The Space Between the Novel and the World:
Reading for Objects in the Contemporary Novel

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Introduction

What We Said of It Became a Part of What It Is

And things, what is the correct attitude to adopt towards things? And, to begin with, are they necessary? What a question. But I have few illusions, things are to be expected. The best is not to decide anything, in this connexion, in advance. If a thing turns up, for some reason or another, take it into consideration. Where there are people, it is said, there are things. Does this mean that when you admit the former you must also admit the latter? Time will tell. (286)

Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*

We begin with a button. This one is yellow and made of plastic, and it lends its name to "Buttony," the two-page short story by Fiona McFarlane that appeared in the May 7, 2016 *New Yorker*, in which a teacher, Miss Lewis, leads her grade-school students in a strange game that centers around the button. After they ceremoniously remove the button from its drawer and file into the yard, one child stands in the middle of a circle and secretly deposits the button into the closed hand of a classmate; the others guess who has the button until they discover it, at which point that child enters the middle. On this particular day, a "kind and beautiful" boy named Joseph, who is described in ominously glowing terms, "swallows the button, rather than passing it to one of his peers (57). When the other students cannot find it, their confusion becomes rage and they turn on Miss Lewis. The story's final image is of a colleague running to the yard to help Miss Lewis as her students start to claw at their teacher, picking and pinching and ripping at her in order to find the lost button.

The story does not answer many questions. The game remains enigmatic and no explanation is given for Joseph's behavior, but the mystery at the heart of "Buttony" is the button itself, about which we know very little. When it is first described, the narrator remarks that when Joseph held "the yellow button out before him in the dish of his hands, Miss Lewis could forget the mustard-colored cardigan it had fallen off one winter day. The button was no longer limited

by its cheap yellow plastic; it seemed to pulse with life" (57). The button is not worth anything. It is uninformative, insofar as it says little about fashion, or the production of clothing, or the culture in which it was produced, or its owner, Miss Lewis. We know from where it comes, but having transcended its original context, the button is newly meaningful in ways that are hard to parse. Though it possesses an auratic glow, it is not a talisman or fetish or symbol; it is ascribed no properties or powers that extend beyond its materiality, and it points in no clear way to some significance outside the system of meaning within the text. In light of its role in Buttony, it makes some sense to call the button a prop, but the word connotes an instrumentalism that fails to account for the object's thrall over the characters outside the rules of the game, the magnetism which seems to tug at the reader and text. The button seems solid and tangible—the story's plot, like the game itself, relies on following the button as it is held, grasped, passed, and eventually swallowed—but this perceived materiality does not ensure the object's legibility or availability; when we reach out to grab it, to assign it meaning, the button withdraws.

The button is emblematic of the kinds of objects in literature that snag my attention: things that do not comfortably or unambiguously participate in social life, historical and economic signification, or symbolic meaning, but which are, at the same time, central to plot, place, and the structure of narrative fiction. They are something like the gratuitous objects Roland Barthes describes, which are "neither incongruous nor significant," and thus do not seem to participate "in the order of the *notable*" (Barthes 141-2). These objects are often vibrant—like the button which "seemed to pulse with life"—and unsettle the configuration of human agency, yet rarely do they upend the novel's investment in the human subject, suggesting literature's role elaborating human-object entanglement rather than a post-human landscape. The literary objects in *The Space Between the Novel and the World* tend to appear materially substantial—sometimes

in ways that seem to exceed or survive the text in which they are produced—while simultaneously drawing attention to their own discursiveness and the ways they participate in meta-literary processes of world building and the construction of novel form. The particular conditions that give literary objects being—namely, their reliance on readerly participation—make them seem close at hand and immediate to the reader, but the irresolvable dialectic between language and matter ensures that the literary object is never fixed or frozen, never any one thing, and never exhausted by the set of relations between it and the characters, the reader, and the fictional world.

The language/matter dialectic that constitutes objects in the novel and guarantees their irreducibility is often referred to by the objects themselves. In "Buttony," when the children wonder who is holding the special button, the narrator seems to channel their admiration: "Oh, that beautiful button: mustard-colored, Joseph-kissed. Round as a planet on one side, sharp as a kiss on the other" (57). Just as the narrative is inflected by the children's voices, so too does the object interpolate the language of its representation into its being. One side of the button becomes shaped like the kiss Joseph gives the button at the start of the game; the other side recalls the "scaled depiction of the solar system" the class passes in the corridor on their way outside to play "Buttony" and Miss Lewis's habit of touching the "smooth crayon surface" of Neptune as she walks by (57). The object cannot remain one immutable thing when experience is continually absorbed into its being. In the words of Wallace Stevens, the poet laureate of fictional objects: "We knew for long the mansion's look / And what we said of it became // A part of what it is" (Stevens, "Postcard" 127). Objects in novels tantalize; they seem to give us access to the real, something to hold on to. But in drawing attention to their own hybrid nature,

literary objects point instead to their distance from the reader, to the space between the novel and the world.

