaux-Arts and Musée David et Alice Van Buuren. Both are thought to be copies of an original lost work. See Yeazell, “The Power of a Name.”


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Whereas the postmodern emphasizes indeterminacy and ontological uncertainty, capitalist realism acknowledges the limitations of critique — even as it constantly seeks new avenues for it. Under capitalist realism the postmodern skepticism toward systems and paranoia about agency control give way, certainly not to a restored faith in systems but to a recognition of the ruling order of capitalism as both more banal and more encompassing.

Similar to Fisher’s description of capitalist realism as a politics of lowered expectations, here Shonkwiler and La Berge identify the eclipse of the postmodern encounter with capital: the horrifying denial of demystification that leads to a compulsive and self-admittedly never-ending search for demystification where the performance of the search provides the closest thing to subjection available. What succeeds postmodernism is the granting of demystification but only so it can quickly evacuate to make room for a sober, deflated abdication of the subjection such demystification implies. Capitalist realism has its demystification cake and eats it too, so to speak, “realiz[ing] market imperatives at an ideological level” regardless of our belief in them. Fossil capitalist realism, and specifically as it operates in the Anthropocene, does the same, admitting that industrial and postindustrial production is ecocidal just to absorb this reveal into a narrative that such production was guaranteed to happen back when we first learned to farm. The planet is dying, so please buy a reusable water bottle to partially repent for the species’ gas-guzzling DNA.

When Auden describes the figures in Bruegel’s painting as “eating” and “walking,” he underplays the artist’s depiction of figures in incipient capitalist production. In this aspect too the painting is instructive for thinking about the Anthropocene’s Icarus imaginary: preoccupied with the background splash, we miss the forest for the trees. Surely the mastery of fire or small-scale coal mining in previous millennia laid some technological groundwork
for global warming as we know it today. But to prioritize this component in the broader tableau of fossil fuel extraction is to look past the capitalist labor forms — preindustrial in Bruegel’s painting but soon to be industrialized and proletarianized by the introduction of fossil fuels — that dominate the scene. This analysis of climate change is available only via historical materialism, as we’ll find with a closer look at Chakrabarty’s touchstone essay.
3.2 “Omnipotent agent, ghost populations”

3.2.a Hyperobject realism

“The end of the world has already occurred,” writes Timothy Morton in *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. “We can be uncannily precise about the date on which the world ended,” he continues. “It was April 1784, when James Watt patented the steam engine, an act that commenced the depositing of carbon in Earth’s crust — namely, the inception of humanity as a geophysical force on a planetary scale.”50 A leading practitioner of object-oriented ontology, OOO, and speculative realism, Morton like the Anthropocenists here converts historical contingency into ontological fact by announcing a technology’s world-making, world-ending power.51 “Hyperobjects” like global warming are so “massively distributed in time and space” that they encase us in their realities rather than exist as the effects of subjects and systems.52 Though it is not lost on Morton that certain hyperobjects exist in relation to human activity and even specifically to capitalist modernity, he asserts that they precede recognition by the human, likewise an object within a “democracy of objects,” to borrow from fellow speculative realist Levi Bryant. “In an age


where flows and processes are PC,” OOO and speculative realism movement counterweigh
the more common normative ecophilosophy inspired by climate change and shorthanded
above as plastic bag taxes, carbon footprint calculators and exposé documentaries.53 OOO’s
counterweight to the approach taken by these subject-centered media lies in its refusal of
historical materialism’s lingering idealism in favor of the “zero-person perspective,” which
eschews an attitude of sublimity for one of sober melancholy and the “world” for a flat,
uncanny “mesh of strange strangeness.”54 Morton does not seek knowledge of objects but
mere “translation” of their withdrawn unknowability, taking his cue from quantum theory’s
study of matter and energy at the utmost isolable scale and, in Morton’s words, “the only
existing theory to establish firmly that things really do exist beyond our mind.”55 Despite this
investment in matter that “really do[es] exist,” he characterizes this method as a “realism, not
materialism.”56

This realism has a name: fetishism. In an exact counter-narrative to Morton’s account of
Watt’s engine, Malm highlights the incredible power of fetishism during the rise of steam
power, the Anthropocene’s preferred year zero:

Conceived as a class project, the engine was simultaneously — a slide typical
for ideology — imagined to be a blessing for humanity. 'It might be said to
have given a new power to the human race,' said a monument champion in
Edinburgh; it ‘has accomplished more than any other machine for the

53 Timothy Morton, “Here Comes Everything,” 165.


55 Timothy Morton, “Here Comes Everything”: 179.

56 Timothy Morton, “Here Comes Everything”: 179.
promotion of the comfort, convenience, and well-being of mankind’, claimed the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; it was more than a mechanical piece — ‘it may be said to be a great moral power. It will lead to important changes in the moral structure of society’, maintained manual author Hugo Redif; it was the apotheosis of civilization. In such excited prose, the interests and endeavors of the Freemason crowd — the actual bearers and owners of steam power — were obviously conflated with those of the human species as a whole.\textsuperscript{57}

Malm enumerates a litany of publications and events from the early 19th century that depicted steam as a boon for all of mankind with the aim of cloaking the otherwise naked profit motive of steam technology’s early investors.\textsuperscript{58} To obscure the material conditions required for steam production — a painstaking, forced transition from water and wind power involving the dispossession of independent mills and farmers alongside heavy state subsidization, all financed by Britain’s imperial exploits — these projects pictured coal-fueled steam as a combined angelic visitation, gift from God and mark of inexorable civilizational advancement. By sublimating a class agenda into a figure of the species, steam gained the popular ground necessary to justify the upward transfer of property that its development required.

From Malm: “Omnipotent agent, ghost population, the power always at hand: in all its multiple fetish guises, steam was perceived as a mechanical-cum-social power — and thus by definition central, not equally distributed over the surface of humanity: in the hands of

\textsuperscript{57} Andreas Malm, \textit{Fossil Capital} 206.

\textsuperscript{58} See especially chapter nine, “‘No Government but Fuel’: The Derivation of Power from Coal in Bourgeois Ideology,” in Andreas Malm, \textit{Fossil Capital}. 
some, to be wielded against others.”\textsuperscript{59} Steam’s institutionalization was anything but fated, and Morton’s invocation of Watt’s engine as the threshold of an ontological transit dehistoricizes the conditions of the fossil economy’s emergence as well as our own conditions of ecological crisis. The “mesh of strange strangeness” presented by global warming’s Hyperobject echoes Marx’s description of the commodity as enigmatic and secretive. While Morton’s account of objects attributes such mystery to the “really existing” material substrate named by quantum theory, Marx explains it through the commodity-form, which “reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves.”\textsuperscript{60} Steam, the steam engine, the fossil economy and fossil-fueled global warming do not make or unmake the world except through capitalist relations of production that direct productive forces in particular ways. The likewise fetishized treatment of the steam engine by proponents of the Anthropocene elides this as much as OOO.

Fetishism has characterized the fossil economy throughout its rise, expansion and consolidation, and the fetishization of petroleum has been perhaps even stronger than that of steam. Rochelle Raineri Zuck’s study of Abraham James, the “wizard” of oil exploration

\textsuperscript{59} Andreas Malm, \textit{Fossil Capital}: 217. Interestingly, Malm suggests that steam fetishism has an unusual character insofar as it “was worshipped for its utter lack of volition,” rather than having a life and agency of its own, as is typical of the fetish. He writes: “The engine was a mega-slave, passive and energetic… a perfectly docile and ductile laborer — no government but fuel: a sublime dream of crisis-ridden capitalists. … Steam was valued for having no ways of its own, no external laws, no residual existence outside that brought forth by its owners; it was absolutely, indeed ontologically subservient to those who possessed it. … The purpose of self-acting machinery — to reconsolidate power over labour — necessitated a prime mover over which capital could exercise absolute power while at the same time offering capital all the power it needed.” 215-216.

\textsuperscript{60} Karl Marx, \textit{Capital: Volume One}. New York: Penguin, 164-165.
in mid-19th century Pennsylvania, points to the intersection of geologic survey techniques, American city-on-a-hill discourse and psychometrics. For Zuck, oil’s imbrication within spiritualist discourses at the moment of its emergence laid the groundwork for its continued treatment as a miraculous substance with an agency and destiny beyond human control. Oil stretched and befuddled early industry scientific methods in its dual form as “a spiritual medium and a commodity,” giving new life to Marx’s dictum that the fetish possesses “a will and soul of [its] own.” Fernando Coronil’s landmark study The Magical State recounts the profound energy fetishism at work in postcolonial nation-building, arguing that state-controlled oil reserves materialized, following Benedict Anderson, the “imagined community” of early 20th century Venezuela. For Coronil, the petro-state acts as a “magnanimous sorcerer” interpellating the nation into a fantasy of unity and progress via “ownership of the nation’s natural body.” Andrew Apter and Michael Watts diagnose a similar spectacle dynamic in 1970s and 80s Nigeria, where oil rents simultaneously underwrote and contradicted the project of post-independence nationhood as is entered


neocolonial circuits of structural adjustment fed by a petroleum lifeblood. Despite important contextual differences, in each case the very stuff of fossil fuels is marshaled to support populist narratives of self-determination and destiny, collapsing a ruling class project with species providence, often through the figure of the nation-state. Across regimes of accumulation and the global expansion of capitalist production, steam, coal and oil have been discursively deployed as messiah of a common human destiny while all the while serving class war. In this sense, the fetishism at work in Morton's analysis or the broader Anthropocene imaginary it echoes is the same one that has historically supported the the fossil capitalist class.

### 3.2.b Beyond “shock” fetishism

As Malm’s archival work on early steam capitalism indicates, historical materialist accounts of the fossil economy abound despite the pervasive fossil fuel fetishism. The aforementioned introduction to *Materialism and the Critique of Energy* by Brent Ryan Bellamy and Jeff Diamanti is exemplary in this regard, providing new insight into the dually human and fossil energy forces that can be found in the “material origins of the commodity-form.” Another is Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptise Fressoz’s cheeky-titled *The Shock*

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of the Anthropocene, where they write, “We have in hand several histories of the Anthropocene that invite us to conceive in political terms the metabolisms of energy and matter commanded by those mechanisms — of production, exchange and consumption — that were invented and imposed by quite particular groups, imaginaries and institutions, and in specific circumstances.”67 Even while highlighting the contribution of specific technological developments to modern carbon energy use and resultant climate change, Bonneuil and Fressoz assert that the environmental impact of such developments are contingent upon the social and political formations in which they emerge and through which they become hegemonic, all of which operate within and for capital: “military apparatuses, the system of consumerist desire and its infrastructure, the gaps of income and wealth, the energy majors and the financial interests of globalization, the technoscientific apparatuses when these work in commodity logics or silence criticisms and alternatives.”68 As another example, much like Coronil and Apter, Christian Parenti spotlights the role of the state among these institutions that facilitate and enforce fossil capital extraction:

The capitalist state has always been an inherently environmental entity… Just as capital does not have a relationship to nature but rather is a relationship to nature, so too is that relationship always also a relationship with the state, and mediated through the state. To put it even more directly: the state does not have a relationship with nature, it is a relationship with nature because the web of life and its metabolism — including the economy — exist upon the surface of the earth, and because the state is a fundamentally territorial institution. … It is the state that delivers nonhuman nature’s use values to capital. More specifically, the modern state’s territoriality delivers nonhuman nature to capital accumulation by way of its place-based property regimes, its

production of infrastructure, and its scientific and intellectual practices that make nonhuman nature legible and thus accessible.69

A similar emphasis on the territorial state drives Glen Coulthard’s Red Skin, White Masks, which draws together primitive accumulation, the settler colony form, environmental degradation and the fossil economy into a Borromean knot of “extractivist capitalist” modernity.70 “Territoriality is settler colonialism’s specific, irreducible element,” Coulthard writes, arguing that anticapitalist, anticolonial politics must be fundamentally land-based and center the repossession of the means of production and reorganization of labor power rather than altering consumption habits or seeking recognition from the settler colonial state.71 The case of contemporary Canadian petroculture makes this plain — Trudeau’s multiculturalism and recognition politics aestheticize rather than redress the colonial violence of tar sands development and broader, ongoing First Nations dispossession.


71 Here Coulthard quotes Patrick Wolfe (7). Coulthard’s work answers Coronil’s call, following Henri Lefebvre: “A resignified nature allows us to include in our historical accounts not just a more diversified set of historical actors but a more complex historical dynamic. It enables us to replace what Lefebvre refers to as the ‘ossified’ dialectic of capital and labor by a dialectic of capital, labor, and land (by land, following Marx, he means not only the powers of nature but also the agents associated with it, including the state as sovereign over a national territory).” Fernando Coronil, 7-8.
The intervention that these critics make into the technology fetishism discourses of the Anthropocene or Hyperobjects is the same one that Marx makes into Hegelian idealism, namely, the introduction of labor as primary analytic unit for the study of history.

“Omnipotent agent, ghost population”: what is missing from the Icarus narrative of always-already-too-late-to-stop-from-falling is an account of the “ghost population” whose proletarianization and continued disciplining over the past few centuries has been secured by the fossil fueling of production. Steam power is fetishized as a Hyperobject and species providence much as labor power is fetishized via the commodity-form, appearing to “give rise to itself,” returning to McCarthy, when indeed it acquires productive force only through capitalist relations. As the “ur-commodity” through which all other commodities become possible, fossil fuels appear as the ontological condition of Homo pyrophilis. Through this tragic Anthropocene hero, fossil modernity’s necromantic character (quite literally in the case of carbon energy’s compressed, dead biotic substance) continues and may even gain further license from global warming, riding its own unstoppable fetishism wave.

To stop and take stock: climate change’s “historical substance,” per Malm — the dispossession of a global working class by a fossil-fueled, capitalist mode of production — is commonly sublimated into a story of species destiny, or into the twin fate analysis of climate change offered by object-oriented and speculative realist methods. Modernity, postmodernity, capitalist reality: stages in a class project that feign universality and

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predetermination each in their own way. Global warming does not so much admit an
ontological fact (a way of talking about fate) as pose a historical question (a way of talking
about power). In supposing the former, the fable-tragedy narrative structure of the
Anthropocene obscures the latter.
3.3 Poetics of evasion

3.3.a “Another, substitute language”

Toni Morrison’s concept of literary evasion helpfully explains this process whereby the figure of species distracts from the productive relations actually responsible for global warming. In Playing in the Dark (1992), Morrison argues that US literature’s preoccupation with “the architecture of a new white man” takes shape around a muted Africanist presence. The cultural construction of white freedom and identity requires an a priori Blackness to rhetorically sustain itself, and the ideological work of this Blackness is to both naturalize white supremacy and detach it from the material conditions of US empire. She writes that “race has become metaphorical — a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological ‘race’ ever was.” She describes this Africanist tic as a poetics of evasion, which offers “another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate.” She goes on:

As a disabling virus within literary discourse, Africanism has become, in the Eurocentric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability. Through the simple expedient of demonizing and reifying the range of color on a palette, American Africanism makes it possible to say

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74 Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: 63.

75 Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: 9.
and not say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless.\footnote{76} Morrison’s objects are primarily novels of the US literary canon. Playing in the Dark is built around examinations of Hemingway, Cather, Poe and Twain, among others. In this section, I borrow the concept of evasion that she draws from these writers to read the aforementioned “The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives” by Steffen et al and Chakrabarty’s “The Climate of History,” performing something like a symptomatic reading of the critical literature on climate change. In keeping with my examination of the Icarus myth’s structuring presence in Anthropocene, I am interested in what Marxist literary analysis brings out of this body of work. Following Morrison, I believe there is something of a “historical presence,” so to speak, in the Anthropocene’s species fixation that has a similar “disabling” effect, allowing academics “to say and not say, to inscribe and erase” the historical character of climate change.

Taken side by side, Steffen et al and Chakrabarty’s articles represent two different versions of this same phenomenon. An examination of both texts reveals the muted structural role that a historical materialist analysis of climate change plays in the Anthropocene’s species fate narrative, something like Jameson’s “vanishing mediator.”\footnote{77} These texts build from research like Crutzen and Stoermer’s that forms the scientific foundation of Anthropocene, offering further scientific, social scientific and humanistic insight — Steffen’s team is comprised of scholars from a Climate Change Institute, a Graduate Institute of

\footnote{76} Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: 7.

International and Development Studies, an Institute for Chemistry and Georgetown’s School of Foreign Service, and Chakrabarty is a historian. This multi- and interdisciplinarity makes the similarity between the arguments particularly interesting: the “conceptual and historical perspectives” provided by Steffen’s social science co-writers confirm the Anthropocene’s scientific foundation, and Chakrabarty’s humanist method ultimately confirms the interdisciplinary one of Steffen et al, rather than critique it by way of historical, structuralist or poststructuralist analysis. The two arguments converge on the same point of species, which accommodates all manner of disciplinary routes one might take to get to it. As an object of scholarly inquiry, the Anthropocene subsumes methodological difference fundamental to the division between the sciences and humanities, part of which is the latter’s interest in historicizing and interpreting the former to determine its assumptions and consequences. I will take up the interdisciplinarity here on display as one example of a broader phenomenon in university research on energy and environment in my conclusion, but it is worth remarking here that such interdisciplinarity is at the heart of the Anthropocene, the fate yarn it spins and its post-critical analysis of fossil capitalist-driven climate change.

In “The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives,” the historical presence appears sometimes as a cursory reference to the unequal responsibility and burden borne by the Global North and Global South regarding climate change. Such inequalities are alternately raised without comment, raised without analysis, or raised in a nominal

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78 The authors’ instituted affiliations are listed as: Will Steffen, Climate Change Institute, The Australian National University; Jacques Grinevald, Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, University of Geneva; Paul Crutzen, Max Planck Institute for Chemistry; John McNeill, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University.
methodological embrace but then qualified or regretfully dismissed in the name of something like pragmatism. In the case of Chakrabarty, he examines global warming and climate change using a variety of subject-driven and historical humanist frameworks — and quite sharply — before ultimately finding them inadequate to the task of theorizing the Anthropocene, which unsettles the timescale and related understanding of subjectivity upon which his critical method relies. Note that here I distinguish between two objects in Chakrabarty’s analysis: global warming and/or climate change can be subjected to Marxist and postcolonial critique; the Anthropocene nullifies them and the subject of history at their center. Thus enters the species, available and amenable to containing fossil capital and fossil-fueled environmental crisis’s contradicting realities.

3.3.b Analysis of “The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives”

As the first of three examples I will pull from Steffen et al’s essay, on the uneven distribution of carbon emissions under the Great Acceleration, the authors write,

While it is clear that the Great Acceleration of the 1945 – 2000 period was almost entirely driven by the OECD countries [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, whose founding members were the United States, Canada and several European states], representing a small fraction of the world’s population, the Great Acceleration of the twenty-first century has become much more democratic. … From a long-term perspective, developing countries have accounted for only about 20 per cent of the total, cumulative emissions since 1751, but contain about 80 per cent of the world’s population. The world’s poorest countries, with a combined population of about 800 million people, have contributed less than 1 per cent of the cumulative CO2 emissions since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. However, the most recent data in the figure show the dramatic changes over the past decade. For 2004, the emissions from developing countries had grown to over 40 per cent of the world total, and the
emissions growth rate, based on a 5-year smoothed average for the 2000–2004 period, show that emissions from China and India have grown much more rapidly than those of the OECD countries and the former Soviet Union.  