Tantalizing indeed. Like “Buttony,” the myth of Tantalus has a certain slightness, an incomprehensibility. A man sacrifices his son and serves him to the gods at a banquet; as punishment, he stands for all time in a pool of water that recedes when he bends to drink, beneath fruit-laden branches that pull away when he reaches for a bite. There are two related movements in the story that makes Tantalus a fitting patron saint for this project. First is the possibility that the condition of being locked into relation with a withholding material world is an enabling one for fiction. In the story that I tell about literary objects, it is not the subject that occupies the novel’s frame but the dilated or distended relationship between subject and object, where language fills the space of perception and experience. To abolish the space between the subject and object is to end fiction. Second is the literary object’s purchase on the reader’s attention and imagination, which has led scholars to seize on the object’s closeness and legibility to configure it as the “reassuringly safe ground upon which to acquire a more or less unmediated access to the real” (Harris 114). As far as category errors go, this is surely less acute than cannibalizing one’s own son, but eliding fictionality in the name of the real or at-hand is to forfeit that which distinguishes object-oriented literary critics from materialists in other disciplines. The object withdraws from our reach like an enchanted bough, and disability becomes an acting condition of reading; we can never possess the literary object.

Yet even if all reaching is failing, our failure makes visible that which separates us from what we reach, providing an opportunity to consider the status of the object in the novel. “When I saw an exterior object, my awareness that I was seeing it would remain between me and it, edging it with a thin spiritual border that prevented me from ever directly touching its

substance," the narrator recounts in *À la recherche du temps perdu* (Proust 86). The centrality I assign the literary object is not part of a revisionist project but stems from the frequent and insistent representations of subject-object relation in modern and contemporary literature. In these moments, like with Proust's "exterior object," the thing-itself gives way to a set of relations, which include those between subject and object, language and matter, and text and reader. The reading practice for which I argue in *The Space Between the Novel and the World* is one that elaborates how each object takes part in the fictional world, the production of narrative, and the structure of the novel, and I show how the different literary objects of Tom McCarthy, Lavie Tidhar, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Jeanette Winterson, and Arundhati Roy produce different aesthetic, affective, hermeneutic, and political experiences of the text. Here we find another reason why we should concern ourselves with objects that, in Barthes's terms, do not seem to participate "in the order of the *notable*." For Barthes, such objects clamor "*we are the real*" and so produce the "*reality effect*," "the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity" (148). In *The Space Between the Novel and the World*, I argue instead that each literary object sets the terms of the novel's fictionality, remaking time and again the contract between reader and aesthetic world.

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Fictionality makes it difficult to discuss things in literature as we would other objects, and so despite the richness of the ongoing material turn, literary texts have unique disciplinary demands that have not been met. Babette Tischleder summarizes this need after surveying recent materialist developments in anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, material culture studies, archaeology, and social studies of technology:

> While all of these approaches offer valuable concepts for the study of literature, none of the disciplinary approaches alone can account for the complex ways in which literary texts envision relations between human characters and the material world. The aesthetic experience of fictional texts allows readers to imagine the mutual lives of people and things through an engagement with the idiosyncratic perspectives, affective bonds, and concrete practices that constitute the characters' world and their interactions with one another. (Tischleder 22-3)

In other words, object-oriented literary criticism must account for the particular affordances and possibilities of fiction, compensating for the difficulties extant materialist theories have describing objects which are curiously discursive and contingent upon human activity. Tischleder's call, for a language that depicts "the mutual lives of people and things," is also a move beyond an anthropological narrative that "tells us little about the actual relationship between persons and things" and "tends always to reduce the latter to the former" (D. Miller 48). Emphasizing the *fictionality* of fictional objects allows us to better articulate the nature of their strange being, but it also frees them from their referential obligations, so that literary objects depcit subject-object relations as they are *and* as they might be.

The object-oriented literary criticism put forward by *The Space Between the Novel and the World* builds on the outpouring of scholarship about things in literature in the last two decades, a flourishing stimulated in part by the 2001 "Things" issue of *Critical Inquiry* that was edited by Bill Brown, which introduced thing theory to a wider audience.[1] Thing theory is a critical approach that relies on a Heideggerian distinction between object (*gegenstand*) and thing (*ding*) to excavate the social and literary importance of things. Unlike objects, which "we look *through,*" things appear when objects stop working, naming "less an object than a particular

subject-object relation" (Brown, "Thing Theory" 4).[2] A critical practice based on things, then, should generate "new thoughts about how inanimate objects constitute human subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects" (7). In many ways, the goals of my project parallel those of thing theory as articulated by Brown. We must "think with or through the physical object world," and "establish a genuine sense of the things that comprise the stage on which human action, including the action of thought, unfolds" (*A Sense of Things* 3). Brown continues: "However much I shared the new historicist 'desire to make contact with the "real,"' I wanted the end result to read like a grittier, materialist phenomenology of everyday life," so that "where other critics had faith in 'discourse' or in the 'social text' as the analytical grid on which to reconfigure our knowledge about the present and the past, I wanted to turn attention to things—the objects that are materialized from and in the physical world that is, or had been, at hand" (3).

My reservations about thing theory largely stem from its relation to "the real" that Brown admits tugs at his attention. He suggests that things "[prompt] questions that are inseparable from questions about the modern fate of the object in America, by which I mean both the history of production, distribution, and consumption, *and* the complex roles that objects have played in American lives" (*A Sense of Things* 12). Things in thing theory have a referential quality, so that they often point to an originary object or human-object relation in the real world. In a representative analysis, Brown concludes by writing: "In this brief account of a long novel, I've tried to show how *Sister Carrie* makes Chicago's vitreous culture visible, and how Dreiser dramatizes the role of plate glass in changing both the relation among human subjects, and the relation between those subjects and inanimate objects" ("The Matter of Materialism" 75). The historicist roots of thing theory mean that its analytic terminus is frequently culture or history,

not literature, objects, or, critically, objects in literature. Though I disagree with critiques of thing theory that see the tilt towards reference as a mercenary demarcation of new critical terrain in the face of the academy's STEMification—it is not the case, as Russell Jacoby suggests, that opportunistic English professors have "noticed theory burnout, shut down tired outlets, and launched new studies of sleek objects"—thing theory's relation to the real does create certain limitations. Given its historicist predisposition and the related tendency to select for novelistic verisimilitude,[3] thing theory can find itself stuck in an interpretive loop: "Thing theory has argued that the culture that makes things significant creates the conditions under which they are received as such, so many of the works that belong to the category of thing theory historicize the reception of objects in order to discern why they pull the focus of those who see and act on them" (Bartlett 12). Instead of continuing this cycle, shuttling between culture and literature, the object-oriented literary criticism of this project resumes the goals of thing theory, lingering within the space of the text to uncover how objects disclose "particular subject-object relation[s]."

In returning to thing theory, I join a new generation of object-oriented literary critics who seek to balance the pull of the real with an increased attention to literary language and form. In *Object Lessons*, Jami Bartlett writes about novels "that stage the philosophical problems of reference by writing through and about referring terms, the names and descriptions that allow us to 'see' objects in the novel" (27). Bartlett is interested less in where objects point the reader (towards culture, towards history) than in *how* they point; she describes how objects can be "intentional," "contain[ing] descriptions of themselves as really or potentially acted upon" (27). In *The Literary Life of Things* (2014), Babette Tischleder introduces the term "the material imaginary," which addresses "the various ways in which literary texts invite us to imagine

physical objects in active roles that enable and shape people's actions, social relations, self-fashioning, emotional states, and moral or cultural orientations, as well as the texts' own narrative and aesthetic expressions" (18). The material imaginary marks the object's relation to the subject and world as well as the literary text, so no discussion of literary objects occurs outside the brackets of the fictional. For both Bartlett and Tischleder, the study of literary objects cannot be at the expense of the literary.

Graham Harman articulates some of the difficulties faced by an object-oriented new historicism in his contribution to a 2012 issue of *New Literary History* on "Object-Oriented Literary Criticism," a volume which approaches the question of literature from the perspective of the speculative realists. Harman writes: "All efforts to embed works exhaustively in their context are doomed to failure for some fairly obvious reasons" (200), and Harman concludes by suggesting ways of

> decontextualizing works, whether through examining how they absorb and resist their conditions of production, or by showing that they are to some extent autonomous even from their own properties. … By showing how the literary object *cannot* be fully identified with its surroundings or even its manifest properties, criticism will show us the same tension between objects and their sensual traits displayed in the tool analysis of Heidegger. (202)

In his addition to the volume, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," Timothy Morton argues that "to study a poem… is to see how causality itself operates. A poem directly intervenes in reality in a causal way." And so "an OOO approach to poetry shows how poems do something as physical as what happens when my car scrapes the sidewalk" (206). The text, like unicorns,

quarks, or the University of Virginia, becomes another glittering and withdrawn object in the firmament of object oriented ontology (OOO).

Harman and Morton's theoretical object-oriented literary criticism is one possible approach, in which the "literary object" appears to be synonymous with the literary text, envisioned here as a cluster of words, moods, time-spaces, and so on that act on and are acted upon by us. Harman and Morton make the literary text legible to OOO, a post-Kantian philosophy that envisions a flattened world of objects that are not ontologically exhausted by human cognition. But the fit is not an easy one. As Harman and Morton show, both the fictional world of the text and the real world in which the book-object circulates can be described by OOO; what proves difficult is moving across the permeable border of fictionality to consider the relation between what lies inside and outside the text. Object-oriented ontology cannot, to my mind, adequately describe authorship, readership, taste, genre, imagination, and aesthetics—certainly not in ways that accord with everyday reading practice—and its anti-anthropocentrism can only go so far in the novel, a form that *does* privilege human subjectivity and agency.[4] It may be possible to balance the insights of OOO with those of the new materialists (a fuzzy title, one which is bestowed unto others with greater frequency than it seems claimed for oneself), who are better equipped to address how matter is generated through practice, perception, and relation, emphasizing contingency, coming-into-being, and how "thought and the world never exist separately" (Harman, *Immaterialism* 14). I explore the relevance of new materialisms and speculative realism to object-oriented literary criticism at greater length in the project (Ch. 3);[5] what is clear is that beyond offering an invigorating possibility for future inquiry, Harman and Morton's foray into object-oriented literary criticism stands as a provocation for future work.

The approach I take in *The Space Between the Novel and the World* is more architectural than those of thing theory or Morton and Harman's object-oriented literary criticism, taking as its focus the literary object's relation to the text as a whole and its role in the construction of the aesthetic world. Inspired by Eric Hayot's elaboration of "variables or mechanisms of world-production in literature" (54), I seek to describe how literary objects participate in the novel's formal, aesthetic, and political projects. The most direct methodological antecedents of this project are not specifically about objects, but rather examples of literary criticism that elucidate the relationships between a particular literary element and novelistic form. When Naomi Schor suggests that "To read in detail is, however tacitly, to invest the detail with a truth-bearing function, and yet as *Reading in Detail* repeatedly shows, the truth value of the detail is anything but assured," she could very well be writing about objects (7).[6] Similarly, the way I write about objects bears a strong resemblance to Alex Woloch's thesis on "minor characters" in *The One vs. The Many*, in which he focuses on figures who "exist as a category, then, only because of their strange centrality to so many texts, perhaps to narrative signification itself" (37). Like thing theory itself, Schor's writing on details and Woloch's on minor characters recuperate elements of texts that have traditionally been overlooked in literary criticism.