Here, Steffen et al point to an asymmetry between Global North and Global South that can only be described as staggering: between 1751 and 2000, 80% of the world’s population contributed only 20% of total emissions, with the poorest contributing less than 1%. I should note that it’s a mistake to track carbon emissions by nation-state and correlate such emissions data only to national population rather than to the national origin of the capital tied up in its production sites — not every garment factory in Thailand is owned by a Thai citizen and not every oil well in Nigeria is pumped by a Nigerian oil company, so why measure their emissions as only Thai and Nigerian? Nonetheless, even this somewhat distorted data analysis paints a clear picture of fossil capital’s colonial map. Those parties at the head of Economic Cooperation and Development bear the most severe carbon footprint by a mile, indicating that it is precisely such Development that drives emissions beyond Holocene parameters. Yet, a pregnant “However” from the authors quickly undercuts this materialist analysis. They shift attention from this “long-term perspective” to what they elsewhere term the “more democratic” arrangement of the twenty-first century, when fossil fuel consumption in China and India but also Brazil, South Africa and Indonesia begins to rival that of the Global North. These BRIC+ nations demonstrate a higher rate of growth than their OECD counterparts, a “dramatic change” that suggests we allocate responsibility for carbon emissions across all of these players rather than point fingers at the “long-term” culprits — though one would think the “long-term” would be of prevailing

interest to the Anthropocene’s geologic timescale. Capitalism as the organizing principle of these processes must be sublimated through such designations as “developed” and “developing,” “the OECD countries,” “the world’s poorest countries” and “China and India.” This last pair is the linchpin to the fantasy of a unified species: in pointing to China and India’s trailing of the march of progress, left out of imperial accumulation but now “growing much more rapidly” than Europe and the US, the authors both nod to uneven and combined development as well as construct in the reader’s mind a united fellowship of nations moving together toward a single (ever-warming) future.

As a second example, on the industrialization that initiates these emissions trends, Steffen et al write,

[The industrial revolution] was undoubtedly one of the great transitions — and up to now the most significant — in the development of the human enterprise. The underlying reasons for the transition were probably complex and interacting, including resource constraints in some areas, evolving social and political structures that unlocked innovative new thinking, and the beginnings of a new economic order that emphasized markets.

Industrialization is “undoubtedly” a big deal, but there is no need to study its “underlying reasons” short of noting that they were “probably complex and interacting” and citing a

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single source in the footnote that accompanies this vague and massive claim. Before industrialism, we lived in “a world dominated by a growing energy bottleneck,” the authors go on to say. “The discovery and exploitation of fossil fuels shattered that bottleneck.” A bottleneck to what? What exactly did solar, wind, water, wood and small-scale fossil extraction like in Song dynasty China stand in the way of? Despite this compulsory reference to industrialization’s roots (which they indeed qualify as British), the authors presuppose a transhistorical force urging a change in energy expenditure from the largely renewable economies of premodernity to “shatter[ing]” growth under fossil capital. Likewise in their treatment of the Great Acceleration — which in addition to identifying inequalities between Global North and Global South specifically points to the economic infrastructure of Bretton Woods and lending practices that integrated the postwar world order, despite or through Cold War conflict — the authors maintain fidelity to “the human enterprise,” the Anthropocene’s simultaneous cause and effect. Per Morrison, their language works “to historicize and render timeless” the marginalization of premodern forms of production and reproduction via fossil capital.

As my final example from Steffen et al’s argument, the article’s Figure 1 (included below) contains a most illuminating series of charts. Foreign direct investment, GDP, motor vehicle transport, fertilizer consumption and, my personal favorite, the number of McDonald’s restaurants appear indistinguishable, inextricable from CO2 and CH4 concentration, terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, ozone depletion and biodiversity decline. The article offers these two sets of charts as one single figure, but together they form a mirror between

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economy and environment. Each of the phenomena depicted is evidently commensurable, and they beg us to identify what unidentified variable renders them so formally consistent. But, rather than measure them against an x-axis value more material and dynamic than the mere passage of time, Steffen et al use each chart simply to validate the others. Altogether, they indicate only that “the Earth system has … moved outside the envelope of Holocene variability.”

If this is the only conclusion to be drawn, why include data on telecommunications and FDI? Why not just marshal the atmosphere and ecosystem data necessary to claim a GSSP for a new post-Holocene epoch? In measuring such a thing as international tourism or paper consumption against time — as Walter Benjamin would put it, “homogeneous, empty time” — it appears merely parallel to the other charted phenomena, not similarly symptomatic of an underlying logic or force; it is Hyperobject, not history; Great Report, not conspiracy; or, per Deleuze, the charts are “ontologically one, formally diverse.” Even with their narrations of industrialism and the Great Acceleration, 1800 is just a number, as is 1950. The authors certainly would not stipulate that the common “hockey stick” shape of these graphs is coincidence, but neither do they name the connective tissue that binds together the phenomena they chart. If this shape is only correlated by passing time, it is as if causality is given up, or dispersed into “complex and interacting” sources that need not be named. Together, such data appear as merely the destiny of “the human enterprise.” Who cares when or where: the parachutist was always going to die.

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Graph from “The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives” (2011)
Hovering around the preponderant page space given to explicitly scientific measures of climate change is a historical presence that provides structure and coherence to what would otherwise be a jumble of parts per million, acreage loss and degrees celsius. To tell their story, Steffen et al must appeal to historical phenomena familiar to students of empire. However, to maintain this story, they must dismiss these phenomena in their full historical, and thus political, weight. They neglect to investigate the conditions for industrialization laid by extraction and dispossession across the Global South and the formation of an urban proletariat in the Global North; the radically unequal distribution of economic activity both among nations and within each of them along class and race lines; the role of environmental-political actors other than nations, specifically fossil fuel corporations that are often indistinguishable from the state; all of which represent material conditions for human and nonhuman life across the planet that were deliberately, painstakingly constructed rather than emerged spontaneously, as if fated. Invoked and dismissed again and again, this historical presence is structurally necessary but also unspeakable.

3.3.c Analysis of “The Climate of History”

If Steffen et al are far from the historical sun — their analysis of climate change stopping short of its historical conditions, but merely identifying social trends that accompany it — Chakrabarty’s “The Climate of History” is at perihelion. In this landmark essay, which Chakrabarty has since qualified and added to in subsequent publications, he assesses the capacity of prevailing historical methods to understand subjectivity in its simultaneously
historical and geologic form. What I understand to be the guiding questions of Chakrabarty’s essay are, in his own words: “If, indeed, globalization and global warming are born of overlapping processes, the question is, How do we bring them together in our understanding of the world?” and “How does the crisis of climate change appeal to our sense of human universals while challenging at the same time our capacity for historical understanding?” Chakrabarty argues that though Marxist and postcolonial criticism allow historians to diagnose the violences and inequalities of modernity that constitute climate change, they remain ill-equipped to theorize from the vantage point of the geologic agency spelled by the Anthropocene:

Capitalist globalization exists; so should its critiques. But these critiques do not give us an adequate hold on human history once we accept that the crisis of climate change is here with us and may exist as part of this planet for much longer than capitalism or long after capitalism has undergone many more historic mutations. The problematic of globalization allows us to read climate change only as a crisis of capitalist management. While there is no denying that climate change has profoundly to do with the history of capital, a critique that is only a critique of capital is not sufficient for addressing questions relating to human history once the crisis of climate change has been acknowledged and the Anthropocene has begun to loom on the horizon of our present. The geologic now of the Anthropocene has become entangled with the now of human history.

Unlike Steffen et al, from the likes of whom Chakrabarty draws much of his scientific material, the histories of capital and climate are for Chakrabarty intimately “conjoined”

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rather than incidental or covalent with the human species. It is not lost on him that the unequal distribution of responsibility for carbon emissions reaches variations in individual human impact as severe as 1000 to 1 and that such inequalities are historically conditioned rather than inevitable or inborn. Yet despite this historical materialist analysis, Chakrabarty asserts that the Anthropocene reveals the “age-old humanist distinction” between natural and human histories to be a modern fiction, residual Holocene thinking. Modernity’s subject and its raison d’être, freedom — the organizing ideal for both imperial forms of knowledge and their critics — is bound up with an ecological regime of mass production, mass transportation and, now, mass climatic destabilization. For Chakrabarty, modes of thought that preserve this subject — however interrogated and qualified by subaltern studies and postcolonial critique, as well as feminist and other postmodern critical lenses — are thus inadequate to the task of historical knowledge-making in the Anthropocene. As he writes, “This critique that sees humanity as an effect of power is, of course, valuable for all the hermeneutics of suspicion that it has taught postcolonial scholarship. It is an effective critical tool in dealing with national and global formations of domination. But I do not find it adequate in dealing with the crisis of global warming.” The study of history as a humanist project may identify the historical roots and casualties of anthropogenic climate change — uncovering the reality hidden by ideology — but it cannot theorize geologic agency. Capitalism relies on steam-power, but critique has run out of it.

The only recourse for the humanist, says Chakrabarty, is the species. Chakrabarty does not arrive at this conclusion easily. He is at pains to clarify to his readers that the species is the

89 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History”: 221.
intellectually necessary subject position of the Anthropocene despite its admitted political risks. I quote at length:

Yet doubts linger about the use of the idea of species in the context of climate change, and it would be good to deal with one that can easily arise among critics on the Left. One could object, for instance, that all the anthropogenic factors contributing to global warming — the burning of fossil fuel, industrialization of animal stock, the clearing of tropical and other forests, and so on — are after all part of a larger story: the unfolding of capitalism in the West and the imperial or quasi-imperial domination by the West of the rest of the world. … If this is broadly true, then does not the talk of species or mankind simply serve to hide the reality of capitalist production and the logic of imperial — formal, informal, or machinic in a Deleuzian sense — domination that it fosters? Why should one include the poor of the world — whose carbon footprint is small anyway — by use of such all-inclusive terms as species or mankind when the blame for the current crisis should be squarely laid at the door of the rich nations in the first place and of the richer classes in the poorer ones? … It is understandable that the biological-sounding talk of species should worry historians. They feel concerned about their finely honed sense of contingency and freedom in human affairs having to cede ground to a more deterministic view of the world. Besides, there are always, as Smail recognizes, dangerous historical examples of the political use of biology. The idea of species, it is feared, in addition, may introduce a powerful degree of essentialism in our understanding of humans.  

The global working class has neither directed fossil capital nor contributed to its carbon emissions, and a biological concept like the species lends itself to determinism, essentialism and, as history shows, the justification of political violence, mostly against precisely those groups that have been excluded from fossil capital’s carbon intensive lifestyles. How does Chakrabarty dig himself out of this hole? How does “species” win the terminological day?

Squaring his analysis’s grounding critique of capital with its capital-agnostic solution of “species,” Chakrabarty’s poetics of evasion takes several forms, three of which pertain to the tragedy-fable’s non-realist narrative structure — its plot, setting and characters. A last example of the historical presence in Chakrabarty’s essay builds on the cascading inoculations in the previous block quote and provides an excellent segue into the next chapter on New Materialism, where we will see Jane Bennett follow Chakrabarty in employing a specific hermeneutics of suspicion just to take a stand against it in the name of environmental crisis and a generalized crisis of subjeecthood.

The basic plot structure of Chakrabarty’s Anthropocene is one we’ve seen before.

Chakrabarty writes that the species has “tumbled,” “stumbled,” “slid” and “fallen” into climate change, an “unintended,” “unwitting” and “unfortunate” consequence of industrialization. In this representation of climate change, the fable-tragedy turns on a moment of awakening marked by Crutzen and Stoermer’s introduction of the term “Anthropocene” and in which Chakrabarty invites us to share. This plot of the unintended, inevitable Homo pyrophilis reproduces Icarus (splash) and the parachutist (splat) and trades on the same “shock” that Bonneuil and Fressoz identify in their Shock of the Anthropocene.

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91 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History”: “Human beings have tumbled into being a geologic agent through our own decisions” (210); “we have stumbled into it [the Anthropocene]” (217); “we have slid into a state of things that forces on us a recognition of some of the parametric (that is, boundary) conditions for the existence of institutions central to our idea of modernity and the meanings we derive from them” (217); “scientists’ discovery of the fact that human beings have in the process become a geologic agent points to a shared catastrophe that we have all fallen into” (218); “climate change is an unintended consequence of human actions and shows, only through scientific analysis, the effects of our actions as a species” (221); “in unwittingly destroying the artificial but time-honored distinction between natural and human histories… the human being has become something much larger than the simple biological agent that he or she always has been” (206); “unfortunately, we have now ourselves become a geologic agent” (218).
The setting for this plot is deep time, extending far into the past and far into the future, a geohistorical purview that eclipses fossil capital’s origins and consequences. By putting contemporary environmental crisis in the context of the Holocene, whose geophysical parameters permitted the agricultural and industrial development that now exceed them, the Anthropocene casts modernity in a new ontological light: it is an effect of the end of the Ice Age, conditioned geologically, not historically.

‘There can be little doubt,’ writes one of the editors of *Humans at the End of the Ice Age*, ‘that the basic phenomenon—the waning of the Ice Age—was the result of the Milankovich phenomena: the orbital and tilt relationships between the Earth and the Sun.’ The temperature of the planet stabilized within a zone that allowed grass to grow. Barley and wheat are among the oldest of such grasses. Without this lucky ‘long summer’ or what one climate scientist has called an ‘extraordinary’ ‘fluke’ of nature in the history of the planet, our industrial-agricultural way of life would not have been possible.92

The Milankovich phenomena: a pretty strong “disabling virus” against the puny purview of capital and its critique. As in the Anthropocene date debates previously discussed, while mass fossil fuel extraction may be a necessary condition of global warming, the post-Ice Age “long summer” is sufficient. From this mythic register of Chakrabarty’s backward glance, he acquires a certain science fiction or climate fiction sensibility looking toward the future. The scale of destruction promised by the Anthropocene ultimately levels the inequalities of empire: “Unlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged (witness the drought in Australia or recent fires in the wealthy neighborhoods of

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Fossil capitalist global warming will collapse fossil capital in an ultimate unifying contradiction, so why theorize as if fossil capital will go on forever? Only global warming will. Altogether, capitalism is overridden first on the front end as a “basic” precondition of anthropogenic climate change — which, accounting for the Ice Age and the Earth’s tilt, appears to be simply the Holocene’s climate — and then additionally overridden at the back end as it concerns climate change’s effects, which, rather than raise all boats as markets have always promised, will allegedly sink them equally.

In the case of character, the historical presence in Chakrabarty’s article takes an inverse form as that in that of Steffen et al. Because Chakrabarty’s argument is centrally concerned with the question of historical knowledge-making, rather than scaffold the Anthropocene with muted historical materialist analysis, Chakrabarty offers what appears to be historical materialism but which is ultimately already contained within a species imaginary. While his argument begins by employing the “we” of his discipline, it shifts unannounced to a “we” of a singular, if internally varied, human species.

For the first ten pages of the essay, appropriate to Chakrabarty’s interest in how climate change “challenges … our capacity for historical understanding,” his use of the pronoun “we” refers to historians. He writes, as examples, “We normally envisage the future with the

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93 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History”: 221. A decade after this essay was published, Kim Kardashian and Kanye West hired private firefighters to protect their home while much of southern California burned in wildfires. I cannot hold Chakrabarty responsible for not foreseeing this specific scandal, but it marks a dark continuation rather than a rupture from the neoliberal privatization of basic goods and services. It and parallel cases of radically unequal disaster preparedness and relief across the US are never altogether unexpected.
help of the same faculty that allows us to picture the past”; “We could begin with the old Viconian-Hobbesian idea…”; “If, indeed, globalization and global warming are born of overlapping processes… how do we bring them together in our understanding of the world?” This “we” is certainly not the lay reader, the average individual, but the climate-minded historian or critic seeking a method for Anthropocenic times, times that may stretch or undo fundamental assumptions of the discipline. Chakrabarty is writing for this “we,” to develop such a method and parse its implications. Then, a switch occurs:

To call human beings geologic agents is to scale up our imagination of the human. Humans are biological agents, both collectively and as individuals. They have always been so. There was no point in human history when humans were not biological agents. But we can become geologic agents only historically and collectively, that is, when we have reached numbers and invented technologies that are on a scale large enough to have an impact on the planet itself.

This final “we” does not designate the earlier “we” of Chakrabarty’s fellow scholars and interlocutors but rather the “we” of “human beings.” This transition in character manifests in a syntactic transition from the “they” of biological agents observed by the “we” of historians’ “imagination” to a “we” which encompasses both of these groups under geologic agency. This species “we” then takes the wheel: “We seem to be currently going through that kind of a period [of species extinction]”; “what we today think of as the institutions of civilization—the beginnings of agriculture, the founding of cities, the rise of the religions we know, the invention of writing— began about ten thousand years ago”, “The Holocene

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94 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History”: “We normally envisage the future…” (197); “We could begin with the old Viconian-Hobbesian idea…” (201); “If, indeed, globalization and global warming…” (200).

is the period we are supposed to be in”; “some scientists have proposed that we recognize
the beginning of a new geologic era”; “Is the geologic agency of humans the price we pay
for the pursuit of freedom?”; “in the era of the Anthropocene, we need the Enlightenment
(that is, reason) even more than in the past.”

This “we” is not merely seeking
methodological clarity. It is a “we” witnessing species extinction, a “we” still enamored with
a concept of “civilization,” a “we” living in the Holocene, a “we” pursuing freedom at high
environmental cost, a “we” concerned with the pragmatics of climate change governance
and desperate for Enlightenment reason to slip the drag of realpolitik.

Chakrabarty goes on, oscillating between the “we” of historians and the “we” of an
undifferentiated, universal mankind, before formally introducing the notion of “species” in
his third of four theses: “The Geologic Hypothesis Regarding the Anthropocene Requires
Us to Put Global Histories of Capital in Conversation with the Species History of Humans.”

By this point, however, the “disabling virus” of implied species-hood has already infected
Chakrabarty’s ostensibly historical engagement. His readers already intuited to this species
“we” after several pages of its implicit or explicit articulation, because the Anthropocene is
less the conclusion of his argument about the historian’s task under climate change than its
very premise. When Chakrabarty drops what would otherwise be a bomb — “we have now
ourselves become a geologic agent disturbing these parametric conditions needed for our

96 Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History”: “We seem to be currently going
through…” (207); “what we today think of as the institutions of civilization…” (208); “… the period we are supposed to be in” (208); “some scientists have proposed that we recognize…” (209); “Is the geologic agency of humans the price we pay…” (210); “in the era of the Anthropocene, we need the Enlightenment…” (211).
own existence” — the “we” of species-being has already been established just so that it can be finally introduced.97

When Chakrabarty stages the difficulty of imagining ourselves as a species — the crux of the provocation his essay makes and central to its continued citation and teaching — it therefore rings false:

Who is the we? We humans never experience ourselves as a species. We can only intellectually comprehend or infer the existence of the human species but never experience it as such. There could be no phenomenology of us as a species. Even if we were to emotionally identify with a word like mankind, we would not know what being a species is, for, in species history, humans are only an instance of the concept species as indeed would be any other life form. But one never experiences being a concept.98

Chakrabarty’s rhetorical finesse has already inured us to this experience of species-being. The species perspective the reader inhabits while reading allows such throw-away phrases as “we may collectively end up making some unreasonable choices [about environmental governance]” appear innocuous when they actually designate something far more insidious: the “we” making “unreasonable choices” is neither historians nor a genuinely collective body but the fossil capitalist class.99 The species becomes Chakrabarty’s own version of “the human enterprise,” justified by the same evasive technique of historical presence as Steffen et al.

3.3.d “Species” and the tautology of post-critique

At the end of the day, Chakrabarty both undermines and renders bulletproof his argument for the species as the subject of historical knowledge making under the Anthropocene. As my final note in this chapter, and with an eye on my upcoming discussion of New Materialism, Chakrabarty uses subject-based and suspicion-driven critical methods only to turn them against themselves in his embrace of the species. As part of his preemptive defense against readers who “doubt” and “worry” at “the biological-sounding talk of species,” Chakrabarty writes,

> It is clear that different academic disciplines position their practitioners differently with regard to the question of how to view the human being. All disciplines have to create their objects of study. If medicine or biology reduces the human to a certain specific understanding of him or her, humanist historians often do not realize that the protagonists of their stories — persons — are reductions, too. Absent personhood, there is no human subject of history. … An object of critical importance to humanists of all traditions, personhood is nevertheless no less of a reduction of or an abstraction from the embodied and whole human being than, say, the human skeleton discussed in an anatomy class.