It is worth lingering on recent writing about character, because here we find an analogy for thinking through the dialectic between mimetic and formalist positions. Alex Woloch recasts contradictory views on character—"language *or* reference, structure *or* individuality"—as relational and codependent (Woloch 17). In *Character and Person*, John Frow provides a similarly useful framework, later adopted by Deidre Lynch, of character as the balance of textual effect and sort-of person, or "writtenness" and the "personlike" (Lynch 211). That these sides are irresolvable is a feature and not a bug; "Put otherwise, if you are too confident that you have got

character's number and so too firm in the conviction that character is *either* (a) a represented person *or* (b) just a rhetorical effect, then you are likely to simplify the strange semantic games that novelists and novel readers have long played together" (Lynch 212). Part of what is so appealing about Lynch's construction is that it resists grand ontological theories in favor of a dynamic and intuitive contract amongst writers, readers, and texts. Though Lynch, Frow, and Woloch do not extend their arguments to consider non-human figures, literary objects benefit from these new inquiries into the dialectic between language and matter.

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What are literary objects? Bill Brown, in order "to avoid getting bogged down in discrepancies between the phenomenal and the material," settles for "engaging the phenomenon of materiality, the *materiality-effect*, an end result of a process whereby you're convinced of the materiality of something" ("The Matter of Materialism" 60). Though the figuration of materiality as a kind of experience proves liberating to discussions about literature, and I discuss the text's materiality in similar terms throughout *The Space Between the Novel and the World*, there is a certain smoothness to the formulation that glosses over the ways in which the literary object is always riven—both thing and representation of the thing—an ontological status which proves central to my argument.[7] Moving forward necessitates a turn back, to debates in analytic philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century about the nature of fictional objects. Such objects began to take on a more solid shape as G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell set out to address "propositions which, *in a certain sense*, imply *the reality of material things*" (Moore); the resultant realism was one in which "'propositions' about and 'meanings' of objects are structured like ordinary things whose existence is built into our descriptive language" (Bartlett 29). Rapping at the unconscious of this project is their near-contemporary, Alexius Meinong, the

"wild ontologizer hypostasizing entities at will" (Kripke 55), whose theorization of objects that have being without existing results in a wild proliferation of objects that Meinong calls *heimatlose Gegenstände*, or "homeless objects" (Chisholm 207). The crowdedness of Meinong's world put him at odds with analytic philosophy's demand for ontological parsimony, but a reconsideration of the literary object's dual being and nonexistence warrants a return to Meinong's jungle.

Controverting irrealist or antirealist approaches, which assume that utterances about fictional objects occur under unspoken pretense or presupposition—so that all claims about fictional objects are appended with a tacit wink wink nudge nudge, marking that we are only pretending to talk about real things—I side here with the realists. Given the complex relations readers form with objects in novels—the ways we act on them and they upon us—it seems clear to me that literary objects have some form of existence, albeit one in which "they exist in virtue of certain activities of people" (Kripke 73-4). This dissertation's brand of realism perhaps most closely resembles artefactualism, an approach in which fictional objects are "actual abstract entities that are brought into existence by, and whose natures depend upon, human beings and human practices" (Brock 11). In his most recent work, Bruno Latour, one of the founding figures of actor-network theory (ANT), embraces a form of artefactualism, writing about how "a work of art *engages* us" (241), and pointing, in terms that are similar to those of Kripke, to the curious nature of fictional beings, whose "objectivity depends on their being *reprised*" by the reader (242). Returning to analytic philosophy gives definition to the particular being of literary objects and illuminates the system of actors involved in their production.

The weird realism of fictional objects endows things in literature with a kind of pale substance; literary objects exist, even as they are also representations of things that exist more

fully, even as they rely on human amanuenses. But the novels assembled in this dissertation employ various strategies that extend or expand the literary object's materiality. All five authors posit a form of transcendent matter that overwhelms the object's metaphysical indeterminacy—its simultaneous solidity and discursiveness—so that the reader experiences literary objects as somehow *more than* the text. This is, for Tom McCarthy, the role of the novelist: to "take the side of things," "to let things thing, to let matter matter, to let the orange orange and the flower flower" (International Necronautical Society 111). In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, the young protagonist Jeanette surmises that "once a thing was created, it was valid for all time," and that "once created, the creature was separate from the creator, and needed no seconding to fully exist." She refuses to eat a piece of fruit cake because the proposition that "the cake existed without… us was certainly true. There was probably a whole township in there, with values of its own, and a style of gossip" (48). By theorizing a post- or extra-human materiality for objects whose existences rely on humans, these novels argue for the peculiarly autonomous lives of literary objects, of the plum that "survives its poems" (Stevens, "Comedian" 70).