> The crisis of climate change calls on academics to rise above their disciplinary prejudices, for it is a crisis of many dimensions. In that context, it is interesting to observe the role that the category of species has begun to play among scholars, including economists, who have already gone further than historians in investigating and explaining the nature of this crisis.100

Everything is a reduction; everything is a discursive formation. Children of postmodernism know this, and so humanists must set aside both any commitment to a pre-capitalist “reality” or first principle like Nature or the Unconscious as well as the well-established, well-

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rehearsed historical contingency of language to join their colleagues in economics and elsewhere in solving the climate crisis. We’re all members of the same species, after all.\textsuperscript{101} In this bizarre passage, “species” is all but identical to “human nature” but made palatable for those whom critique has taught, and rightly so, to be suspicious about talk of nature, essentialism or truth. It substitutes contingent historical conditions for apparently contingent geologic ones so that “species” can appear less transhistorical than its ideological predecessors. Simultaneously, Chakrabarty reminds us all that we can’t avoid terms altogether. Personhood, species, we have to pick something. If not in the emergency of climate change, when?

Global warming, climate change and the Anthropocene are discursive formations for actually existing phenomena, and mostly the same phenomena: global warming, the rise in atmospheric CO2 and attendant rise in global temperatures; climate change, these emissions along with deforestation, water pollution, coastal erosion and other widespread environmental damage; the Anthropocene, all these as they occur on a geologic timescale at the hand of the \textit{Anthropos}. In this interpretation, the Anthropocene acquires a material history and weight that differentiate the story it tells from the stories told by global warming

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{101} “OOO shares one thing at least with deconstruction — refraining from assertions about some general essence or substance at the back of things that guarantees their existence. The lack of a big Other means that OOO can’t cleave to Nature. It also means that OOO can’t cleave to Matter, if by that we mean something like what Mr. Spock means when he claims to have found ‘Matter without form.’ OOO is troubling for materialisms that rely on any kind of substrate, whether it consists of discrete atoms or of a continuum. Materialism lopes along hampered by a Newtonian-Cartesian atomistic mechanism on the one hand and the formless goo of Spinoza on the other.” Timothy Morton, “Here Comes Everything”: 178-179.}
The species is, as Chakrabarty notes, “a concept,” a leap taken from climate science and the critique of fossil capital into fossil capitalist realism.

What I want to argue is not simply that Chakrabarty is mystified by fossil capital, or that anyone is, really. The real of fossil capital does not hide undiscovered beneath the ideological veneer of the Anthropocene and the species. To the contrary, I have made plain that Chakrabarty thoroughly engages and embraces the Marxist and postcolonial traditions that interpret climate change as the result of fossil capital, though before Malm would coin the term. Chakrabarty’s simultaneous embrace and deflection of historical materialism rather allows for the competing realities of fossil capital and global warming to exist side-by-side, neither obscuring the other. The Anthropocene and its species actor is “the simple expedient,” per Morrison, for balancing this post-ideological state of affairs, to critique capital but doubt any political yield from this critique and so to all but explicitly endorse capital’s reality. Capitalist realism names the replacement of ideology with a cultural mode of lowered expectations, where ideology and production exist on the same self-evident plane rather than relate vertically so that subjects will continue to believe in a system that deceives them. This puts suspicion in a bind, and encourages critique to critique itself and adopt capital’s own terms and conditions. The Anthropocene, as a part of fossil capitalist realism, can win geologists and postcolonial scholars alike by offering the lessons of demystification and their quick dismissal — in the name of the species, in the name of crisis, in the name of

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102 This is not to downplay the material history of the climate change, which emerged initially as a US right-wing downplay of the fossil-fueled rise in temperatures. The term has largely shed this connotative baggage in the university.
putting aside our “disciplinary prejudices” to solve, however unspecified this solution, climate change.
4. Vibrant Naturalism: The Ecocritic and Literary Technique

“The grounding of materialism in one or another conception of matter is rather the hallmark of bourgeois ideology from the eighteenth-century materialisms all the way to nineteenth-century positivism and determinism.”

Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*1

“Some one hundred years after the Romantics, now well into the biopolitical age, the generic mutation of ‘naturalism’ evinces on its discursive surface an urban setting explicitly modeled upon the biopolitical concept of the ‘environment’ as a calculable milieu. Naturalism, we might say, is a breakthrough genre that introduces both population and environment simultaneously into its literature, taking for the first time the ‘built environment’ of urban life as a kind of ecological system that has quantifiable consequences for the populations that live within it.”

Leerom Medovoi, “The Biopolitical Unconscious”2

Georg Lukács opens his 1936 essay “Narrate or Describe?” with a side-by-side comparison of scenes of the horse races in Zola’s *Nana* and Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*. Despite nearly identical subject matter and a shared investment in verisimilitude, Zola and Tolstoy offer strikingly different depictions of the races. Although in Zola’s novel “every possible detail at a race is described precisely, colorfully and with sensuous vitality,” Lukács finds that “for all

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its virtuosity the description is mere filler in the novel.”3 There is coincidence (a horse is, too, named Nana) and intrigue (a betting fraud scheme), but these events are only “loosely related to the plot and could easily be eliminated”: all occurs as if by chance or by fate, and culminates no latent plot thread nor manifests any underlying purpose or desire in the characters.4

In Anna Karenina, by contrast, “the race represents the crisis in a great drama.” Like Zola in Nana, Tolstoy offers a mimetic depiction of the environment, but one which crucially interlocks environment with characters and events rather than depict them as only “loosely related.” Lukács writes that in Anna Karenina, “the relationships of the protagonists enter a new critical phase because of the race. The race is thus no mere tableau but rather a series of intensely dramatic scenes which provide a turning point in the plot.”5 Setting, character and plot mutually constitute; none are eliminable; methodical attention their interrelation is at the core of the novel’s representation of the world. The same itemized environments that provide “mere filler” in Nana provide critical context and fodder for character development, drama and world-building in Anna Karenina. Lukács observes the same interaction in works by Balzac: “Balzac’s extraordinarily multifaceted, complicated characterizations could not possibly emerge with such impressive dramatic effectiveness if the environmental conditions in their lives were not depicted in such breadth.”6

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4 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 110.

5 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 110-111.

6 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 118.
Lukács neatly outlines the “absolute divergence” in approach that produces these two effects: “In Zola the race is described from the standpoint of an observer; in Tolstoy, it is narrated from the standpoint of a participant.” For Lukács, this description is the mark of naturalism, which presents capitalist reality, however regretfully, “as social facts, as results, as caput mortuum of a social process.” For the naturalist, capitalist modernity evacuates agency and predetermines all lots in life, and so too must its mimetic representation: the drama of characters and settings amount to “lifeless, fetishized objects [] whisked about in an amorphous atmosphere,” where “the final victory of capitalist inhumanity is always anticipated.” Narration, on the other hand, is the technique of realism, which inherits from epic art the representation of “significant and vital aspects of social practice,” the discernment of its conditions, actions, contingencies and constraints. Realism captures the how of social process that the naturalist simply represents as a what, interpreting agency and its varying availability to characters and communities amid varying historical conditions. While Zola reports events as a spectator, Tolstoy’s realist narration emerges from within them and as a part of them, demanding from his readers a similar involvement in the world represented. Lukács is at pains in his essay to distinguish these two narrative modes as fundamentally different in formal design, in authorial intention and in the politics they

7 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 111.
8 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 113-114.
9 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 146; 133.
10 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 126.
manifest and make possible for readers: “These are two basically divergent styles. Two basically divergent approaches to reality.”

This distinction between realism’s narrative and naturalism’s descriptive techniques aptly summarizes the distinction between the hermeneutics of historical materialism and New Materialism, and how these hermeneutics relate to critique. In this chapter, I will outline and evaluate this distinction in terms of the analytic and political capacities of realism and naturalism regarding fossil-fueled global warming as the second part of my examination of fossil capitalist realism in the education ISA. Using Lukács’s “Narrate or Describe?” as a rubric for literary analysis and as a model for critical method, I stage a controlled comparison between a canonical new materialist text, Jane Bennett’s 2010 *Vibrant Matter*, and a minor work by a major historical materialist thinker, David Harvey. Similar to Zola and Tolstoy’s shared interest in the horse races, Bennett and Harvey offer parallel readings of a Baltimore neighborhood that yield strikingly different pictures of the characters, setting and drama there involved. *Vibrant Matter* theorizes a common, horizontal “vital materiality” that more or less secretly shapes interactions between human and nonhuman agents but which is normally obscured and discriminated by categories of self and other, subject and object, life and matter. It goes on to contend that recognition of this shared vibrancy among life and matter is the seed for more sustainable modes of living. As in much of Harvey’s scholarship, his 1992 essay “A View from Federal Hill” interprets the Baltimore skyline as an architectural manifestation of changes in capital’s mode of accumulation across the 20th century. Like Bennett, Harvey argues that there is more than meets the eye at play in the inner harbor, but

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11 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 120.
advocates the vertical analysis of historical materialism as the proper method for identifying the relevant driving actors and forces. Though Bennett and Harvey’s twin analyses both aspire to the representation of reality, I find that they occupy a naturalist and realist literary mode, respectively. In either depicting capitalist production as caput mortuum or historicizing its changes over time, these representative modes ultimately make available significantly different environmental politics.

Bennett herself poses this difference at the end of her second chapter: “It is ultimately a matter of political judgment what is more needed today: should we acknowledge the distributive quality of agency to address the power of human-nonhuman assemblages and to resist a politics of blame? Or should we persist with a strategic understatement of material agency in the hopes of enhancing the accountability of specific humans?”

I define Bennett’s vibrant naturalism in part by her preference for the former, following criteria outlined in Lukács’s essay and drawing from other literary critics and scholars in the Environmental Humanities. Further, following what Leerom Medovoi has termed the “biopolitical unconscious” of ecocriticism, I interpret Bennett’s and New Materialism’s broader refusal to “enhance the accountability” of specific actors in the climate crisis as ultimately facilitating capital’s containment of its own fossil-fueled contradiction. What exactly is “new” in New Materialism that has recommended its widespread adoption by Environmental Humanists? Its naturalist representation of environmental crisis, much like the Anthropocene’s fable-tragedy, reproduces fossil capital’s “reality” and keeps at arm’s length from our sense of “realistic” environmental politics the systemic change called for by

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fossil-fueled global warming. It does this in part as a response to critique’s having “run out of steam” in face of the tautological form of ideology named by capitalist realism and the resultant crisis of the humanities to offer politically compelling research output, which I likewise understand to present significant problems for the humanist critic today and respond to differently with the analyses presented in this dissertation.

As discussed at the outset of the previous chapter, New Materialism enjoys a privileged position in the Environmental Humanities that qualifies it for extended treatment as part of my examination of university knowledge production about environment and climate. Like the Anthropocene, New Materialism’s critical heyday has passed, but its influence during the period when the field became a field has ensured that its influence continues in a kind of hegemonic form. While all of New Materialism cannot be reduced to any single text, I offer Bennett as representative of this dominant strain of thought in the Environmental Humanities based on both her primary analytic categories and her extensive circulation on bibliographies and syllabi. Her animating questions are likewise shared by many Environmental Humanists. Indeed, the premise of Bennett’s work is similar to mine: ideology no longer fully obscures realities of capitalist violence from subjects, but rather functions precisely to beat us to the demystification punch, so to speak, and to deflate all attending political sails. I identify likewise with her resistance to a politics of outrage — “a moralized politics of good and evil” — predominant in mainstream US politics at the time of her writing and perhaps more severe in certain media messaging in the Trump era.\(^{13}\) We also share a commitment to academic criticism that has political aims: she asks in the first

\(^{13}\) Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*: 38.
few pages of her book, “How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?” These aims echo those of various post-critique thinkers like Eve Sedgwick and Bruno Latour, who Toril Moi notes remain committed to critique as a practice, just untethered from the hermeneutics of suspicion so as to be more “politically useful.” It is from these common investments, and keeping in mind *Vibrant Matter*’s influence in the Environmental Humanities, that I find it necessary and productive to treat Bennett’s work at length here.

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4.1 Two views from Federal Hill

4.1.a A “speculative onto-story”

As it circulates in the Environmental Humanities, New Materialism eschews historical and structural concerns amid the felt failures of demystification and the urgent, galvanizing waters of ecological crisis. In *Vibrant Matter*, a much acclaimed and cited text in the Environmental Humanities corpus, Bennett draws from an alternative materialist genealogy that includes Henry David Thoreau, Baruch Spinoza, Lucretius, and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as well as what she categorizes as “eco- and ecofeminist philosophers” like Val Plumwood, Wendell Berry and Barbara Kingsolver. With this archive, she builds upon her work in 2001’s *The Enchantment of Modern Life* to imagine a political program derived from the insights of affect theory into modern conceptions of agency and power. Reframing the objects that surround and derive from subjects as “an out-side that is active, forceful and (quasi)independent” in its own right, *Vibrant Matter* dwells upon the increasingly untenable distinction between life and matter to channel such a philosophical reorientation into a political one that is fit for our age of radical environmental degradation.

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Bennett’s vital materialist method is driven largely by a frustration with the political limits of demystification. She contends that critiques of capital, empire and their ecological costs are indeed important and even correct but falsely assume that “exposés of illegality, greed, mendacity, oligarchy, or hypocrisy […] produce moral outrage … and ameliorative action.”

Recalling the previous chapter, this inertia is the same one that is built into the fable-tragedy genre of the Anthropocene and much climate change media, exposés of “sudden” environmental crisis that hail us simultaneously as subjects with the power to choose and act in the world and also as a species with nothing like free will. Through the term fossil capitalist realism, I have argued that this always-already disidentification with political subjecthood is itself the subject formation regime of late fossil capital. Though without the same emphasis on energy and environment, work by Slavoj Zizek, Jacques Rancière, Eva Cherniavsky, and Mark Fisher all offer a similar diagnosis of contemporary post-ideology.

Within these frameworks, and echoing Bennett, the politics of exposure does not only fail to undermine but indeed reinforces this regime. Zizek explains this turn: the “purely material sincerity of the external ideological ritual, not the depth of the subject’s inner convictions and desires, is the true locus of the fantasy that sustains the ideological edifice.” He continues: ideology “exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it […] The position, ‘not all is ideology, beneath the ideological

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mask, I am also a human person’, is the very form of ideology, of its ‘practical efficiency.”’

Given this state of affairs, how could demystification produce a more democratic or sustainable politics? Fossil capital does not persist because we all ardently believe it is best, and climate change policy does not stall because we are all deniers. Capital’s subjects are “fetishists in practice, not in theory,” and recognizing this “practical efficiency” of ideology under late capitalism is the departure point for revolutionary politics.

Bennett has suggestions for our practice. She contends that should critics not continually expose capital-p Power but individually recalibrate our sensitivity to the vital forces of everyday life, we “might augment the motivational energy needed to move selves from the endorsement of ethical principles to the actual practice of ethical behaviors.” More forcefully, Bennett asserts that the political aims of the historical materialist indeed cannot be realized without this shift in the affective terrain: “There will be no greening of the economy, no redistribution of wealth, no enforcement or extension of rights without human dispositions, moods, and cultural ensembles hospitable to these effects.” Like the essays in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s landmark collection New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics, Bennett here at once combines and discards the constructivist approaches of the

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22 Slavoj Zizek, Sublime Object: 97.


25 Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: xii.
cultural turn and the structuralist purview of historical materialism. Emphasizing that the micropolitical *is* political and the textual *is* material, her cohort of new materialists shine on these hermeneutics the light of developments of post-Newtonian physics, systems theory, biotechnology and the digital, which point to “matter’s autonomous contingency” and the “increasingly ‘unpredictable’ realities which defy ‘totality’” and thus critical methods that admit it.\(^{26}\) By grounding their critique in these non-dialectical materialisms rather than either the immaterial tendencies of constructivism or the vertical imaginaries of class conflict or empire, Bennett and others promise to correct for the shortcomings of ideology critique amid climate crisis and a post-ideological ideological regime. In vital materialism are the makings of a new political practice adequate to these conditions, one rooted in a retraining of our individual regard for environment.

To illustrate the philosophical-political disposition that she seeks to cultivate in her readers, Bennett’s first chapter places her in front of a bagel shop in Baltimore’s Federal Hill neighborhood. She offers what she terms a “speculative onto-story” of her environment, recounting a moment in her life on a sunny Tuesday in June when a cast of “characters” appeared, vibrating, before her:

- one large men’s black plastic work glove
- one dense mat of oak pollen
- one unblemished dead rat
- one white plastic bottle cap
- one smooth stick of wood.\(^{27}\)


\(^{27}\) Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*: 3-5.
Bennett finds herself suddenly party to an assemblage of material actants, the banality of a morning bagel run momentarily disturbed and even rendered sublime by this “contingent tableau.” Following Deleuze and Guattari, Bennett defines assemblages as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sort. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within.” Bennett draws additionally from Bruno Latour’s “actor networks” and their constituent “actants,” defined as “a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events.” Latour’s own description in his seminal “On actor-network theory” resonates here: “This is the most counter-intuitive aspect of ANT. Literally there is nothing but networks, there is nothing in between them, or, to use a metaphor from the history of physics, there is no aether in which networks should be immersed.” Bennett is “struck,” she is “repelled,” and is made to “feel” by these actants — not coercively, not as a result of their intentionality, and not in step with some system logic they inhabit. Rather, Bennett’s place in this assemblage is contingent, spontaneous, and made visible by an “anticipatory readiness” on Bennett’s part to estrange

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31 Bruno Latour, “On actor-network theory: A few clarifications.” *Soziale Welt* 47.4 (1996): 370. It is worth mentioning that Latour’s base unit is the relation whereas ultimately Bennett’s is the actant, making her use of ANT something of a distortion from Latour’s network.
such objects from their status as (well,) objects and to relinquish as much as possible her own status as subject.\textsuperscript{32}

Bennett has cultivated this readiness by taking a page out of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's book, who writes in \textit{Phenomenology of Perception} that “our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other ‘objects’ the miracle of expression.”\textsuperscript{33} Bennett concedes that in recounting this scene she reinforces somewhat her position as the human agent of knowledge and action, possessing unique access to the power of representation. Nonetheless, she contends that her being “addled” by this encounter with the “alien,” the “uncanny,” the “strange,” the “Wild” in Thoreau's sense — with, in short, the “radical alterity” of the other, which retreats from knowability and in this very retreat acts upon the subject — can disrupt and horizontalize the hierarchy or structure of agencies that grounds the organization of society and guides our environmental criticism.\textsuperscript{34} She is acting, yes, but suffering action as well, one material node among many. To recognize such diversity in effecting and being effected is to lay political ground for the recession of the human subject's predominant effecting on small and large scales. A “decent politics,” Bennett argues, begins with such an unexpected, diligent encounter among a glove, some pollen, a dead rat, a bottle cap, a stick and the ecocritic.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{32} Jane Bennett, \textit{Vibrant Matter}: 5.


\textsuperscript{34} Jane Bennett, \textit{Vibrant Matter}: 2-3.

\textsuperscript{35} Jane Bennett, \textit{Vibrant Matter}: xi.
Take, by contrast, Harvey’s 1992 “A View From Federal Hill.” Harvey’s critical concerns in this essay are not explicitly environmentalist, as in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* and other shorter works from the 1990s. Nonetheless, because he writes this piece from the very same neighborhood as does Bennett for her vibrant onto-story, I find a side-by-side comparison of these works in the form modeled by Lukács helpful for distinguishing the representative and political capacities of new and historical materialism for questions of environment. Harvey exhumes the forces at work along the skyline of South Baltimore, Gay Street, Downtown, and, most extensively, the city’s Inner Harbor. These views altogether constitute “a great book of time and history, proclaiming in glass, brick, and concrete who holds the reins of power” in a city that has been economically and demographically remade several times in the postwar period. The broad shift from industrial to finance capital is legible in such abandoned or gentrified sites as Riverside’s Bethlehem Steel shipyard, the Allied Chemical and American Can Company plants in Fells Point, and Federal Hill’s own cramped and glittering rowhouse condos, repurposed for young professionals from the bones of warehouses and churches once occupied by the working class. Harvey is wary of romanticizing the postwar economy carried by this now displaced population, which relied heavily on military manufacturing and witnessed rampant racial discrimination in employment and housing, as well as high disease rates resulting from chemical waste.

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38 David Harvey, “A View”: 128.
exposure at work and at home. In an era nostalgic for postwar liberalism — despite or explicitly because of its constitutive exclusions along race and gender lines — I am anxious to underline Harvey’s caution with my own. But one need not idealize this period to note its eclipse and the unlivable costs such eclipse has imposed on the urban working class, as Harvey has elsewhere documented.\(^{39}\) It is in this context that post-68 Baltimore with increasing fervor and in mostly red ink embraced the leisure, tourism and real estate industries, typical of broader neoliberal shifts in production but marked by Baltimore’s particular history, and ones which have not abated since the time of Harvey’s writing.\(^{40}\) But even by the early 90s, the Inner Harbor had transformed from docks and factories into a “permanent commercial circus” of shopping malls, luxury apartments and hotels, permit-only markets and festivals, and attractions like the Maryland Science Center and National Aquarium. This area is cocooned by a ring of monuments to the surging power of finance: just blocks from the Inner Harbor one could find the Maryland National Bank, First National Bank and Citibank, tucked neatly among the halls of a city government eager to combine its public prerogative with foreign investment for high-capital development projects that contribute nothing to the local economy but a shrunken tax base and a few temporary, underpaid jobs. For Harvey, to stop and take stock of the Baltimore skyline is to historicize how the state under late capitalism “rediscovered the ancient Roman formula of bread and

\(^{39}\) David Harvey, \emph{A Brief History of Neoliberalism}. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.

\(^{40}\) Today even more so than in 1992, Baltimore has been financialized out of its industrial and working class roots. From 1990 to 2000, 9% of Baltimore’s census tracts were gentrifying; from 2000 to 2010, that rate jumped to 23%, when the same processes witnessed in Harvey’s Inner Harbor spread to surrounding areas — the neighborhoods west of Camden Yards; Mount Vernon and Barclay to the northeast of Downtown; and the communities encircling Patterson Park in East Baltimore like Canton, Butcher’s Hill and Highlandtown. “Baltimore Gentrification Maps and Data.” \emph{Governing: The Future of States and Localities} (2015): https://www.governing.com/gov-data/baltimore-gentrification-maps-demographic-data.html.
circuses as a means of masking social problems and controlling discontent.” From the street level, one can discern a shift in capitalist strategies of accumulation that is unified in its global reach but remakes life from the raw material of the local.

Two scholars, separated by a few years and fewer city blocks; two radically different materialisms; and, as I’ll argue, “two basically divergent styles” of representation. The speculative onto-story and the view from Federal Hill. What to make of this distinction? How does it help us think about fossil-fueled environmental crisis and the materialist frameworks available for its analysis?

At the outset it is important to clarify that Bennett and Harvey are both suspicious readers, though Bennett might dispute me saying so given that she positions vital materialism as a corrective to demystification. She writes that “this hermeneutics of suspicion calls for theorists to be on high alert for signs of the secret truth (a human will to power) below the false appearance of nonhuman agency.” This is the position of Satin Island’s U. at the outset of his mission, filling dossier after dossier of his Great Report in search of a prime mover for the parachuting accident. Much as U. gives up on this representation of totality in favor of an “auto-alphaing and auto-omegaing script” wherein all appears to be its own prime

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41 David Harvey, “A View”: 137.

42 Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: xiv. “A relentless approach toward demystification works against the possibility of positive formulations. In a discussion of the François Mitterrand government, Foucault broke with his former tendency to rely on demystification and proposed specific reforms in the domain of sexuality: ‘I’ve become rather irritated by an attitude, which for a long time was mine, too, and which I no longer subscribe to, which consists in saying: our problem is to denounce and criticize: let them get on with their legislation and reforms. That doesn’t seem to me like the right attitude’” — as if critique and legislation represent the range of politics (xv).
mover, Bennett decides to dwell on the plane of nonhuman agency rather than peer beneath it. Rather than produce yet another confirmation of capitalist power (there it is again, controlling everything), she offers a playbook for how to uproot its violent anthropocentrism on a more immediate and individual level and eventually, however unspecified her theory of political change, a public one. Despite the emphasis on surface here, however, Bennett's is ultimately a suspicious hermeneutic. “I want to highlight what is typically cast in the shadow,” she writes, offering an alternative materialist method that is itself suspicious of a critical faith to suspicion that seeks a human prime mover behind all phenomena and asks how it came to be that we stopped taking objects at something like face value, or the face value we might assign to them had modern thought not severed our affinity with them.43 “How did Marx’s notion of materiality — as economic structures and exchanges that provoke many other events — come to stand for the materialist perspective per se?”44 Bennett’s speculative onto-story essentially asks us to recognize a particular material order hiding under the historical, anthropocentric picture offered by the historical materialist method of Marx or Harvey, which reveals the historical production of what ideology presents as “real.”45 In bringing out, to borrow again from Latour, the “fibrous, thread-like, wiry, stringy, ropy, capillary character” of modern society, Bennett does not necessarily dispute the accuracy of “the notions of levels, layers, territories, spheres, categories, structures, systems” offered by historical materialist analysis, much as Chakrabarty does not dispute its accuracy in explaining fossil-fueled climate change. She merely suggests that there is another hidden truth behind the hidden truth revealed by such

43 Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: ix.
44 Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: xvi.
critique, one that sits paradoxically on the surface: matter, vital and vibrant, dead or alive.
And this reality, all the more invisible for critique’s visibilizing of capitalist production, holds an ecopolitical promise that the reality exposed by historical materialism does not.

4.1.b Genres of analysis


“The characters’ lives, the careers of the protagonists, merely constitute a loose thread for attaching and grouping a series of pictures of objects, pictures which are ends in themselves. … The leveling inherent in the descriptive method makes everything episodic.” Identically, the moment Bennett selects for her onto-story is not representative of a broader ecological condition because it indexes the historical structures that contain it. Rather, the episode is representative as an end in itself, unique and irreplaceable. As Bennett describes it, the onto-story’s critical purchase lies in “the impossible singularity of *that* rat, *that* configuration of pollen, *that* otherwise utterly banal, mass-produced plastic water-bottle cap.” Bennett does not ask, Could this assemblage happen anywhere but Baltimore? How was the bottle cap produced? What worker wore the “large men’s black plastic work glove” and how much did

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47 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 134.
they get paid or not paid? These questions lead to answers “utterly banal.” Like Zola, coincidence and intrigue manifests nothing like a pattern, system or master plan. That *Vibrant Matter* presents “animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities” as random in their arrangement and rearrangement betrays an inattention to how such categories of “things” are marshaled into and constitute environment in entirely different ways from one another and differently across modes of production and regulation.\(^{49}\) Thus despite the assigned singularity of each actant and assemblage, they are indistinguishable.

But Bennett, like Zola, is not unaware of this: the inattention that produces such indistinguishability is a deliberate critical choice. She deliberately skips questions of history and power to dwell in the immediacy and richness of the singular encounter, seeking a thoroughly itemized and thus more comprehensive representation of reality. As she outlines in her opening provocation, the materialist chooses between a continued “strategic understatement of [the] material agency” of things or a recognition of “the power of human-nonhuman assemblages.” In choosing the former, vital materialism enacts its own “strategic understatement” of the human characters, whether individual actors or social structures, with consequences for how it understands human and nonhuman agencies to interact:

The autonomy of the details has varied effects, all deleterious, on the representation of men’s lives. On the one hand, writers strive to describe details as completely, plasticly and picturesquely as possible; in this attempt they achieve an extraordinary artistic competence. But the description of things no longer has anything to do with the lives of characters. Not only are things described out of context with the lives of the characters, attaining an

independent significance that is not their due with the totality of the novel, but the very manner in which they are described sets them in an entirely different sphere from that in which the characters move.\textsuperscript{50}

In terms laid out by Jacques Rancière, Bennett’s partition of the sensible presents itself as radically horizontal, albeit scaled down to single events so that the density of the “now” can appear.\textsuperscript{51} It appears, indeed, hardly partitioned at all, refusing to distinguish among degrees of power and the spheres in which they move in Bennett’s insistence that the various kinds of such power are not only worthy of critical notice but incommensurable with one another and thus impossible to systematize. Everything — every thing — can and must be made sensible, it seems. To do so, characters, drama and setting convert into a single unit, “thing,” and as a result, no one element appears capable of directing, changing or otherwise conditioning the entity as a whole. The interlocking spheres that define realist depiction of the social recede from critical view and investment.

I follow Bennett’s own claims in attributing to her work a literary quality: apart from terming actants “characters” and her method a “speculative onto-story,” she elsewhere appeals to science fiction and Kafka’s “The Cares of a Family Man” as exemplars of the vitalist sensitivity she prizes. (Incidentally, Kafka’s thing-protagonist Odradek also informs Timothy Morton’s “hyperobject” and J. Hillis Miller’s theory of the “ecotechnological”).\textsuperscript{52} In Bennett’s eyes, these literary modes are indeed perhaps more adequate to her task than theoretical

\textsuperscript{50} Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 132.


\textsuperscript{52} Ian Thomas Fleishman discusses the surprising popularity of Kafka’s Odradek in recent environmental criticism in his “The Rustle of the Anthropocene: Kafka’s Odradek as Ecocritical Icon.” \textit{The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory} 92.1 (2017): 40-62.
discourse. As with all critics but perhaps more self-consciously, the eco-conscious vibrant critic performs an act of representation, describing the world in its overlooked self-evidence rather than discriminating among its parts in an effort to see into and through it. If, as Rancière suggests, the literary makes the social available for view, engagement and transformation, Bennett’s narrative renders sensible to us those immediate terms of one’s environment that we have held to be outside the social, both literally and theoretically disposable: the trash, fluff, background noise. This immediate environment constitutes an assemblage, of which Bennett is a part; beyond this exist other such environments, containing multiple underestimated actants, flattened into an assemblage; these assemblages are themselves flattened in their relation as actants to one another; their system total, finally, likewise, an assemblage. Much like the graphs in Steffen et al’s Anthropocene article, each particular assemblage is not a symptom of a greater architecture of power but itself the irreducible real of that architecture. Character, drama and setting all at once, organic and inorganic materials “self-organize” into “contingent tableau[s]” recognizable to any vital materialist with “the fortuity of being in the right place at the right time” and the capacity to identify it as a story to be told.

Fredric Jameson, following Darko Suvin, writes that science fiction is defined by the novum, the formal device of estrangement, which extrapolates from the singular to defamiliarize and

53 As mentioned, assemblage is the Deleuzian term and Bennett’s preference, but Latour’s actor-network equally holds.

54 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*: 9, 6, 5.
thereby represent the structural.\textsuperscript{55} Hardly an exercise in such utopian desire, Bennett’s science fiction-inspired “material formations” are by contrast much closer to what Mark McGurl has termed the “subutopian counterfactual” of the modern novel: imagined alternative accounts of the endless present.\textsuperscript{56} Just as Mrs. Dalloway could have bought this or that and Elizabeth Bennett could have married one or another man, Bennett teaches in one chapter that the international blackout could have resulted from the deregulation and privatization of public goods or the eccentric, agential pulses of electricity itself.\textsuperscript{57} Likewise, the proceedings of a Baltimore courtroom where Bennett sat as juror are as much subject to an indeterminable trace of gunpowder — exhibit A as actant — as to a legal system predicated on the mutual exclusion of racialized and propertied bodies. In such examples, Bennett seeks a theoretical model where events are not forced to unfold in a certain way (all roads lead to capital), attributing to left critique a fate economy similar to the one I have identified in the Anthropocene’s fable-tragedy. She therefore deploys the tropes of science fiction to preserve the supposed abundance of each moment, reclaiming political and


\textsuperscript{56} Mark McGurl used the term “subutopian counterfactualism” in a lecture at Duke University on October 12, 2017 entitled “Being and Time-Management: Fictions of Consumer Consciousness in the Long Age of Amazon.”

\textsuperscript{57} The blackout is probably Bennett’s most interesting case study, and in the context of increasing disruptions to electricity infrastructure by climate change events, surely deserving of more treatment than I can give it here. “To the vital materialist, the electrical grid is better understood as a volatile mix of coal, sweat, electromagnetic fields, computer programs, electron streams, profit motives, heat, lifestyles, nuclear fuel, plastic, fantasies of mastery, static, legislation, water, economic theory, wire, and wood — to name just some of the actants… There is not so much a doer (an agent) behind the deed (the blackout) as a doing and an effecting by a human-nonhuman assemblage.” See chapter two of \textit{Vibrant Matter}, “The Agency of Assemblages,” especially 24-31.
ecological crisis from a preset historical materialist method that Jameson identifies at the heart of the genre.

But much as Woolf’s subutopian counterfactualism is inflected with a neurotic denial of mortality and the empty promise of consumerist choice, Bennett restores critical theory with a variety and possibility precluded by demystification at the cost of simply accepting the structural terms of everyday life. Under this materialism, elements meet in arbitrary convergence, networks emerge and disperse, and our job as good political subjects is to dwell more mindfully, sustainably, even joyfully within them. The practice of ideological critique might appear to follow a rote tragic plot, but in her attempt to avoid such critical predetermination, Bennett leaves everything predetermined — each moment miraculous, reality an auto-choreographing kind of fate. The run to the bagel shop: a fortuitous encounter among actants at a precise time, at a precise location, involving more parties than meets the suspicious eye but beyond the determination of an unseen political-economic cabal. In Deleuze’s words, such instances are “ontologically one, formally diverse,” rather than, as the historical materialist would hold, the inverse. And in Lukács’s, this is a distortion: “Bringing characters to life and representing objects on the basis of immediate, empirical observation is a process with its own logic and its own mode of accentuation. Something much worse than mere leveling results — a reversed order of significance, a consequence implicit in the descriptive method since both the important and the unimportant are described with equal attention.”58 In short, “narration establishes proportions, description merely levels.”59

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58 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?:” 131.
59 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?:” 127.
4.1.c A “vicious circle”

Pheng Cheah contends that in agitating the ontologies of matter and life, such unorthodox “non-dialectic materialisms” as those of Deleuze and Derrida, strong influences for *Vibrant Matter*, put tremendous pressure on modern understandings of political form and activity. “The effectivity of these materialisms,” he writes, “lies in the urgency of rethinking the ontological bases of current languages and vocabularies of politics and political thought.”

Cheah’s assessment interests me here because, in my analysis, Bennett’s naturalist critical mode and its sought-after “decent politics” — in her words, “[the] greening of the economy, [the] redistribution of wealth, [the] enforcement or extension of rights,” as mentioned — rests upon the very same ontological bases of liberalism: public, subject and self-preservation. Her inclusion of nonhuman actants into political personhood surely distributes the sensible in ways that cut against the anthropocentrism of liberal thought. But she justifies this inclusion using liberalism’s own justificatory schema — by appealing to a philosophy of nature. Here the political consequences of a naturalist depiction of environment become clear: in removing the word “historical” from in front of “materialism,” New Materialism’s naturalist literary technique defines the “decency” of its political project by a fidelity to how things “really” or “naturally” are, rather than by a class interest in the historical struggle for power.

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Bennett’s “guiding question” is, as a reminder, “How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?” In offering “bodies” as an alternative to subjects, she leans heavily on Spinoza’s definition of vitality as self-preservation, or conatur, and in theorizing a public thereof constituted she draws on John Dewey’s definition of the public as “the product of conjoint action” in response to problems. Bennett’s provocation is to unsettle the “we” supposed by hegemonic, i.e. liberal, understandings of bodies and publics, much as it has been unsettled by the inclusion of various nominally nonhuman agents into official political personhood over the course of liberalism’s long tenure. Her provocation is not, however, to unsettle the ontological basis of the claim that this “we” makes to political personhood. Under Bennett’s vitalist schema, membership in the “public” named by “public problems” expands in its content — by the likes of Bennett and other enlightened human actants on behalf of our vibrant material fellows, which already participate in our infrastructure meltdowns and legal proceedings whether we know it or not. The “political responses” this new public might muster likewise expand in their content — a vibrant public considers matter as it responds to spontaneous problems. But, the form of both public and its activities remains untouched — the public

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61 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*: 103. Introducing Dewey’s relevance for vital materialism, Bennett writes, “In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey presents a public as a confederation of bodies, bodies pulled together not so much by choice (a public is not exactly a voluntary association) as by a shared experience of harm that, over time, coalesces into a ‘problem.’ Dewey makes it clear that a public does not preexist its particular problem but emerges in response to it. A public is a contingent and temporary formation existing alongside many other publics, protopublics, and residual or postpublics. Problems come and go, and so, too, do publics: at any given moment, many different publics are in the process of crystallizing and dissolving.” *Vibrant Matter*: 100. On Spinoza’s conatus: “Each thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives [conatur] to persevere in its own being… Any thing whatsoever, whether it be more perfect or less perfect, will always be able to persist in existing with that same force whereby it begins to exist, so that in this respect all things are equal.” Spinoza, *Ethics: Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect, and Selected Letters*. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Ed. Seymour Feldman. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992: pt. 3, proposition 6. Quoted in *Vibrant Matter*: 2.
responds to spontaneous problems. Bennett’s quest to reclaim materialism from a historical form presupposes an ahistorical space of appearance and action where previously excluded elements may be rightfully incorporated into the social body. Vital materialism reifies liberal subjection by extending it to nonhuman agents, who act with variant but equal power and whose recognition-inclusion within an imagined public promises radical ecological transformation. For the new materialist ecocritic, this public (assemblage, network, mesh) is not a construction, an ideal to be materialized; it merely reflects a natural order that has long existed, however unacknowledged and unactivated by human agents (the power outage was caused by erratic electricity, the gunpowder residue sent a man to jail). What Bennett leaves us with is a politics of recognition that couches its claims in a vocabulary of nature, standard liberal fare of subject reformation with a postmodern-posthuman-ecological twist.62

The first of Rancière’s “Ten Theses on Politics” asserts: “Politics is not the exercise of power. Politics ought to be defined on its own terms, as a mode of acting put into practice by a specific kind of subject and deriving from a particular form of reason. It is the political relationship that allows one to think the possibility of a political subject(ivity), not the other way around.”63 Rancière here names the “vicious circle” that results from taking the subject rather than the relation as the beginning point of political philosophy, a vicious circle that

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62 In this sense, Bennett’s vital materialism harmonizes with such environmental discourses as “the rights of nature,” which reinforce the redistributive power of the settler capitalist state as the horizon of social and environmental justice rather than point to its structural inability to accommodate the demands of the decolonial environmentalisms articulated by Buen Vivir and Sumak Kawsay.

captures New Materialism’s relationship to liberalism. In theorizing political personhood, activity and the good life with an assumed “particular form of reason” — for Bennett’s matter-liberalism: agency requires recognition and lawful cohabitation — one ascribes ontological status to what are actually specific and, for the historical materialist, historical forms of rule. Why should, one might ask Bennett, the public reflect the agency of matter, rather than reflect only the predominant agency of human actors? For new materialists generally, the answer falls somewhere near: any participant in the ecosystem has a right to rule. For Rancière, supposing right from participation circumvents the question whose dispute and contention is proper to political philosophy: where does this right come from? For New Materialism as with liberalism, nature. Whether today’s “fibrous, thread-like, wiry, stringy, ropy, capillary” picture of cyborgs, anti-matter and post-Holocene climate conditions or an earlier modern one where apples mechanically fall on unsuspecting heads, this “nature” calls the political shots.