Literary objects become even more substantial when the novels in which they appear connect their being to that of the book.[8] This is what Timothy Morton discovers in his object-oriented reading of Mallarmé: that he "treat[ed] the paper as part of the poetry. The space stopped being a blank container for words, and started to be for humans what it already was: an entity in its own right. Paper can tear. Ink can spill. Lines of poetry can burst asunder. Trees can be pulped to form paper and wind harps" (222). Though there are future opportunities for bibliographic research that connects print culture and physical manuscripts to the representation of objects, my interest here lies in how literary representations of books, reading, and the circulation of literature capitalize on the reader's relationship to the book-object to flesh out

literary objects. Consider the narrator's collection of books in *The Bray House*, which "are always printed on special long-life acid-free paper, as is only proper, and will be almost immortal, if it is not, of course, destroyed by some environmental disaster before their own span has been exhausted" (42), or a display of books in *Osama*, which seemed "like a flock that had descended on these tables, pages fluttering like wings, and here they rested in the shade, enjoying the lull, knowing it would soon be time to go on their way again" (274). Both novels tap into our experience of the book-object (its persistence through time, its apparent liveliness) to extend the lives of objects within the novel. Rather than formulate a deterministic or stable relation between physical book and literary object, this dissertation's object-oriented literary criticism demands that we stay attuned to the various ways authors ask readers to imaginatively transpose different forms or affects of materiality.

Because the literary object's being relies on the experience of reading, and because its substance is produced by language, ontological investigations of literary objects are inextricable from phenomenological ones. As in "Buttony," where the button's material properties ("round as a planet," "sharp as a kiss") reflect the characters' experiences of the button, objects in literature are bound to human perception and cognition, and so "make visible how the world touches us" (Merleau-Ponty, "Cezanne" 19). This loop between mind and world, as Tom McCarthy describes it, "is space and matter inscribing themselves on consciousness, whose task, reciprocally, is to accommodate space and matter" ("Geometry" 173). Virginia Woolf recounts a similar exchange in the story "Solid Objects"— an apparent influence on "Buttony": "Looked at again and again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it" (82). Phenomenology ties the object

to human perception, but at the same time it binds the human to the world. “We are in the world, mingled with it, compromised with it” insists the phenomenologist (Merleau-Ponty, “War” 147), fastening the reader’s experience of literary objects to narrative fiction’s basic condition: to present “human subjects in the concrete circumstances of everyday life,” which “is depicted as the coexistence of human subjects and inanimate objects” (Tischleder 17). The novel, bound to follow human subjects in a sustained way through time and space, emerges as a genre particularly suited to the representation of Being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*), and the character’s embeddedness in a material world proves analogous to the reader’s unfolding relation to the aesthetic world of the text.

The philosopher Amie L. Thomasson, a founding figure of artefactualism, has argued that “the very nature of fictional characters is determined by the beliefs and practices of those who competently deal with works of literature” (142). As much as object-oriented literary criticism benefits from the insights of the philosophy of fictional objects, our practices should be consistent with and sculpted by those of readers, critics, and writers. In taking up the latter to elaborate this project’s debt to modernist literature, I see the novels of Virginia Woolf and Samuel Beckett not simply through the lens of literary history but as part of this project’s theoretical foundation. For Woolf, human experience and the world are made legible only in the constant exchange between subject and object—in the exemplification of how “We live in things” (*Between the Acts* 44). Sometimes humans are like objects, made “so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite” (*Orlando* 77-8); elsewhere, remnants of human life persist only in objects, like the possessions that remain in Jacob’s room after Jacob, or the Ramsay family belongings that “kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated” (*To the Lighthouse* 129). Woolf reimagines social networks

throughout her novels in material terms, whether metonymically—as in the focus on London's new telephone network in *Night and Day*—or metaphorically—as when two characters leave a social engagement and the narrator notes that "they went further and further from her, being attached to her by a thin thread (since they had lunched with her) which would stretch and stretch, get thinner and thinner as they walked across London" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 112). The large tapestry of human activity and social life does not make sense without objects, so that even the language we have at our disposal ("the large tapestry") is always inflected by objects.

The novel, in elaborating the relations between the subject and object, draws attention to the space in-between the two, giving material form to the practices of seeing and feeling that tie us to things. Seeing itself becomes seen when Woolf reifies vision in *To the Lighthouse*, describing, when Mrs. Ramsay and Mr. Bankes look in the same direction, how "Looking along his beam she added to it her different ray" (48); when Lily Briscoe looks out, "This ray passed level with Mr. Bankes's ray straight to Mrs. Ramsay" (52). These rays, which mimic that of the lighthouse, literalize the modes of perception that form the basis of this small community's social fabric. In moments like these, Woolf inventories the novel's particular capability of registering how we make and are made by the world around us. In *The Waves*, when dining out with his friends, Bernard muses,

> We have come together… to make one thing, not enduring—for what endures?—but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting, but now a seven-sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves—a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution. (82)

As perception is folded into the object, Bernard's experience moves from his imagination into the world; in a moment of literary cubism, the carnation transforms from a "single flower" to this "seven-sided flower." The literary object cannot stand apart from experience.