This is why Rancière locates politics only in democracy, whose non-subject, the demos, “exists only as a rupture of the logic of beginning/ruling” rather than as the rightful subject of an arché (from the Greek archein, “to begin,” “to lead,” “to rule”). Whereas the arches of

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64 “Behind the current buffooneries of the ‘returns’ of the political (that include ‘the return of political philosophy’), it is important to recognize the vicious circle that characterizes political philosophy; a vicious circle located in the link between the political relationship and the political subject. This vicious circle posits a way of life that is ‘proper’ to politics. The political relationship is subsequently deduced from the properties of this specific order of being and is explained in terms of the existence of a character who possesses a good or a specific universality, as opposed to the private or domestic world of needs or interests. In short, politics is explained as the accomplishment of a way of life that is proper to those who are destined for it. This partition — which is actually the object of politics — is posited as its basis.” Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses” (section I.3).

monarchy or aristocracy presume a political subject naturally qualified to rule (the king by
divine right, the *aristos* by virtue of superior intelligence or wisdom), the *demos* of democracy
signifies not the natural prerogative of rule “by the people” but rather denies such a
prerogative to any political subject. Democracy suggests that the distribution of power is
never natural; the *demos* is supplementary to, a void within and exactly at odds with any *arche*
narrative of natural political right rather than entitled by nature to rule. The *demos* alone,
therefore, possesses political content: it insists that politics cannot occur without first
understanding the political relation to be unsettled, no political subject in possession of a
natural right to rule.66 The *demos* is charged with determining another such principle and
keeping the question of such a principle’s determination always open and void of fixed
meaning. For Rancière, “the whole question of politics lies in the interpretation of this
void,” and to ignore it and take for granted the political relation means you have not even
begun to talk about politics.67

Rancière contends that modern political philosophy is largely blind to this void, merely
reifying whatever picture of political subjectivity is its own premise via the *arche*. It largely
shuffles the particular subject who is entitled to rule by natural right, but it always natural
right that grounds the entitlement. To put this contention in conversation with Cheah, New
Materialism “rethink[s] the ontological bases of current languages and vocabularies” of
politics insofar as it shuffles the subject of rule as cued by changes in our understanding of
nature from scientific research ranging from subatomic to planetary scales and beyond.
However, Rancière signals that this process simply substitutes one conception of natural

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66 Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses”: sections III, IV and V.

right for another, rather than interrogate the principle of natural right itself, an interrogation that marks the properly political discussion. Reworking subjectivity from a reworked representation of nature is not politics, but rather preserves fully intact the arche relation of modernity.

This is why it's important that Bennett is too a suspicious reader: she sticks with “nature” as a political north star, letting us know that we've been defining it incorrectly but can begin to define it correctly by uncovering how its vibrant materiality has been operating unseen all along. Witness the arche language in Bennett’s outline for vitalist liberalism: “We would then get this (Spinozist) version of Dewey’s theory of the public and of conjoint action: problems give rise to publics, publics are groups of bodies with the capacity to affect and be affected; problems are signals that the would-be or protomembers of a public had already encountered the indirect effects of other endeavoring bodies.”68 A public is and does this, problems are and do that, rather than publics have been constituted in this and that way or problems might be best defined and addressed in this way because of another first principle. The role of the word “historical” in front of “materialism” is precisely to disrupt the nature arche that remains intact in even this emphatically “(Spinozist)” liberal political program. Without a sense of dialectic history, Bennett’s vital materialism remains confined to liberalism’s vicious circle of self-justification and to the capitalist mode of production it supports, where predominant understandings of public, subject and self-preservation are inextricable from the project of accumulation. Much like the Anthropocene poses political questions it has already answered, New Materialism endlessly reifies capitalist relations. “Not

Flower Power, or Black Power, or Girl Power, but *Thing-Power,*” Bennett coaches, arriving at the same political relation developed by our modern forerunners, though taking a genuflective detour through postmodern scientific developments.\(^{69}\)

Bennett’s allergy to the hermeneutics of suspicion reaches anaphylaxis when by u-turning from the search for material exploitation obscured by social relations, she transforms materialism into a fully horizontalized ontology, one that like Borges’ map must be as large as the world it describes to avoid anthropocentrism or the endless recurrent loop of Marxist critique. This representation of reality employs a partition scheme that denies us the capacity to isolate primary causes or necessary conditions for the fossil capitalist organization of planetary life, receding such drama and characters into setting. Ultimately, it shores up the liberal subject as the basic unit of politics, whose self-cultivated heightened awareness will ostensibly prompt more ecological modes of relation. Bennett’s “naive” materialism naturalizes rather than historicizes late capitalist environment, offering by way of politics only a new disciplinary regime grounded in a new philosophy of nature, an expanded subjecthood within this same, albeit defamiliarized, environment.

\(^{69}\) Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter:* 6.
4.2 The descriptive turn

4.2.a Ecomimesis

In this final section I will take up the writerly position of the new materialist ecocritic and the ecocritic more broadly. To do so, I follow Lukács’s notes on the “observer” standpoint of the narrator in naturalist literature as well as critiques from Timothy Morton and especially Leerom Medovoi on certain literary tropes of ecocritical scholarship. Writing with a strong subjective voice from a default setting of climate emergency — a planetary space correlated to the characters of species and matter and which occupies an endless present tense — the ecocritic paradoxically relegates environment to a distant outside of ecocriticism and mischaracterizes the critic’s position in the capitalist production of environment. This narrative technique is consistent with the reified and reifying technique of naturalism and finds correction in ecocritical attention to capital’s own investment in sustainable environmental management via biopolitics.

*Satin Island* captures and lambastes many of these tropes in what McCarthy calls “Present-Tense Anthropology™.” U. offers Present-Tense Anthropology™ as the solution to the Great Report’s un-writable-ness with the suspicious, structuralist toolkit that guided his doctoral research. Calling the approach naive or even foolish just as Bennett does, U. develops Present-Tense Anthropology™ to recast the Great Report and its very writing as one of the Report’s own internal moving parts: if contemporary totality is an “auto-alphaing and auto-omegaing script,” the Report must stand inside rather than apart from it. In
centering the critic, U. argues, Present-Tense Anthropology™ decenters critical authority, allowing us to approach “the spirit of the age” not as a structure to diagram from without but as a set of vibrant, vital assemblages one can only represent from within:

What if just coexisting with these objects and this person, letting my own edges run among them, occupying this moment, or, more to the point, allowing it to occupy me, to blot and soak me up, rather than treating it as feed-data for a later stock-taking — what if all this, maybe, was part of the Great Report? What if the Report might somehow, in some way, be lived, be be-d, rather than written? … No longer scrolling through dead entrails of events hoping to unpack the meaning of their gestures, [anthropologists] would instead place themselves inside events and situations as they unfolded — naively, blithely and, most of all, live — their participation-from-within transforming life by bringing its true substance to the fore at every instant, in the instant, not as future knowledge but as the instant itself, which, like a ripened pod, would oversell its bounds and rupture, spawning meaning, spreading it forth to all corners of the world… Then the Great Report would not be something that was either to-come or completed, in-the-past: it would be all now. Present-tense anthropology; anthropology as a way-of-life. That was it: Present-Tense Anthropology™; an anthropology that bathed in presence, and in nowness — bathed in it as in a deep, bubbling and nymph-saturated well.70

The micropolitical purview of Bennett’s work finds expression here, as do a few formal aspects of ecocriticism related to the place and time of the ecocritic’s writerly voice. In terms of the former, recall Vibrant Matter’s bagel shop corner, where Bennett theorizes from the subjective, embodied experience of a singular assemblage in a singular place. Or consider Ladelle McWhorter’s Bodies and Pleasures, wherein after a gardening session, McWhorter looks out her kitchen window at a Dorito bag peeking from the trashbin, then down at her soil- and orange-dusted hands, and from this experience recognizes a revelatory “cousin”

70 Tom McCarthy, Satin Island: 77-78.
relationship among these materials. In the same vein as Lukács and McCarthy, and drawing from Graham Harman, Timothy Morton argues that the way these scholars emplace themselves in their work is a typical narrative device of environmental humanist scholarship. He describes this motif in the critical literature as “ecomimesis”:

A trope of immediacy and vivid aesthetic experience surrounding the act of writing, thinking, or speaking … Standard ecomimesis implicitly or explicitly employs the phrase ‘As I write’: ‘As I write this, snow is falling outside my window’; ‘As I write this, the BP oil spill is washing up on the beaches opposite my window.’ The trope opposes writing, in particular the act of inscribing the sentence in which it occurs, to environmental phenomena occurring ‘outside’ the scene of writing. Ecomimesis performs ‘See? I’m no bookish penman, I know and care about real things.’

Like St. Paul struck on the road to Damascus by a bag of Doritos or a dead rat, the environmental humanist establishes critical authority in the performance of an individual, often visceral sensitivity to their surrounding spatial environment. Yet, as Morton observes, the paradoxical effect of this emplacement is that environment recedes even further into the

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71 “‘Nope,’ I thought, ‘can’t feed that crap to my dirt.’ I threw the crumbs in the trash and reached for that one last chip. It was halfway to my mouth before I was struck by what I’d just said. I looked out the kitchen window at my garden, my trenches, my dirt, and then my gaze turned downward toward my Dorito-stained hand. Dirt and flesh. Suddenly it occurred to me that, for all their differences, these two things I was looking at were cousins — not close cousins, but cousins, several deviations once removed. I haven’t purchased a bag of Doritos since.” Ladelle McWhorter, Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999: 167. This passage is cited in Stacy Alaimo’s “Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature,” Material Feminisms, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2008. When I mention St. Paul and use such terms as “conversion narrative” and “annunciation,” I mean it quite seriously — there is a prominent, self-declared spiritual thread running through Vibrant Matter, and Bennett even speaks of sharing a common “faith” with Spinoza.

“outside” of criticism than it was before the ecocritic brought it into the light. Bennett is
“struck,” “repelled,” made to “bear witness” and become conscious of such a thing as
“environment,” at once modeling and theorizing a moment of ecological awakening for her readers. Yet, in this witnessing Bennett stands apart from the social processes that shape the encounter, party to the assemblage but arriving to it as if by chance and so as if separate from it. As Lukács outlines in his analysis of Tolstoy and Zola, she is not a participant but “merely [a] spectator[], merely [an] observer[].” With this distance, New Materialism intuits a primarily aesthetic regard for environment. The “sudden” appearance of matter hinges Bennett’s argument on a visibility/invisibility binary, leaving us the choice to see or not see, accept or deny its objective existence rather than to diagnose the laws and histories that condition our relationship to and within it. Lukács attributes such observation to the naturalist voice, whose mimetic authority lies paradoxically in its highly subjective position: “Extreme subjectivism approximates the inert reification of pseudo-objectivism”

In the position of spectator, “know[ing] and car[ing] about real things” does not secure the critic’s agency to do anything about them. In refusing to distinguish between human and nonhuman orders of action, in insisting instead upon their ontological equality-through-difference, Bennett offers a representation of the world that overwhelms for the sheer number of entities that must be considered in its new posthuman liberalism. Rendering this picture requires a certain authorial presence — forthcoming, embodied, heavy-handed, be-d. She deflects the charge that Adorno levies against Heideggerian phenomenology for

73 Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: x.
74 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 116.
75 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 141-144.
attempting to approach the thing itself, “to philosophize formlessly, so to speak, purely on
the ground of things,” contending the shedding of any critical pretension to mastery is
precisely the point of vital materialism. In her “naive ambition” to willingly “play the fool,”
Bennett deliberately fetishizes the objects of her environment in substitution of “more
familiar fetishizations,” to quote Bill Brown’s “Thing Theory”: “the fetishization of the
subject, the image, the word.”

Kimberly DeFazio has referred to this as “cultural theory’s catastrophe fetish,” which
“glorif[ies the] ever-more spectacular evidence of the human subject’s failure to know the
world,” most strikingly in the “sudden” appearance of climate crisis. Rather than regard
matter as an effect of the human subject, the new materialist diminishes human agency to
the point of excusing the subject from the responsibility of bearing knowledge, performing
labor or structuring the world. As Bennett boldly writes, “Such a newfound attentiveness to
matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it
can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of
inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations.” New Materialism offers an inverse
of the famous closing of “Theses on Feuerbach”: “Have you heard of chaos theory?

76 Theodor Adorno, Negative Dialectics. Trans. E. B. Ashton. New York: Continuum, 1973:
78. Cited in Bennett, 18.

Vibrant Matter: 19.

78 Kimberley DeFazio, “The Spectral Ontology.”

Philosophers cannot change the world; the point is to interpret it.”\textsuperscript{80} Much as Toni Morrison reports that Africanist evasions in US literature “tear at the narrative fabric of their stories, forcing labyrinthine evasions and contradictions and contortions to maintain discrete racial categories,” the personal anecdotes, “I” statements and critical prerogative of environmental humanist ecomimesis seem to contradict the new materialist commitment to decentering human agency. This tension at once demonstrates critique’s inability to abandon the Kantian subject as well as the basic untenability of post-subject subjectivity during an ecological crisis that evidences decisive action on the part of human actors and systems as well as begs for similarly decisive action of a different kind. That ecomimesis is delivered with a strong, embodied authorial voice indicates as much: that the shunning of mastery actually reifies and redoubles the masterful position.

4.2.b True consumption

I attribute the split between new and historical materialism to their respective critical gazes at the site of consumption and production. In \textit{The German Ideology}, Marx and Engels write:

\begin{quote}
If you proceed from production, you necessarily concern yourself with the real conditions of production and with the productive activity of men. But if you proceed from consumption, you can set your mind at rest by merely declaring that consumption is not as present ‘human,’ and by postulating ‘human consumption,’ education for true consumption and so on. You can
\end{quote}

be content with such phases, without bothering at all about the real living conditions and the activity of men.\textsuperscript{81}

We might think of Bennett’s project as aspiring to an “education for true consumption,” in that she contends that our retraining to more attentive interaction with the vibrant matter of everyday life marks the newest and truest ecopolitical horizon and that demystification’s more structural approach to political change is inert. Marx and Engels instruct that such thinking can only originate from the site of consumption, which is finally conditioned by productive relations. A materialism like Harvey’s, by contrast, insists that the “permanent commercial circus” of Baltimore’s Inner Harbor does not exist by virtue of freely made individual consumer decisions. Such consumption is preconditioned, a much later link in the productive chain.

John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark discuss this prevailing consumer-based model of environmentalism through the category of “the enigma of consumption,” which obscures productive relations and characterizes ecological crisis as the collection of our individual moral failings. “Production and consumption,” they write, “are elements of a single process, dialectically connected, and like any organic whole mutually interacting — production, however, is predominant since its conditions are ‘the real point of departure’ for the various moments [of consumption].”\textsuperscript{82} Ecological politics requires attention to the whole of this process but especially its origin in production, or it forfeits struggle over the terrain where


capital, labor and nature actually meet. But as climate change is in the mainstream cast as a problem of consumer society — a cultural pathology rather than economic fiat — it is thought to be best remedied through austerity measures voluntarily adopted by individual consumers. Hence sustainability’s Holy Trinity of plastic bags, lightbulbs and gas tanks, and hence Bennett’s subutopian counterfactual imagining that in each moment we are fully empowered to choose between being a good eco-subject or a bad one. Vitalist sensitivity at the site of consumption is necessary to incite large-scale ecological transformation.

Foster and Clark observe that today consumer environmentalism predominates over suggestions of Malthusian population control, which would appear to signify a recognition of global warming’s differential, historically-conditioned causes: rather than attribute climate change to species reproduction, as population control measures do, an eye to consumption indicates an appraisal of extractive capitalism’s deleterious environmental effects. Foster and Clark note, however, the “semantic confusion” that characterizes this turn to consumption in mainstream climate media, which elides environmental and economic definitions of the word and shifts focus from system to subject.

In terms of environment, consumption occurs at the stage of production, whether “the transformation of nature through human labor” that consumes natural resources or the productive role played by fossil-fueled investment activities. In economic terms, however, consumption signifies consumer activity, unmoored from production. Mainstream environmentalism follows a rubric of ethical shopping that hardly approaches the actual “consumption” at the root of climate change. The energy consumed in US industrial production, for instance, outsizes that consumed in all residential, commercial and
transportation activities combined.\textsuperscript{83} Waste disposal offers a similar lesson: consumer waste amounts to approximately 2.5\% of total waste, while the remaining 97.5\% consists of “(1) industrial waste, (2) construction and demolition waste, and (3) special waste (waste from mining, fuel production, and metals processing)… [occurring] outside of households [and] invisible to most individuals who, in their role as consumers, have no direct part in either its generation or disposal.”\textsuperscript{84} The would-be eco-friendly consumer is, then, in Marx’s words, “no freer than the producer [the worker],” whose “means and needs… are determined by his social position, which itself depends on the whole social organization.”\textsuperscript{85} He sums up this bind: “World trade turns almost entirely around the needs, not of individual consumption, but of production.”\textsuperscript{86} Foster and Clark plainly state the matter: “A good must be produced before it can be consumed.”\textsuperscript{87} Cloaked in the vocabulary of capital’s critique, consumption-oriented climate policy asks for what is not only inconvenient but entirely ineffective. No

\begin{flushright}
\begin{itemize}
\item [\textsuperscript{84}] John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “The Ecology of Consumption”: 117.
\item [\textsuperscript{86}] Karl Marx, \textit{The Poverty of Philosophy}: 41-42. Cited in John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “The Ecology of Consumption”: 117.
\item [\textsuperscript{87}] John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, 116. They continue: “By ignoring the difference between these two very different notions of consumption [environmental and economic], it is easy to insinuate that the problem of the consumption of environmental resources is to be laid at the door of consumers alone. Yet, to neglect in this way the impact of investors on the environment is to exclude the motor force of the capitalist economy. Spending by investors is just as much as part of overall environmental throughput as is the spending of consumers. To lose sight of investment in the environmental equation is to deemphasize the role of production, profits, and capital accumulation.”
\end{itemize}
\end{flushright}
matter how receptive we are to their agency, the plastic bottle cap and work glove are, as commodities, “manifestations of definite material-productive relations?” — their mere appearance in our lives signals that, by the time of our encounter with them, the real environmental damage has, so to speak, already been done.88

Foster and Clark write, “While the environmental problem arises primarily from production, i.e., in the transformation of nature by human labor, it is increasingly attributed entirely to consumption, which thus becomes its own cause and effect.”89 “Its own cause and effect” is, I think, a nifty shorthand for the naturalist mode of Bennett and other new materialisms, for Rancière’s “vicious circle;” and for the Anthropocene’s fable-tragedy. The “environmental proletariat” that Foster and Clark offer at the conclusion of their essay might initially appear similar to Bennett’s “political ecology of things,” Karen Barad’s “government of things” (following Foucault) or even Levi Bryant’s “democracy of objects.”90 However, though all materialisms “believe in” matter, so to speak, non-dialectic ones approach it as self-evident stuff to the detriment of the longer story of production. Foster and Clark’s environmental proletariat does not form horizontally at the site of consumption and prompt us to either observe or ignore. Rather, it extends vertically across the production process, stringing together the human and nonhuman “workers” and consumers whose shared, structurally co-constitutive exploitation comprises fossil capital. It is how labor is extracted

88 John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “The Ecology of Consumption”: 123.
89 John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, “The Ecology of Consumption”: 118.
by capital and how our lives are made to be reproduced within it rather than our individual consumer sensitivities and failings that is the purview of ecopolitics and where the materialist critic must position themselves on questions of environment.