Among the other authors who crowd around this project, none intrude as forcefully as Samuel Beckett. Throughout his novels, in pockets and satchels and cupboards we find "little portable things in wood and stone" that press themselves into the orbits of characters; for Malone, it is not only that these things "made me wish to have them about me and keep them always," but also that they "sometimes gave me the impression that they too needed me" (*Malone Dies* 241). They are objects that "from time to time, in spite of everything… impose themselves on the understanding with the force of axioms, for unknown reasons" (*Molloy* 55). It is not simply that Beckett's characters are so often fixed in oppressive material worlds, but that the difference between subject and object becomes the structuring condition for fiction. Malone, confined to his bed, uses his stick to interface with the objects around him: "I would identify them by touch, the message would flow all along the stick, I would hook the desired object and bring it over to the bed" (*Malone Dies* 243). The narrator of *The Unnamable* wishes he had such a stick: "I would dart it, like a javelin, straight before me and know, by the sound made, whether that which hems me round, and blots out my world, is the old void, or a plenum" (294). Or, in different terms, the narrator recalls the man who "would wonder where his kingdom ended" and so throw stones into the gloom to discover its bounds (354-5). If, roughly, Woolf's fiction provides a blueprint for how novelistic language makes visible the entanglement of subject and object, Beckett demands that we see our separation from the world as the necessary difference for fiction to occur. The suspension or dilation of the space between subject and object becomes fundamental: whenever the subject seems on the brink of collapse, of dissipating into language

or mud and muck, of becoming “a solid in the midst of other solids,” the novel continues, asserting that something here, however slight, is different from everything else (*Molloy* 103).

It is no accident that the many starting places of *The Space Between the Novel and the World*, whether Russell, Meinong, Merleau-Ponty, Woolf, or Beckett, all point to the beginning of the twentieth century, a moment that saw “the disintegration of stable balanced relations between subject and object” (Levenson 22). Prior to this point, “the novel, in particular the realist novel from the nineteenth century (say Dickens, Balzac, Zola, Dreiser) dedicated itself to rendering object culture legible and to making objects metonymically meaningful” (Brown, “The Matter of Materialism” 62). The rise of the novel is seen as coeval with the consolidation of identity for the growing middle class, so literary objects become relevant in scenes of commerce, transit, collecting, ownership, and domestic life. But something changes, and what emerges is “modernism’s extraordinary generative fascination with the object understood neither as commodity (Goods) nor as symbol (Gods), but *as* ‘object’” (Mao 4). Mao continues: “This feeling of regard for the physical object as object—as not-self, as not-subject, as most helpless and will-less of entities, but also as fragment of Being, as solidity, as otherness in its most resilient opacity—seems a peculiarly twentieth-century malady or revelation” (4). Tom McCarthy describes a similar narrative: “one of the central thrusts of literature as it moves into and through the twentieth century—perhaps *the* central one,” is a shift towards base materialism. This is evident in the late poetry of late W.B. Yeats, with the “downgrading of his lofty esoteric icons to a clutter of half-broken rag-and-bone-shop trinkets;” the “thingliness of things,” “the way their sheer material facticity breaches the limits of every attempt to conceptually or aesthetically contain them” in Francis Ponge; Wallace Stevens’s plums “oozing and rotting beyond and between their lines;” and it culminates, with “whirrs and clunks and splats and

squelches," in *Ulysses*, which "matters most, because it makes matter of everything" ("Why *Ulysses* Matters" 32-3). The formulation of objects shared by the modern and contemporary novelists who appear in these pages stems not primarily from economic or social concerns but from an aesthetic and philosophical imperative to describe our experience of being in the world—and to do so without diminishing or explaining away the "rebellious soul in things" (Conrad 200).

Though the historical framework of this project, such as it is, is contemporary, the discontinuities inherent in periodization ill-suit my understanding that the orientation towards objects of certain recent novels self-consciously extends a modernist project. What is new is how each of the texts in my dissertation updates the set of concerns that necessitate a return to an embedded subject among objects. In the contemporary novel, detailed descriptions of objects and environments illuminate the material conditions of locality, reinvigorating a term that is too often deployed uncritically, drenched in nostalgia, and "offered as the determinate, stay-at-home negation of global capitalism's mobile expansiveness" (Robbins 42). A renewed focus on the local as a perceptual space—akin to phenomenology's *lebenswelt* or Jacob von Uexkull's *umwelt*—brings the concerns of ecocriticism into the project. Though I rarely address representations of nature and the environment as such, there are moments throughout this dissertation where an insistence on human embeddedness has ecological implications. For many of the assembled authors, a focus on objects corrects for the subject's historical primacy, which has proved ecologically catastrophic. The space of the novel becomes an anti-hierarchal one, akin to Cormac McCarthy's description of the desert in *Blood Meridian*:

> All phenomena were bequeathed a strange equality and no one thing nor spider nor stone nor blade of grass could put forth claim to precedence. The very clarity of these articles

> belied their familiarity, for the eye predicates the whole on some feature or part and here was nothing more luminous than another and nothing more enshadowed and in the optical democracy of such landscapes, all preference is made whimsical and a man and a rock become endowed with unguessed kinships. (247)

In contemporary literature, the unguessed kinships between man and rock contain ethical possibilities, bulwarks against environmental degradation and late capitalism's anonymizing instrumentalism.

The restoration of the local precipitated by object orientation suggests that attending to objects narrows the aperture of the novel. Indeed, for the texts in *The Space Between the Novel and the World*, taking objects seriously entails neglecting what can seem a shallow sense of globality. But this pulling back is less an abnegation of the novel's political commitments than a political response to global problems, whether it is to escape the dislocation of modernity in *Remainder*, global terrorism in *Osama*, ecological devastation in *The Bray House*, religious fundamentalism in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, or postcolonial violence in *The God of Small Things*. The contracted narrative scope proffered by objects also seems connected to the absence of digital technology from these fictional worlds. Though the publication dates of these novels span the Age of Information, there are almost no mentions of the internet, personal computing, cellphones, or other communications technologies. It is tempting to read the elevation of objects and erasure of digital technology as a reaction against the "dematerialization" of material culture in late capitalism—a claim which has been deployed more broadly as evidence of the material turn's conservatism (Renfrew 188). But the authors in this dissertation accentuate the virtuality of literary objects; there is no solid thing-*qua*-thing to grasp in the face of digital dislocation. I suggest that rather than see object-oriented literary criticism as a bid to return to something solid

or stable, the rise of digital media raises the stakes for developing a vocabulary that describes how humans engage with objects that are both solid and *virtual*, as these are the kinds of objects amongst which we increasingly find ourselves.

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In loose terms, the preoccupations of my first chapter are onto-phenomenological (what existence do literary objects have, how do they structure fictional worlds, and how does the novel position characters and readers in relation to them?); those of my second chapter are epistemological (what can we know about or from literary objects, and how is it distinct from what we can know about or from objects in the world around us?); and those of the third are political (when and where do literary objects enable or disable certain forms of relation, and how does our experience of matter in the novel create the structures of power that order the fictional world and make us complicit in them?). These emphases tend to focus each chapter on a different relation animated by object-oriented reading—though here too the lines are blurry—so that we move from the subject and object (Ch. 1), to reader and text (Ch. 2), and, finally, language and matter (Ch. 3).

In my first chapter, "The Detective and the Phenomenologist," I take up the relationship between detective and clue as a way to frame the novel's figuration of subject and object more generally. I begin by expanding the project's intellectual history, tying the rise of phenomenology to the detective story, which produces a jointly literary and philosophical form of subjectivity that is outward-facing, legible in its contact with an object world. It is this kind of subject-object relation I go on explore in Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2007) and Lavie Tidhar's *Osama* (2012), in which detective and clue, as formal elements, are both mutually constitutive and necessarily kept apart. Without the other, clues and detectives are objects and people, but

without a narrative fissure between them, there is no plot—clues, if immediately legible, end the mystery. I show how McCarthy and Tidhar employ various strategies to maintain this distance between subject and object, in part by theorizing a materiality of objects that seems to extend beyond language and the text. This transcendent matter substantiates the distance between subject and object, but more than that, I argue that both novels reimagine fiction-making and novel form as structured around the dilation of this difference. The arguments of this chapter are primarily formal, and the descriptive language I develop to comprehend the literary object's participation in novel form is one I use for the rest of the project. I pull back, at the end of the chapter, to consider what the narrowed focus of object orientation implies about the novel's capacity, as a global genre, for concern or empathy. I find that a return to the local plays to the novels strengths, rooting it in the modest representational claims of an "I," a "here," a "now," a "this."

Questions about being and experience give way to reading and reference in my second chapter, "After Objects," in which I ask: how faithfully do objects—those in the novel and the novel itself—refer back to the world? Using *The Bray House* (1990) by Éilís Ní Dhuibhne as a test case because of how it foregrounds the potential susceptibility and resistance of the novel to anthropological priorities, I explore the ways that we imagine objects protect and transmit knowledge. I investigate the particular conditions of Irish history and the novel's publication to elaborate how the interchangeability of Irish subjects and objects within the British imagination and financial system adds a material dimension to the multiple levels of alienation (including economic and linguistic) that define the colonial experience, while pointing to how such historical conditions suggest that objects, even, or especially, when they participate in the colonial enterprise, are uniquely positioned to narrate Irish experience. The double-edged quality

makes objects sites of ambivalence throughout the novel, thwarting *The Bray House*'s authoritarian author—another colonizer—but suggesting too how we as readers approach objects in fiction. In this chapter I discuss in greatest detail the role of books as physical objects in the lives of fictional objects; I also introduce the term "intermateriality" as a way of understanding constellations of intertexts, the objects that move through them, and the role of the reader who enables such movement. Intermateriality helps us understand how literary objects move outside a given text without transporting the reader away from the novel or undermining the brackets of fictionality.

Where my first chapter was primarily concerned with how the novel represented the space between the subject and object, my final chapter, "A Politics of Mattering," focuses on the affordances inherent in the literary object's particular amalgam of discourse and matter. Though the material turn is widely understood as a shift away from the poststructuralist emphasis on discourse, I revive the discursive through the lens of object-oriented criticism to understand what political ends may or may not be forwarded through a consideration of things in fiction. I begin by reflecting on how the balance of language and matter proposed in new feminist materialisms might serve as a model for object-oriented literary criticism. I then turn to Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) to articulate a politics of mattering, a term in which I include how language produces the phenomenon of materiality, what Bill Brown calls the "*materiality-effect*" (60); how narrative configures the political possibilities of things that matter—opening them up to creative play or outside manipulation; how language and narrative thicken and point to their own materiality, often foregrounding how the discursive produces material consequences in the world; how the productive distance between reader and text is abbreviated by Sara Ahmed's call to make things

"'matter' in our reading," implicating the reader in the production and thus the politics of the text (44); and how a focus on the mattering of the novel suggests a certain consequentiality of literary objects and their strange insistent lives that exist after the reader turns away, positing the novel's role in the imaginative making and re-making of the world.