Ecomimesis, however, takes place at the site of consumption, where meaningful ecological politics is always-already precluded. It is not a coincidence that in writing from the Baltimore street corner or staring out one’s office window, ecocritics employ the ekphrastic mode of Tom McCarthy and W.H. Auden discussed in my chapter on the Anthropocene. The site of consumption occupies a different plane from that of production: one is where we each make circumscribed decisions and one is where the world takes shape (to reiterate, what’s a ploughman to do?). Thus it is hardly surprising that the embodied, situated writerly position produces an almost choked quality in many ecocritical texts. They are self-admittedly non-masterful, exploratory (in Bennett’s case, proudly fictional) and so perhaps they necessarily fumble in their search for an epistemic paradigm that remains out of reach and for a sense of political capacity that their immediate environment disallows. Where a method like Harvey’s avoids such ekphrastic paralysis, even while employing a parallel narrative style that looks across the Baltimore skyline from a Federal Hill cemetery, is in its connecting the author’s place at the site of consumption to that of production. Harvey cultivates a sense of place to trace its historical origins rather than to abstract locality from the broader productive framework that gives it material form.

A similar historical materialist presence as that structuring Chakrabarty’s “The Climate of History” is present in ecocriticism’s ecomimetic form, one that is available to an even more direct application of Morrison’s account of Africanism. While such analyses as Vibrant
Matter shun a hermeneutics of suspicion that reveals the hidden productive origins of
everyday surface appearances, they nonetheless frequently appeal to racialized figures that
metonymize how it is finally capital that is producing climate crisis. These figures function in
a similarly structural way as do the Marxist and postcolonial accounts of global warming that
are paradoxically essential to and erased by Chakrabarty’s Anthropocene species.

Ecocriticism has of course a long history of deploying the figure of the Indian as a “canary in
the coal mine” and/or unalienated and authentic eco-subject around which white
environmentalism can rally conservation efforts. In the context of global warming, this
dying-dead Indian role is occupied by the climate refugee, whether a post-Katrina New
Orleans resident, the Bangladeshi fisherman, the Syrian refugee or the Maasai tribesman,
among others. The coherence of the figures conjured by the ecocritic’s imagined climate
emergency, whether the species of the Anthropocene or the agential matter of New
Materialism, take shape around these precarious figures and the stalling of energy transition,
land redistribution and other necessary environmental measures whose absence has rendered
them without refuge. With respect to the Global North ecocritic, these figures mark an
outside to such criticism.

As it concerns the time, rather than place, of critique, ecomimesis occupies a resolute
present tense, one defined by the specter of climate emergency as it suddenly appears.
Lukács asserts that the realist’s obligation to narrate rather than describe reality requires a
retrospect unavailable to the author who observes such events in real time: “In narration the

writer must move with the greatest deftness between past and present so that the reader may grasp the real causality of the epic events.”

Drawing upon Goethe’s writings on the epic, Lukács defines realism by the “effective poetic selection of the essential elements within the varied richness of life.”

“The criteria for determining whether a detail is pertinent” — i.e., whether it “encompass[es] more complex and indirect relationships” than spelled by the surface appearance of drama — appear only in a reflective mode. And it is only the sense of causality afforded through this past tense that makes possible our engagement with characters as their thoughts and actions interlock with varying conditions of constraint and choice. Any Present-Tense™ representation, like that of naturalism, distorts such dynamic interactions and empties them of historical and thus political meaning: “the observer, necessarily a contemporary to what he observes, loses himself in a whirlwind of details of apparently equal significance.”

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92 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 133.

93 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 128. Later: “Description contemporizes everything. Narration recounts the past. One describes what one sees, and the spatial ‘present’ confers a temporal ‘present’ on men and objects. But it is an illusory present, not the present of immediate action of the drama. The best modern narrative has been able to infuse the dramatic element into the novel by transferring events into the past. But the contemporaneity of the observer making a description is the antithesis of the contemporaneity of the drama. Static situations are described, states or attitudes of mind of human beings or conditions of things — still lives. Representation declines into genre, and the natural principle of epic selection is lost. One state of mind at any moment and of itself without relation to men’s activity is as important or as irrelevant as another. And this equivalence is even more blatant when it comes to objects. In a narrative it is reasonable to mention only those aspects of a thing which are important to its function in a specific action. In and of itself everything has innumerable qualities. When a writer attempts as an observer and describer to achieve a comprehensive description, he must either reject any principle of selection, undertake an inexhaustible labour of Sisyphus or simply emphasize the picturesque and superficial aspects best adapted to description.” Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 130-131.

94 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 128.

95 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 128.
For U., “the Great Report would not be something that was either to-come or completed, in-the-past: it would be all now.” Bennett attends above all to the event, the encounter, the instance. The Present-Tense is what makes U.’s anthropology trademark-able. It is the “new” and “vital” which substitutes materialism’s “historical” thrust. The reader will recall that it is precisely this ahistorical quality that defines the Anthropocene’s fate narrative — the “technical delay” of species destiny, the jump cut from discovering fire to patenting the steam engine. A tactic of ecomimesis that Morton dubs “Latour Litanies” issues a material roll-call that in an instant collapses all of modern history like an accordion into a single image or phrase. We have seen the litany before, in Satin Island’s dossiers: parachuting accidents, jellyfish, traffic jams, scam emails, shark attacks. In Bennett, glove, pollen, rat, bottle cap, stick, ecocritic. In Jan Zalasiewicz’s The Earth After Us, the “Human Event Stratum” of a fossilized city:  

Here, there will be meters-thick layers of rubble, of compressed outlines of concrete buildings, some still cemented hard, some now decalcified and crumbly; of softened brick structures; of irregular patches of iron oxides and

96 A footnote in Timothy Morton’s “Here Comes Everything” directed me to Ian Bogost’s “Latour Litanizer” algorithm, which generates a random set of Wikipedia items as a tribute to this frequent trope of Bruno Latour and object theorists. Graham Harman and Levi Bryant also both have blog posts about Latour Litanies. See Bogost’s generator “Latour Litanizer: Generate your own Latour Litanies” (http://www.bogost.com/blog/latour_litanizer.shtml); Harman’s “Latour Litanies and Gibbon” (https://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2009/12/15/latour-litanies-and-gibbon/); and Bryant’s “Latour Litanizer” (https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/04/26/latour-litanizer/). Morton reminds us that “a liturgical litany is usually penitential and requires the repetition of some formula (such as ‘Lord hear us’),” suggesting that New Materialism’s rhetorical tropes reveal its philosophical preoccupation with the subject’s capacity to know and act to be something like a political tonic. The Anthropocene’s historical presence in the case of the new materialist — in the forms of the litany-ecomimesis — amounts to an anxious, evasive self-flagellation/self-forgiveness.
sulphide representing former iron artifacts, from automobiles to AK-47s; of darkened and opaque remnants of plastics; of white, devitrified fragments of glass jars and bottles; of carbonized structures of shaped wood; of outlines of tunnels and pipes and road foundations; of giant middens of rubble and waste.  

Here, fossil capital is refracted into the apparently happenstance skeletons of buildings, automobiles, machine guns; then refracted even further into the brute stuff of plastics, glass and wood. Much as New Materialism likes to think of itself as the modest rubble that remains after some theoretical detonation of the modern subject, in the blink of an eye the litany condenses swaths of historical phenomena into a mere assemblage of stuff. The writerly time of the ecocritic evades historical materialist engagement with environmental crisis in favor of a naturalist one.

4.2.c The new white man of late fossil capital

This distinction is not useful to make for its own sake but rather because different representations of what “matters” in environmental politics bear different relationships with the project of fossil capital that drives global warming. This is why Morrison's project is of interest to me: of course it is plainly racist for the white environmentalist to invoke a victim stereotype like the rainforest tribal leader to enlighten the European bourgeois on the underbelly of history, and of course it is tone-deaf to insist upon nonhuman agency at the moment that the nonhuman world appears under the thumb of a human economic regime. But Morrison insists that beyond critiquing these literary tropes is understanding how they narratively secure the “new white man,” in my case a subject specific to late fossil capital as it

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encounters its own climate contradiction. Morrison’s object is “the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it.” She goes on, “The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination, and behavior of slaves is valuable. But equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters.”

I similarly want “to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served.”

Who and what is “served” by the ecomimetic, naturalist form of environmental humanist scholarship?

Medovoi’s “The Biopolitical Unconscious” historicizes ecocritical hermeneutics to answer precisely this question, and I consider my treatment of naturalism in this body of scholarship a further refining of his general diagnosis: ecocriticism’s calls for a more attentive, sustainable regard for the environment bear a biopolitical unconscious advocating better management of capitalist value extraction and accumulation. Climate change’s “new white m[e]n” of the species and nonhuman material agents represent a development in capitalist ideology specific to the neoliberal long wave of fossil development in its encounter with climate change. Ecocriticism’s “framing discourse of an anthropogenically produced crisis of earthly life” indicates that its external referent lies rather than in the critical treatment of historical phenomena otherwise presented as natural, as with feminist or Marxist analysis, instead in “the natural sciences, which establish the axiomatic truth of contemporary ecological crisis.”

Ecocriticism self-defines by a “nature” unacknowledged by some

98 Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: 11-12.

99 Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: 90.

100 Leerom Medovoi, “The Biopolitical Unconscious”: 125.
formulation of hegemony (humans, culture, modernity) and which requires acknowledgment for more sustainable and righteous modes of living. In ecocritical literary studies, textual interpretation “work[s] backward from the crisis-ridden present (either openly or tacitly) to the origins and development of either the human attitudes and practices that have led to the brink of such disaster, or else to alternative human attitudes or practices that might help us to avert it.”

Where Bonneuil and Fressoz describe this narratological phenomenon as a story of “awakening” and I have characterized it as the tragedy-fable of Icarus, Medovoi assesses this “ubiquitous trope of environmental crisis” as “an avowedly Christian religious narrative … secularized and imported into the context of environmental criticism.”

To assess this hermeneutic mechanism, Medovoi asks, “To what histories does this peculiar path of the ecocritical subject allude?” Following Greg Garrard, he finds that “the ur-text for this environmental crisis tradition” is Thomas Malthus’s 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which predicts apocalypse in modern demographic increases and resource use. Tellingly, Malthus’s *Essay* is likewise an ur-text for the birth of biopolitics and the emergence of population as an object to be managed for continual capital growth. In accounting for the rapid population rise and urbanization of early industrial production, modern power adopts a newly self-reflective stance, famously resulting in a governmental apparatus of prison, medicine and school that manage demography against the construction of and extraction from new and often unstable environments of city and country. Medovoi interprets Foucault’s diagnosis of biopolitics as a reconfiguration of power’s object from people and

territory (“those who form the collective subject of the sovereign on one hand, and their associated object world, the geographic realm or domain that delimits the sovereign’s jurisdiction”) to population and environment (“a space organized not by the law but by the irregularities of life and its biological requirements,” ones under increasing strain from industrial production and demographic shifts). Following Jameson’s “political unconscious,” Medovoi names the formal structure of this self-reflective governing mode in contemporary environmental thought its “biopolitical unconscious”: “biopolitics represents the political externality with which this literary hermeneutic [ecocriticism], knowingly or unknowingly, concerns itself.”

In my mind, this is an absolutely essential point for understanding the stakes of the representation of fossil-fueled climate crisis offered by wide swaths of Environmental Humanities scholarship, so I will quote from Medovoi at length:

Like “population,” the “environment” is a category that cannot be taken for granted as something to be universally generalized throughout human history. It is true that human beings have always made their lives under the conditions established by their necessary relationship to the land, waters, climate, and other species with which they cohabitate. But the discovery of the environment as a statistical set of factors amenable to political intervention quickly placed it at the center of the first genuinely reflexive mode of regulation in the history of capitalism, one that at its core sought to govern the effects of both natural and social surroundings on the productivity of the population that drew life from them.

This point is crucial because it upends completely the founding (and deadlocked) idealistic binary of all hitherto existing ecocriticism, namely that between “man” and “nature,” “humanity” and the “environment,” or the “anthropocentric” and the “ecocentric” perspective. To the extent that

104 Leerom Medovoi, “The Biopolitical Unconscious”: 129.
ecocriticism’s animating assumption grew out of the political tradition known as deep ecology, it explains the escalation of environmental damage as a direct effect of human beings’ failure to appreciate the “intrinsic value” of a nonhuman world (the environment, ecology, nature). In this view, if ecocriticism can inculcate an appreciation for the intrinsic value of the environment, its transformation of people’s “hearts and minds” promises to liberate nature from our degradation of it. … As Lance Newman points out, this philosophically idealist conception of historical change stands in utter contradiction to ecocriticism’s allegedly materialist concern with the environment. Ecocritics who attribute environmental degradation to our wrongheaded ideas about dominating nature in fact resemble nobody so much as the young Hegelians of the early nineteenth century, whom Marx and Engels roundly attacked for expecting that the world could be changed simply through a change in our “consciousness [which] amounts to a demand to interpret reality in another way.”

So far, my point has been to argue that a historical materialist ecocriticism must study literature’s relationship, not to our ideas about the environment, but rather to the material relations that have historically produced the “environment” as an operative biopolitical category. Both the “population” and the “environment” are not merely ideas, doctrines, or ideologies, although they certainly do approach human beings and their milieu through an act of abstraction (their statistical or demographic character). Rather, they are concrete mechanisms through which those bodies and places are governed. To use Althusser’s term, they are apparatuses that serve to reproduce the capitalist mode of production. Above all, the history of biopolitics teaches us that ecocriticism’s binary opposition of man and environment (aligned with bad anthropocentric and good biocentric thinking, respectively) is utterly ahistorical. The historicizing alternative to such metaphysics would be an ecocritical inquiry into the materially specific (and recent) invention of the “population/environment/capital” triad, a systemic exercise of political power that only some two hundred years ago began to develop strategies for pacifying, harnessing, and reorganizing the mutual relationships of human and nonhuman life toward the end of optimal capital accumulation.106

The appearance of environmental crisis, or really such a thing as environment at all, as it appears in the naturalist mode of ecocritical New Materialism — witnessed by the spectator rather than produced with the participant, flattening all factors across the productive process into a single unit of “actant,” occurring in the never-ending Present-Tense of emergency,

arranged into assemblages that exist in no structural relationship to one another besides in further nested assemblages — facilitates continual capital accumulation. The fundamental carbon contradiction on display in fossil-fueled global warming presents for capital perhaps its strongest emergency prerogative yet for the management of life by increasingly austere measures. In reproducing this emergency event as a sudden interruption of the otherwise “normal” flow of events, this tradition of Environmental Humanities scholarship reifies fossil capital’s terms and strengthens its cause.

Medovoi’s discussion of naturalism in the early 20th century suggests that it is this particular genre which “introduces both population and environment simultaneously into its literature, taking for the first time the ‘built environment’ of urban life as a kind of ecological system.” Bennett’s own naturalist scenes likewise represent the urban spaces of Baltimore as a new type of nature that we can use to reorder our political norms, from the endless anthropocentric blame-game of demystification to a “political ecology of things.” Medovoi’s attendant argument for a formal literary ecocriticism — much like my argument for a formal conception of petrofiction in the previous chapter — points to the reified thinking of naturalist form as it appears in novels and I'll extend that to its appearance in new materialist ecocriticism. As it stands, this body like Stephen Crane or Theodore Dreiser represents the content of capitalist environment with too little if any regard for the form in which such environment is made. Ecocriticism of the realist order advocated by Lukács might return

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“proportion” to what has been “flattened” by naturalist representation, as “all basic aspects of life are smothered under a blanket of delicately delineated minutiae.”

4.2.d Sudden catastrophes

In “Narrate or Describe?” Lukács includes a quotation from Flaubert on *Sentimental Education* where he says that the climaxes we are so accustomed to in realist narrative do not reflect life: “In life nothing like this exists.” Lukács swiftly corrects Flaubert’s assessment as an assessment made from the position of capital:

Do ‘climaxes’ exist in art alone? Of course not. Flaubert’s frank confession is important not only as a personal criticism of his significant novel but even more as a disclosure of his basically erroneous conception of reality, of the objective existence of society, and of the relationship between nature and art. His belief that ‘climaxes’ exist only in art and that they are therefore created by artists at will is simply subjective prejudice. It is a prejudice arising from a superficial observation of the characteristics of bourgeois life and of the forms life takes in bourgeois society, an observation ignoring the motive forces of social development and their unremitting influence on even the superficial phenomena of life. In such an abstract view life appears as a constant, even-tenured stream or as a monotonous plain sprawling without contours. The monotony, admittedly, is interrupted at times by ‘sudden’ catastrophes. In reality, however — and naturally in capitalist reality as well

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108 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 131. Equally biting, Lukács quotes Friedrich Hebbel: “Because moss shows up more impressively if the painter ignores the tree, and the tree stands out better if the forest disappears, there is a general cry of exultation, and artists whose powers scarcely suffice to render the pettiest aspects of nature and who instinctively do not attempt loftier tasks are exalted above others who do not depict the dance of the gnats because it is scarcely visible next to the dance of the planets. The ‘peripheral’ begins to bloom everywhere: the mud on Napoleon’s boot at the moment of the hero’s abdication is as painstakingly portrayed as the spiritual conflict in his face. … In short, the comma puts on coat-tails and in its lofty complacency smiles haughtily at the sentence to which it owes its existence.” “Narrate or Describe?”: 131-132.

109 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 121.
— ‘sudden’ catastrophes are actually long in preparation. They do not stand in exclusive contrast to an apparently peaceful flow but are the outcome of a complicated, uneven evolution. And this evolution shapes the supposedly unruffled surface of Flaubert’s sphere.110

Only in the framework of capitalist ideology is global warming a sudden catastrophe; in reality, it is absolutely normal, much as Marx understood economic crises to be the “most normal” aspect of life under capitalism.111 The naturalist agnosticism to the making of climaxes, and further to how certain events come to appear as “normal” or “sudden” in the fold of capitalist reality, ensures that its representations remain superficial, presenting not only an analytic deficiency — less “true” than the realist representations of a critic like Harvey or a novelist like Tolstoy — but more importantly a political obstruction. Scholarship in the Environmental Humanities deploys fable-tragedy and naturalist tropes as erasures and convenient shorthands (“species,” “actants”) for the mess of history made plain by historical materialist analysis of climate change, an analysis that insists upon redistribution of productive power rather than a recalibration of how the scenes and objects of consumption acts on us. At the outset of Vibrant Matter, Bennett contends, “Ethical political action on the part of humans seems to require not only a vigilant critique of existing institutions but also positive, even utopian alternatives. … A relentless approach toward demystification works

110 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 121-122.

111 “In objective reality the false, subjective and abstract contrast between the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal’ vanishes. Marx, for example, considered the economic crisis as the ‘most normal’ characteristic of capitalist economy. ‘The autonomy assumed by interrelated and complementary factors,’ he wrote, ‘is violently destroyed. Hence the crisis reveals the unity of factors which had become independent of each other.’ Reality is viewed quite differently by apologetic bourgeois science of the second half of the nineteenth century. A crisis appears as a ‘catastrophe’ which ‘suddenly’ interrupts the ‘normal’ flow of the economy. By analogy, every revolution is considered catastrophic and abnormal.” Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 122.
against the possibility of positive formulations.” However, the “negative” position identified with critique here is mistaken for the converse of a “positive” project (as Bennett identifies vital materialism) rather than its precondition. Utopian imagination is the other side of critique’s coin, not its opposite or substitute.

As stated, I read Bennett like Chakrabarty as symptomatic of broader trends in the field and in environmental thinking in the twenty-first century, as well as as landmark scholarly texts that have encouraged these trends in a particular direction. Lukács was likewise interested not in condemning this or that literary mode but in discovering what the eclipse of the epic analyses of realism by naturalism signified for the prospects of anticapitalist struggle during the nineteenth century. Lukács discusses how Zola and Flaubert on the one hand and Tolstoy, Balzac, Dickens and Stendhal on the other responded in different ways to the crises of 1848, in terms of their occupations and civic associations, their personal writings and reflections on changes in the operation of capital, and the form their literary works take. Lukács is interested in correlating biographical detail from individual authors to the political

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112 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*: xv.

113 As Lukács writes, “What is important is knowing how and why description, originally one of the many modes of epic art (undoubtedly a subordinate mode), became the principal mode.” Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 116-117.

114 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 118. Later: “Flaubert’s confession is an uncommonly honest expression of the general ideological crisis of the bourgeois intelligentsia after 1848.” “Narrate or Describe?”: 143.
ideologies manifested in their representative techniques. Though I have focused on particular texts and thinkers here, such individualization is not my intention. It is rather to contextualize with our own moment of profound ideological crisis the specific contours of contemporary knowledge production at work in the Environmental Humanities and the political costs of those contours — to historicize the predominance of a descriptive method such as Bennett’s and to measure its stakes. Lukács writes,

New styles, new ways of representing reality, though always linked to old forms and styles, never arise from any immanent dialectic within artistic forms. Every new style is socially and historically determined and is the product of a social development. But to recognize the determining factors in the formation of artistic styles is not to assign equal artistic value or rank to these styles.

I agree with Lukács on both fronts: one, representational “styles” whether employed by novelists or scholars emerge from historical conditions; and, two, such representations help

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115 “In their public activity as well as in their private lives, they followed the tradition of the writers, artists and scientists of the Renaissance and of the Enlightenment, men who participated variously and actively in the great social struggles of their times, men whose writing was the fruit of such rich, diverse activity. They were not ‘specialists’ in the sense of the capitalist division of labor. … They became specialists in the craft of writing, writers in the sense of the capitalist division of labor.” Georg Lukács: “Narrate or Describe?”: 118-119.

116 Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 119. Also relevant here: “Description, as we have discussed it, becomes the dominant mode in composition in a period in which, for social reasons, the sense of what is primary in epic construction has been lost. Description is the writer’s substitute for the epic significance that has been lost. But in the genesis of new ideological forms, an interaction always takes place. The predominance of description is not only a result but also and simultaneously a cause, the cause of a further divorce of literature from epic significance. The domination of capitalist prose over the inner poetry of human experience, the continuous dehumanization of social life, the general debasement of humanity — all these are objective facts of the development of capitalism. The descriptive method is the inevitable product of this development. Once established this method is taken up by leading writers dedicated in their own way, and then it in turn effects the literary representation of reality. The poetic level of life decays — and literature intensifies the decay.” Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?”: 127.
to shape precisely those conditions, though no single text does so in a total, immediate or
definitive way. In a struggle for people and planet whose winner is very much not yet
determined, the dominance of one representational style or another, one critical method or
another, matters, especially as Environmental Humanists measure our work at least in part
by its political chops. This chapter’s historical diagnoses of trends and assumptions in the
field are meant to evaluate and challenge them to ensure that our scholarship indeed
supports a just ecological transition.

The fossil capitalist realism at play in New Materialism no doubt indexes the historical
conditions that Bennett herself identifies as inspiring *Vibrant Matter* (ecological crisis,
perpetual war and democratic ebb). It also and more specifically symptomatizes conditions
of contemporary knowledge production that hold certain methods to possess a common
sense value because they break new critical paths while characterizing others as outmoded
and deficient because they tell us something we already know: capital holds the reins.

Leaving behind the obvious and tired mode of historical materialist critique in favor of a
professionalized “naive ambition,” *Vibrant Matter* theorizes through the eyes of capital as it
builds a new mode of accumulation to contain its own environmental crisis. Bennett
presents this crisis as social fact much as Zola’s descriptive technique, despite his left politics,
ultimately fetishizes capitalist relations by neglecting the social process that produces the
environments represented in his novels.117 In depicting the social as a horizontal assemblage
of actants, Bennett obscures the structures that produce and arrange such assemblages and
that differentiate the agency of the actants there involved. In asking us to “take seriously the

vitality of (nonhuman) bodies” — as if modernity simply undervalues or ignores nature rather than strategically arranges its extraction for continual accumulation — she confines environmental politics to the level of personal belief, which in itself is a defeating catch-22 (per my analysis of the fable-tragedy) and, even if it were not a trap, presupposes that systemic change follows from the reconstruction of personal beliefs. In suggesting we abandon a “politics of blame” for this self-directed reconstruction, she misunderstands the power of blame, which lies not simply in its assignment to bad actors by a vague and nonexistent figure of “the public” but in how its determination raises the consciousnesses of those who have skin in the game and makes possible their collective claim on a redistribution of power. In this sense, it is primarily the confusion of demystification for its own sake with demystification’s profound and essential role in continually recreating the historical conditions for material struggle that confines new materialist analysis to the reality of fossil capital. This confusion, in turn, begs important questions about the purpose and stakes of university knowledge production — for its own sake, for capitalist accumulation, for collective struggle — given the embedded crisis conditions New Materialism responds to: the onset of climate change, the limits of suspicion, and higher education austerity. I take these up in the conclusion.
Conclusion

Strategic Realisms in the Neoliberal University

“To my mind, no one has yet improved on Marx’s 1843 definition of Critical Theory as ‘the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age.’ What is so appealing about this definition is its straightforwardly political character. It makes no claim to any special epistemological status but, rather, supposes that with respect to justification there is no philosophically interesting difference between a critical theory of society and an uncritical one. But there is, according to this definition, an important political difference. A critical social theory frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan though not uncritical identification. The questions it asks and the models it designs are informed by that identification and interest.”

Nancy Fraser, “What’s Critical About Critical Theory?”

“What are our long-term goals?”

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*.

Just as often as corporate and state leaders chide environmentalists to “be realistic” about our climate policy demands, environmentalists inside the university and out chide an

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imagined contingency of non-believers to face “the reality of climate change.” Most of us, however, hardly need the wake-up call. As Erik Swyngedouw writes,

Consensus has emerged over the seriousness of the environmental condition and the precariousness of our socio-ecological balance. BP has rebranded itself ‘Beyond Petroleum’ to certify its environmental credentials. Shell plays a more eco-sensitive tune, eco-activists of various political or ideological stripes and colors engage in direct action in the name of saving the planet, New Age post-materialists join the chorus that laments the irreversible decline of ecological amenities, eminent scientists enter the domain to warn of pending ecological catastrophe, politicians try to outmaneuver each other in brandishing the ecological banner, and a wide range of policy initiatives and practices, performed under the motif of ‘sustainability,’ are discussed, conceived and implemented at all geographical scales.³

Amid such popular consensus concerning climate change’s reality and the catch-all ethics of sustainability and “taking action,” it is clear that the dividing lines on the path to carbon emissions reduction, energy transition, and wider projects of resource decommodification, environmental rehabilitation, and climate reparations do not fall not along belief or knowledge. Instead, they fall along historical consciousness of fossil capital and the attachment of this consciousness to a collective political vision. When climate scientists profess “a moral obligation … to ‘tell it like it is’” — a realist call-to-arms — their sense of the facts and of their responsibility to a public is not wrong, far from it, nor are they being unrealistic in the deflationary sense invoked by those in power to protect the status quo.⁴ Such calls are, however, not strategic.

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In Leerom Medovoi’s article “The Biopolitical Unconscious” discussed at length in the previous chapter, he makes two interventions into the field of ecocriticism. The first concerns the historical emergence of the “environment” as an object of biopolitical management. In the mid-nineteenth century, Medovoi argues, industrial capital adopted a newly self-reflective stance of environmental consciousness so that it could sustain accumulation in the face of increasing environmental crises that it itself produced. Biopower, as Foucault famously named it, identifies a governmental apparatus including medicine, prisons and schools designed to manage the contradictions and instabilities of swelling demography within modern capital’s new environments of city and country.5

Retooling Foucault’s formulation of biopower — “Security, Territory, Population” — as “Security, Environment, Population,” Medovoi argues that environmentalism, and specifically its policy directives of population control and individual behavior modification, aims to rerationalize capital in the face of its contradictions. A word for capital’s identification of its own unsustainability, today as in the early days of industrialization “environment” invokes a realist epistemic project: it locates political progressivism in revealing the hidden truth of crisis so as to contain it within capital rather than in dismantling capitalist relations of infinite extraction and growth that drive such crisis from the start. Swyngedouw’s diagnosis of the common cause made of environmental awareness and sustainability by such strange bedfellows as “New Age post-materialists” and oil companies attempting a public relations makeover sharply indicates how politically defanged this realism is.

Medovoi’s second intervention is to locate this essentially bourgeois impulse of environmental realism in the literary ecocritic. Offering a genealogy of ecocriticism that originates in Thomas Malthus, Medovoi demonstrates that the writerly position of the ecocritic is truth-teller amid “an anthropogenically produced crisis of earthly life.” The ecocritic’s job is not to historicize such a concept as “environment” or “environmental crisis” (as in the historical materialist critical traditions of Marxism, feminism and postcolonial thought, for instance) but to reveal the capital-T Truth of environmental crisis as a prelude to demanding action, and fast. The field’s external referent lies in “the natural sciences, which establish the axiomatic truth of contemporary ecological crisis” and, like capital, its goal is the resolution of systemic crisis in systemic sustainability. Following Fredric Jameson’s “political unconscious,” Medovoi names this resolution structure of ecocriticism a “biopolitical unconscious,” arguing that the objective to rerationalize capital which guided the emergence of bourgeois environmentalist thinking in the nineteenth century is the same which ultimately drives literary ecocriticism as a research field in the university today, regardless of the political commitments held by one ecocritic or another. As he writes, “biopolitics represents the political externality with which this literary hermeneutic, knowingly or unknowingly, concerns itself.” Ecocriticism’s realist epistemic project is the same as that of biopower: in revealing, documenting, lamenting, resolving the supposedly hidden reality of

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environmental crisis, it ultimately works to reify the “reality” of fossil capital that environmental crisis disturbs.

I have argued that the Environmental Humanities discourse of New Materialism testifies strongly to Medovoi’s diagnosis that the realist discourse of ecocriticism is a biopolitical tool conducive rather than mutinous to capital’s environmental crises. Though taking a different route, my analysis of the Anthropocene makes a similar claim. Expanding beyond the purview of these discourses and beyond the literary ecocriticism that concerns Medovoi, I am interested in analyzing how the similarly realist pursuit of truth by academics researching questions of environment and energy across a range of disciplines beyond the humanities performs this same biopolitical function for capital, not always by intention but in every case owing to the political economy of the university under neoliberalism or late fossil capital.

Relatedly, I am interested in determining how university researchers can retool our work to match the goal many of us have for our research: to not simply render the status quo sustainable but, in short, to build climate justice. How can academics contribute to energy transition and climate justice? How can we work with reference not to the axiomatic truth of ecological crisis itself or its resolution within capitalist terms but to an anti-capitalist, decolonial, reparative and eco-socialist abolition of the conditions responsible for such crisis? What role are we to play — as researchers, teachers, workers — in not just revealing a hidden reality but in building a better one? In other words, what do we want and how do we fight to win it?

The slipperiness and revealing versatility of the term realism brought me to this dissertation project, a way of mapping realism’s plaited literary, political and epistemological meanings
that join and sunder as capital sees fit and, at the same time, remain indispensable to the struggle against fossil capital. It remains, however, that the reality of climate change is no longer the privileged belief of the left and a weapon we can use against the barbarism of the right. Realism’s revelation of truth does not scold climate denialists into eco-socialism but rather lends itself to a spectrum of political projects, whether a collective, decommodified, abolitionist ecological vision or the preservation of capital accumulation by means of Third Way environmentalism, apocalyptic nihilism, techno-utopianism and/or ecofascism. Today’s dominant cultural and political mode of capitalist realism does not require the ideological consistency or affective investment of a modernist understanding of reality and seizes upon the epistemic instability of postmodern irreality to advance ruling class ends. The tenacity of the fossil-fueled capitalist world system — whether by far-right denial, neofascist acceptance or the climate-believing neoliberal center, which aids and abets both — owes in part to this epistemic vacuum and late capital’s eclipse of reality within the tautology of market fundamentalism.

I will suggest that to escape this tautological loop in our own work and build climate justice as members of universities communities and beyond, academics should research, teach and otherwise work on energy and environment in a similarly strategic mode as the ruling class. We will not win climate justice by simply appealing to the reality of climate change (proving it, documenting it, tracing its roots as Truth), nor by evacuating any and all claims to reality (as New Materialist ecocritics accuse of postmodern critics and as the right has used to tremendous effect to stall emissions reduction and dismantle environmental protections).

Rather, a unified left inside the university must research and teach by a particular set of political convictions and toward particular political ends. I will offer “strategic realism” as a name for such a scholarly disposition.11 “Strategic realism” does not abandon the utility of revealing the truth or reality of climate change for building climate justice but neither does it overestimate the political gains made by this task alone. It understands all realisms to be subject to strategic deployment and so deploys its knowledge for openly politically committed ends. In this way, it acts in the mode of critical theory described by Nancy Fraser in the epigraph above, “mak[ing] no claim to any special epistemological status” but rather only to political commitment: “A critical social theory frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan though not uncritical identification. The questions it asks and the models it designs are informed by that identification and interest.”12

I first encountered “strategic realism” in Imre Szeman’s article “System Failure,” which outlines three political imaginaries that have shaped the end of fossil capital. Alongside techno-utopianism and eco-apocalypse, Szeman defines the imaginary of strategic realism as a realpolitik for resource security amid resource scarcity. As he writes, “What is of prime interest in strategic realism is engaging in the geopolitical maneuverings required to keep economies floating in oil. At the heart of strategic realism stands the blunt need for nations to protect themselves from energy disruptions by securing and maintaining steady and


predictable access to oil.” Over ten years since the article, today this strategic realism of the ruling class sets its sights on both petroleum and well beyond, adopting a technoutopian stance to complement its crasser warmaking activities at height during the Bush years. For instance, the US state and fossil fuel elite are today equally interested in deposing Evo Morales to marketize Bolivian lithium and maximize profits on smartcar batteries as in deposing Nicolás Maduro to marketize Venezuelan reserves of crude oil. These greenwashed developments notwithstanding, strategic realism’s basic triangulation of state power, global capital and, as Szeman writes, “the cold hard facts of global warming and ecological catastrophe” remains unchanged. The ruling class does not need to wake up to the reality of climate change, but believes in and faces it precisely by doubling down on the extraction and accumulation that drive it. In this sense, strategic realism principally identifies how the epistemic project of realism regarding environmental limits is mobilized by an alliance of state and capital to protect capitalist interests at the expense of collective ones by any means necessary.

This ruling class strategic realism lives in the university. One of its habitats is the interdisciplinary climate, sustainability, environment or energy institute, an increasingly common fixture of the US university campus. These institutes have proliferated over the past two decades alongside the climate adaptation and disaster recovery industries, building

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on the longstanding institutional presence of fossil fuel-specialized engineering programs.15 These bodies support research and curricula to develop alternative energy materials, technologies and other measures to “green” and “clean” our carbon-based lifestyle amid “the most daunting challenge facing humankind during the 21st Century,” as proclaims the Cornell Energy Institute.16 They typically emphasize the interdisciplinarity required of such work, as in the case of the Duke Energy Initiative at my current institution, North Carolina’s Duke University, which enlists the public policy, law, business, engineering and environment schools in its mission of “advancing an accessible, affordable, reliable, and clean energy system.”17 There are similar institutes at public and private universities across the country.

15 “Energy Institute Benchmarking Profiles.” Prepared by Ross Strategic on behalf of the University of Texas Energy Institute. November 17 2016: 2. Fossil fuel engineering programs typically offer undergraduate and graduate degrees, with coursework and fieldwork involving such applied sciences as geochemistry, geophysics, seismology and stratigraphy (and even business management in some cases). In the US fossil fuel engineering programs can be found at the University of Oklahoma, Texas A&M and the University of Texas-Austin (the latter supported by many of the same oil and gas corporations as support UT’s Energy Institute); in the UK at the University of Edinburgh and the University of Aberdeen; and in Canada most prominently at the University of Alberta, where the Petroleum Engineering BSc program is over 50 years old. Designed to prepare students for exploration and drilling in an increasingly “tough” oil world, Alberta’s program touts the same message of ecological responsibility that energy institutes and initiatives do, blurring the line between old, dirty energy and its newer, cleaner successor: “Petroleum engineers apply scientific understanding and technology in the exploration and management of hydrocarbon resources while preserving and protecting the environment.” University of Alberta Undergraduate Admissions, 2017: web. On the climate adaptation and disaster recovery industries, see: “Climate Change Adaptation & Resilience Markets.” Environmental Business International (June 2019); “Disaster Recovery Solutions Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report By Type (Backup & Recovery, Data Security, Replication), By Deployment, By End Use, By Enterprise Size, And Segment Forecasts, 2018 - 2025.” Grand View Research (August 2018).


distributing funds, coordinating research and events, and supporting various academic programs, degree specializations and certificates.\(^{18}\)

As with Duke’s Energy Initiative, these institutes are frequently founded and maintained (and not inexpensively) with support from the oil and gas industry.\(^{19}\) Indeed, according to a report from the University of Texas Energy Institute, “virtually every energy institute has some sort of relationship with industry,” whether officially through corporate affiliate programs and research sponsorship or less formally, such as when a company executive sits on an institute’s advisory board.\(^{20}\) As a few examples, Stanford University’s Precourt Institute for Energy was established in 2006 thanks to $30 million from Jay Precourt, former CEO and Vice Chairman of Tejas Gas Corporation, and the institute houses Stanford Energy 3.0, a corporate affiliate program that counts among its members China’s SAIC Motor, Kazakhstan’s Samruk Energy and Singapore’s Trafigura.\(^{21}\) Harvard University’s Consortium

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\(^{18}\) The Council of Energy Research and Education Leaders (CEREL) 2012 census on “Non-traditional and Broad Energy Education” in four-year US colleges and universities usefully catalogues these academic programs (though, the report being five years old, it excludes the most recent programs). Vincent, Shirley et al., “Non-traditional and Broad Energy Education: Results from the 2012 Census of U.S. Four Year Colleges and Universities.” National Council for Science and the Environment: January 2013.

\(^{19}\) Energy institute budgets typically range between $1 and $3 million per year, but research agreements between universities and corporate partners run totals far greater. As one example, Berkeley’s Energy Biosciences Institute and Shell signed a five-year $25 million deal in March 2017. Information current as of July 2017. “Energy Institute Benchmarking Profiles.” Prepared by Ross Strategic on behalf of the University of Texas Energy Institute. November 17 2016: 6; Brett Israel, “EBI, Shell sign $25 million partnership to fund new energy tech research.” Berkeley News (March 15 2017): web.


for Energy Policy Research was founded with almost $4 million from Shell Oil, along with support from BP, Chevron and the Apache Corporation, the latter of which subsidizes the university’s Professorship of Global Energy Policy. And at Texas A&M University’s Energy Institute, the advisory board includes executive personnel from Halliburton, Marathon Oil, Chevron, ExxonMobil, the Dow Chemical Company and Honeywell UOP, among other titans of the global energy industry and villains of our highest-profile environmental disasters, cover-ups and ongoing controversies.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology provides an illustrative example of how the strategic realism of these institutes’ research agendas plays out to benefit capital. In 2015, MIT saw a broad-based fossil fuel divestment campaign garnering wide support from faculty, staff, students and alumni who hoped to downsize the university’s contribution to global climate change by shaking up the company that its endowment keeps. The campaign spotlighted the university’s relationship with BP, Shell, ExxonMobil, Chevron, Saudi Aramco and Norway’s Statoil (all prominent financiers of MIT’s Energy Initiative) and gave particular attention to David Koch, who has donated $185 million to the school over the past three decades. After some dithering in the face of mounting pressure, the university administration rejected all calls to divest from oil and gas, with President L. Rafael Reif


asserting that solutions to climate change will emerge “not by distancing ourselves from fossil fuel companies, but by bringing them closer to us.”

When asked directly whether the decision was influenced by Koch’s heavy involvement in the energy and petrochemical industries, not to mention his billions backing climate change denial, MIT Corporation Chairman Robert Millard was reported to say “I don’t see a conflict.”

As of 2017, as an agreement reached in March 2016 between Fossil Free MIT and university administration stalled, Millard sat on the MIT Energy Initiative’s external advisory board alongside a former assistant treasurer of ExxonMobil, the current Chief Technology Officer of Saudi Aramco.

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and the current Vice President for Digital and Communications Technology at BP.\textsuperscript{27}

Divestment campaigns at Harvard and Princeton have come to similar ends.\textsuperscript{28}

In addition to baiting conflicts of interest between fossil fuel profiteers and universities' professed commitment to environmental sustainability, the proliferation of climate and


\textsuperscript{28} Harvard’s own campus fossil fuel divestment campaign roughly parallels MIT’s: although the Harvard Management Company announced in April 2017 a “pause” in its fossil fuel investments to applause from Divest Harvard, HMC has since clarified its position to “neither represent a move towards divestment nor a significant change in Harvard’s investment practices” but rather merely reflects a strategic financial decision for the university endowment’s natural resources portfolio. Divest Harvard’s activities, accordingly, continue apace. Harvard’s Consortium for Energy Policy Research is backed by the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences, which has also supplied years of research funding for notorious global warming skeptic Robert Balling of Arizona State University. Professor Balling received additional funding from the government of Kuwait, and is currently on the payroll at ASU’s Julie Ann Wrigley Global Institute of Sustainability. Harvard’s Consortium is also backed by Wells Fargo, which has been prominently involved in the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipeline projects, prompting multiple US city councils to divest from the bank. See: Gary Lee, “Industry Funds Global Warming Skeptics.” \textit{The Washington Post}, March 21 1996: web; Brandon Dixon, “Despite Divest Cheers, Harvard Maintains Investment Approach.” \textit{The Harvard Crimson}, April 28 2017: web. As with MIT, Princeton has been the site of a fossil fuel divestment campaign since 2014, one particularly targeting the endowment’s ties to coal companies. Among the corporate “e-filiates” of the university’s Andlinger Center for Energy and Environment is the Southern Company, formerly under investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission for the fraudulent use of hundreds of millions of federal dollars to build the Kemper “clean coal” plant, which was expected to be a model for sustainable power plants across the nation. After seven years of over-cost construction and legal scrambling, the site was red-lighted in June 2017 after the Transport Integrated Gasification, or TRIG, technology — meant to turn the world’s most pollutive coal into synthetic and “clean” gas — proved to be a total non-starter at an industrial scale. For the full fiscal implications of TRIG’s nonviability and its death knell for the “clean coal” myth, one might ask Halliburton, who owns the patent. See: Russell Gold, “Mississippi Regulators Seek to End Southern Co. ‘Clean-Coal’ Plant.” \textit{The Wall Street Journal}, 21 June 2017: web; “Princeton Sustainable Investment.” 2016: web; Ian Urbina, “Piles of Dirty Secrets Behind a Model ‘Clean Coal’ Project.” \textit{The New York Times}, July 5 2016: web.
energy institutes epitomizes the contemporary university’s much bemoaned administrative budget bloat and its multiplication of large capital ventures at the expense of increasingly under- and de-funded instructor budgets, particularly for humanities departments, as well as undergraduate tuition scholarships and university staff pay and benefits. The university’s embrace of oil and gas industry collaboration turns to some degree on faith in the market’s capacity to develop and deliver new energy technologies on the efficient timeline that climate change demands. But, the donations and grants secured to do this pressing work are highly targeted and come with strings attached, and so at times the result is duplication and redundancy. Observe, for example, Stanford’s Precourt Institute for Energy and the Stanford Global Climate and Energy Project, which are, if you can imagine, distinct research bodies (though they are directed by the same person). One can also find at Stanford the Energy Modeling Forum, the Sustainable Energy Initiative, the Precourt Energy Efficiency Center, the Center for Automotive Research, the Program on Energy & Sustainable Development, the Shultz-Stephenson Task Force on Energy Policy, the Center for Carbon Storage, the Environmental & Energy Policy Analysis Center, the Institute for Materials & Energy Sciences, the Natural Gas Initiative, the Steyer-Taylor Center for Energy Policy & Finance, the SUNCAT Center for Interface Science & Catalysis, and the TomKat Center for Sustainable Energy. (Pause to breathe). There is lastly the aforementioned Stanford Energy 3.0, a corporate affiliation program with twins at MIT, Princeton, Texas A&M, UC-Davis and the University of Texas-Austin. For a minimum yearly fee of $250,000, Stanford Energy 3.0 promises its members “personalized access to Stanford University, tailored to your organization’s needs” so that research can accommodate companies’ interest in “gaining and
maintaining a competitive advantage in their commercial efforts.”29 In total, that’s seven centers, two institutes, two initiatives, one project, one forum, one task force, one program, one explicit pay-to-play corporate research program, and one less explicit (when a report from the Center for American Progress alleged that Stanford’s Global Climate and Energy Project engaged in “corporate research for hire,” the director cited “academic freedom.”30) That’s a lot of strikingly similar, nearing-identical bodies at a single university, structurally incapable of the streamlined research that is supposed to be the market’s bread and butter. More, all of them take seriously the reality of climate change, but they approach it as a combined technological and economic opportunity for the few, none as a political question with stakes for the many.

Presenting such information about a university’s corporate ties might come across as a cheap shot or a rudimentary, even indelicate airing of dirty laundry. I take seriously, however, La Berge’s definition of realism as “following the money” and of capitalist realism as following the production capital’s realism. In this spirit, here I’m following the money that fuels university research about energy and climate and like Kushner’s The Flamethrowers and McCarthy’s The Road I too arrive somewhere we’ve already learned to regard as realist: when it comes to which climate change knowledge is considered legitimate, which contributions to the energy conversation serious, which solutions realistic, the realism encasing university research in these venues on the reality of climate change and the realities available to us in

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response refers to the real of fossil capital. Fossil capital represents realism as much as realism represents fossil capital.

In other words, I am telling you a lot of things you already know. The “dark money” is not so dark.31 This is a central insight of capitalist realism and my amendment of it with the lens of fossil capital. What Wendy Brown calls the “absence of a scandalized response” to university-industry entanglements like those catalogued above only affirms that the “conversion of basic principles of democracy from a political to economic semantic order” in the university is already spoken for, unshocking, uninteresting, just as Mark Fisher describes capitalist realism, “so taken for granted that it is no longer worthy of comment.”32 Far beyond sustainability and energy institutes like those discussed above, corporate and private donor sponsorship is the common sense of today’s university, less a secret or black mark than a point of pride regarding an institution’s capacity to accommodate research missions to the imperatives of a market ontology and break its path as a “university of the 21st century.”33 The university’s “relentless privatization,” as Jameson writes, its “downsizing (or ‘rightsizing’), outsourcing and rationalizing,” as Lynne C. Howarth writes, is central to the


story of neoliberalism and the loss of ideological obfuscation. As a public institution undergoing privatization and as a site of subject formation and knowledge production, the university provides an optimal lens through which to view neoliberalism in its dually political and epistemic radicalism. In David Harvey’s *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, for instance, university economics plays a central role in the market shocks of Pinochet Chile, with the discipline since then largely transformed into a training facility for market ideologues, granting degrees that both place neoliberal economists in powerful decision-making positions and ascribe a project of class war the neutrality of “knowledge” and “expertise.”

For Brown in *Undoing the Demos*, the university is a principal site for the cultivation of *homo economicus*. Students, instructors and researchers alike are meant to understand education’s function primarily in terms of human capital, taking cue from James Buchanan’s now ubiquitous model of the “incentivized” university. Work by Malcolm Harris, Eli Meyerhoff, Christopher Newfield, Nancy Welch and others sharpens this picture of the university’s total

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36 As Nancy MacLean illustrates, Buchanan’s vision (developed while an undergraduate at UCLA in the 1960s) would become the Koch playbook for the educational arm of its “stealth plan for America.” Jane Mayer usefully chronicles where and how Koch activities in higher education have swelled since 2010, even as she highlights the difficulty of precisely tracking these many, often covert or pseudonymous donations from the Koch brothers themselves or their sundry companies, think tanks and charitable foundations. See Jane Mayer, *Dark Money* and especially chapter 7, “A World Gone Mad,” in Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains*. 
absorption by capital. Work by James Boyle, Philip Mirowski, Hans Radder, David Tyfield, and Christian Zeller further clarifies how this absorption is one aspect of scientific research’s more general commodification. Years of such transformations have laid the groundwork


so that the last of the University of Texas Energy Institute’s four pillars — policy, education, research and commercialization — hardly makes us blink. The same goes for Stanford’s Global Climate and Energy Project when it boasts of its “diversified portfolio of research projects.”\(^3^9\) You can find this language in any number of research environments in the university and out, as intellectual variety shrinks and contorts to accommodate economic imperative, and academic commitments do not merely echo but are financially intertwined with those of the energy, agriculture, pharmaceutical and other industries at the heart of the cascading crises we all face.

Consider the following statement from Yueh-Lin Loo, Director of Princeton’s Andlinger Center for Energy and the Environment:

> We are building bridges. The only way to impact our energy and climate change problems is if we engage the larger community in deep collaboration. We must have teams working together at the intersection of research disciplines and professions. And all this with an eye towards practical, economically-feasible solutions and technologies that can help cleanly power the world. It’s an all-hands-on-deck moment. I hope you can join me on this journey. Collaborate with us. Take our classes. Learn from our experts. Join E-ffiliates. Our national and economic security, the health of the environment, and the well-being of future generations depend on us working together.\(^4^0\)

All hands on deck! Build bridges! Join E-ffiliates! Like MIT President Reif’s reply to the question of fossil fuel divestment, Loo here instructs that climate change requires practicality and that practicality requires joint action. Today’s fossil capitalist realist university


reaches across disciplines and industries to embrace even (especially) those elite 100 companies responsible for 71% of total greenhouse gas emissions since 1988 in the name of what is “practical,” “feasible” — realistic.41 The Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment similarly writes that “companies investing in the world’s hydrocarbons have a critical role to play [in energy research], for moral, ethical and” — especially — “practical reasons.”42 This call for what is elsewhere termed “multi-stakeholder collaboration” or “network governance” is echoed by sustainability experts and even climate scientists and engineers, whose calls to arms address networked actors at universities, tech giants and energy companies — though, significantly, less frequently as scientific bodies grow increasingly

41 A remarkable study published in July 2017 is one of the first of its kind to analyze emissions data by company rather than by nation. In so doing, it not only confirms the Global North ruling class’s preponderant responsibility for climate change and the increasing contributions of the BRIC nations, but moreover directly contradicts the ecofascist suggestion that population growth (especially in the Global South) is a primary cause of climate change. Unsurprisingly, the fossil fuel companies and other industrial actors listed are among the most frequent, generous donors to the Andlinger Center and other energy institutes like it. Paul Griffin, “The Carbon Majors Database CDP Carbon Majors Report 2017.” Carbon Disclosure Project, July 2017.

insistent that global warming begs for systemic economic change.\textsuperscript{43} The boringly technocratic strain of this story the university tells about its role in climate change solutions finds its uncanny reflection in the more baldly business-minded calls like that from Berkeley’s Energy Institute, which “strives to ensure that energy and environmental policy is based on sound economic and business principles” and “works with scientists to commercialize promising energy technologies.”\textsuperscript{44} Employing the language of corporate governance, interdisciplinary climate research melds market fundamentalist faith in Promethean discovery with a strategically predetermined research framework of “viable


\textsuperscript{44} “Energy Institute at Haas.” \textit{BerkeleyHaas}, 2017: web.
policy frameworks and market structures” and “economically and environmentally sound
energy solutions.”

What better demonstration of fossil capitalist realism as both tautological narrative form and
political-economic vice grip than to see institutions of knowledge production plainly define
the real of their research as continued fossil capitalist growth? Fossil capitalist realism is a
strategic realism, one with meshed cultural, political and epistemological dimensions to
match the post-ideological form of capital today. By a realist metric of denial/acceptance,
the rise of sustainability institutes is a political good; by a strategic realist one, where the
reality of climate change is amenable to a number of political projects, these institutes
represent less a rupture from fossil capital’s interest in resolving its environmental
contradictions on its own terms than a seamless and cynical continuation of it. There are
manifest and alarming conflicts of collective social interest involved when energy companies
call the knowledge production shots, when fossil fuel profiteers are warmly welcomed into
climate research efforts under the banner of smart growth reform. In all cases, the paradox
of widespread, well-funded research on environmental crisis and an absence of

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45 I draw this first line from the mission statement of Columbia’s Lenfest Center for
Sustainable Energy (different from the Lenfest Center for Sustainable Investment): “The
development of novel energy conversion pathways and technologies – particularly with
reduced environmental footprints (i.e., CO2 emission and water usage) – is one of the
greatest challenges faced by humanity that cannot be overcome by simply employing
traditional scientific or engineering approaches. More than ever, the development and
implementation of sustainable energy technologies require cross-cutting collaborations
between natural science, engineering and social science disciplines. Furthermore, the
development of viable policy frameworks and market structures are also important for the
significant reduction of anthropogenic carbon emissions. To achieve this ambitious goal, we
need to work together and encourage the effective, rapid transfer of knowledge between
participating members of various fields and global communities.” “Mission.” Lenfest Center
for Sustainable Energy (2017): web; “About the University of Michigan Energy Institute.”
accompanying systemic social change appears less paradoxical when the realism touted by these institutes betrays its ultimate political-economic objective so starkly. As with the literary ecocritical corner of university environmental research, these climate institutes produce, in Medovoi’s terms, “strategies for pacifying, harnessing, and reorganizing the mutual relationships of human and nonhuman life toward the end of optimal capital accumulation.” Their research outcomes are not climate justice outcomes; they strategize in profiting through crisis, by capital as a system and class and even more specifically the fossil fuel corporations at the very center of global warming. That the realist epistemic project of environmental awareness is so hospitable to pay-to-play corporate research agenda-setting is a strong indication that the acceptance/denial binary is far from adequate as a framework for conducting our own research in the humanities and for building climate justice at universities.

George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici write,

As was the factory, so now is the university. Where once the factory was a paradigmatic site of struggle between workers and capitalists, so now the university is a key space of conflict, where the ownership of knowledge, the reproduction of the labour force, and the creation of social and cultural stratifications are all at stake. This is to say the university is not just another institution subject to sovereign and governmental controls, but a crucial site in which wider social struggles are won and lost.

If today’s corporate university currently aids and abets this strategic realism of the right, what would it take for university workers to build a strategic realism of the left? In


universities specifically, where what counts as knowledge about environment is produced, how can our work as academics both prove, project and historicize the reality of climate change as well as move a step beyond to strategically deploy this knowledge toward a political vision for the good of all? A similar question posed to scholars and artists at 2015’s After Oil summer school comes to mind: “What cultural strategies are available to trigger and expedite a large-scale transition of energy regimes?”48 Though Graeme MacDonald has wondered whether “our criticism, like our technology and terminology, might not yet be sufficiently refined” to match these ambitions, my discussion so far through the lens of fossil capitalist realism indicates that it is less an ever-sharpening picture of reality or critique of power than the material conditions of university knowledge production that must inform a strategic realist approach of the academic left.49 This strategic realism requires not just bringing our fossil-fueled “reality” under the province of the knowable in our capacity as researchers but striving to remake this reality, insofar as is possible, “as [we] please” in our capacity as workers in the university workplace.50

Jennifer Wenzel has written lucidly on “the imperative of originality in scholarly production.” She notes in “Taking Stock of Energy Humanities” that there is irony and danger in how this imperative governs a field premised upon a critique of surplus:


It’s worth thinking about scholarly production as production, and the demand for originality (and scholarly ‘productivity’ itself) in terms of hyper consumption, planned obsolescence, and the eternal lure of the ‘new and improved’ as strategies for managing capitalism’s own imperative — grow or die — which has for more than a century been premised on cheap energy. … By ‘more… more… more,’ all of us mean a qualitative difference, new thinking adequate to the seemingly infinite power of this finite power source. Yet our critical desire (for another kind of originality) veers uncomfortably close to oil’s love affair with quantity, its mantra of ‘more.’

Jane Elliott similarly writes, “We tend to assume that theory that is no longer novel is no longer useful — that what is uninteresting is also unimportant.” The “mantra of more,” the “cycle of novelty”: these are only in part an occasion for the individual critic to reflect upon her own “critical desire.” They are much more an occasion to reflect on the political economic conditions of university research that originate such mantras and cycles and that cauterize them as both desire and paycheck. If a strategic realism for the academic left means a critical disposition reoriented from surplus value to political struggle, such a disposition requires redistribution of resources and power in the university — changing the material conditions of our work, whether in the humanities or in energy and environment institutes.

As Wenzel puts it, “In other words, our goal is not the endless (and endlessly pleasurable) proliferation of neologisms that begin with petro-, but instead a future under the sign of some other prefix.” “Some other prefix” begins only with the repossession of the

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university such that we research and otherwise work under conditions we collectively
determine. The most promising strategic realism for building climate justice at US
universities — and the one which university workers across occupation, rank, discipline and
institution immediately and collectively pursue — is to organize their labor to refuse it and
exact concessions from power. I offer this strategic realism at once heeding Jameson’s
reminder that the position of today’s scholar amid privatization is “not properly grasped
through the steam of moral indignation” and cognizant of Fred Moten and Stefano
Harney’s indispensable diagnosis of the productive character of “be[ing] against the
university,” the critique so professionalized it cannot help but find its way to the university
itself. Among its many vital insights — like Shonkwiler and La Berge write of Jameson's
Postmodernism, The Undercommons is in my mind “unassailably correct” — few are more
pressing to consider than “Critical Academics Are the Professionals Par Excellence.” Yet
fossil capitalist realism leads academics precisely beyond this realm of the critical, beyond
privatization-by-professionalization, into the strategic and the collective. My second chapter
puts a fine point on this, as does Cormac McCarthy’s young protagonist when he looks out
at readers who are merely surviving by their work to ask, “What are our long-term goals?”
If “realism” operates a bit like the unbeatable chess player at the opening of Walter
Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” a perfectly even match for historical

Fredric Jameson, “How Not to Historicize Theory”: 571; Fred Moten and Stefano
Harney, “The University and the Undercommons: Seven Theses.” Social Text 79 22.2
(Summer 2004): 105.

Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “The University and the Undercommons”: 111; Fred
Moten and Stefano Harney, The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study. Wivenhoe/

Cormac McCarthy, The Road: 160.
materialist critique, the object of Benjamin’s allegory, then let us concede that critique is not how you win the game. Beyond calls for new analyses or settling for, per Jameson, “anti-anti-utopianism,” my analysis in this dissertation indicates that our suspicion remains important, profoundly important, for the political project of fossil capital’s abolition but also that such analysis cannot do our political work for us. Rather than fall back on the truth of a hidden reality to orient our realist representations of fossil capital, university workers have to choose a reality we seek to build with these representations — not by identity or desire but by solidarity — and collective strategize to build it. Thus chief among the benefits that the analytic of fossil capitalist realism offers to Environmental Humanities scholarship is its presenting occasion to reflect upon the political capacity of such an analytic or any other under current conditions of knowledge production and to advocate in strong terms for the redistribution of power over those conditions, which might give critique meaning. By assessing these institutional circumstances for the paralysis of energy transition alongside the cultural life of fossil fuels far outside university walls, we can see more clearly what “reality” our scholarship abides and begin to determine what new one it can help to build in the face of environmental crisis.


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