Chapter 1

The Detective and the Phenomenologist

He was standing with the wind at his back, like that mule, and he felt he could stand there indefinitely, maybe forever, like a post or a tree. It took a great deal of energy to be a human being… (23)

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

The Space Between the Novel and the World opens with the clue and the detective because the generic protocols of detective fiction make visible the systems of relation through which subject and object are mutually constitutive. The detective cannot exist irrespective of a meaningful material world; just as a cooper makes barrels and a milliner hats, the detective is only a detective because of his engagement with objects. By the same token, clues need detectives to pluck them from piles of refuse and clutter, readers who understand their value in the construction of narrative; "a clue is named as such only when it serves as part of a more general story—of an overall construct at the disposal of the person who has decided to grant it the status of a clue" (Bayard 49). As I argue in this chapter, the inclination or tendency for detectives to seek clues and clues to call out to detectives is itself an engine of plot; in other words, detective and clue are not simply productions of narrative, but produce narrative and novelistic structure themselves. What binds the detective and clue is detection, a particular form of perception, suggesting that the detective is an ideal phenomenological subject, whose existence is structured by experiences that are directed towards objects and their particular meanings. In this light, the detective genre seems particularly hospitable to the representation of the embedded subject, or of the experience of being in the world. Starting with clues reasserts narrative fiction's basic condition, to represent "human subjects in the concrete circumstances of everyday life," which "is depicted as the coexistence of human subjects and inanimate objects"

(Tischleder 17). In Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* and Lavie Tidhar's *Osama*, the figure of the detective is worldly: he is defined and sustained by his relations to object, even as he is earthbound, denied the possibility of transcendence.

Clues are a natural starting place for my inquiry not only because of how clearly they signal their relations to the subject, reader, and fictional world, but in how they insist on a materiality in fiction that is necessarily consequential. The objects in detective stories are rich with significances that do not overwhelm or elide their substance, giving them the "same value as written documents" (Bayard 35). Clues, then, make apparent the inextricability of meaning and matter in literary objects more broadly, as well as demand we take seriously how objects participate in the structure of narrative and form. Detective fiction "presupposes the belief that the world is so organized that every clue has its cause, every signifier its signified" (Porter 242). In these worlds,

> there is no stone in the street and no brick in the wall that is not actually a deliberate symbol—a message from some man, as much as if it were a telegram or a post-card. The narrowest street possesses, in every crook and twist of its intention, the soul of the man who built it, perhaps long in his grave. Every brick has as human a hieroglyph as if it were a graven brick of Babylon; every slate on the roof is as educational a document as if it were a slate covered with addition and subtraction sums. (Chesterton 4-5)

Though not every object will turn out to be a clue, every object must be considered with care before it is discarded. Clues suggest a reading practice that cannot rush past description to reach dialogue or action; the detective-like reader is a slow reader and a close reader. It is only through such a method that the detective—accompanied by the reader—"notices that which eludes others in their habits and routines" (Bloch 250). In suggesting that detective fiction offers a practice of

reading that is well-suited to my work in later chapters, I participate in a long history of looking to the genre to expound wider principles about writing and reading, in part because of detective fiction's rich self-referential quality. So often the genre "describes some external reality" while it also "overtly and covertly manifests its own structuring principles," so that "detective narratives are understood as metaliterary stories devoted to their own constructive principles and, by extension, as representations of literature in general" (Pyrhönen 32).

In this chapter, I show how by reviving the protocols of detective fiction, *Remainder* and *Osama* reimagine how literary form structures and is structured by the relation between subject and object. I propose several strategies that McCarthy and Tidhar use to represent a materiality that exceeds or survives the text, substantiating and animating the distance between detective and clue and thus enabling the production of narrative; there can be no mystery if the detective can immediately interpret the objects around him. The dilation of the difference between subject and object, I argue, is the enabling condition for fiction-making in these novels, and the bulk of this chapter is devoted to exploring how this relation reorients our understanding of novel form. I conclude by considering how focusing on detective and clue shuts down shallow formulations of globality, revising how we understand the contemporary novel's representational capacity or obligation.

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<u>The Detective and the World</u>

"It has long been an axiom of mine," says Sherlock Holmes in "A Case of Identity," "that the little things are infinitely the most important" (294). The detective takes up objects that might not otherwise warrant narrative attention, a reading practice that proves infectious. When a flustered landlady deposits a handful of burnt matches and a cigarette butt on his table in "The

Adventure of the Red Circle," she says, "I brought them because I had heard that you can read great things out of small ones" (381). The reader, racing to beat Holmes to the solution, must also become object oriented, scouring every sentence for suggestive odds and ends. Yet objects have their own voice in the contracts between detective and clue—and reader and text—by suggesting the ways we might interact with them. Holding up the titular stone in "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle," Holmes muses, "Just see how it glints and sparkles. Of course it is a nucleus and focus of crime. Every good stone is. They are the devil's pet baits. In the larger and older jewels every facet may stand for a bloody deed" (384). The object directs how we read and how we behave—as though the carbuncle itself incites theft and murder. Detective fiction makes clear how human action and inquiry must be understood as co-productions between subjects and objects.

There is a very real sense in which clues are material markers of the exchange between humans and objects. Clues are often characterized by a richness of meaning that comes from a collusion or collision of human and object—whether a stone from a particular quarry lodged in the sole of a boot or blood spattered on a marble bust. Detective fiction gives us a sense of places and things that have "preserved the trace of typically human activity," and, conversely, knowledge of the "human [that] is reified into the location" (Heissenbüttel 86-7). But we can take this a step further and say that the detective and clue are actually mutually constitutive. Clues need a subject to pluck them out of a sea of undifferentiated objects, and detectives need objects to fulfill their professional and narratological obligations. This is related to Pierre Bayard's argument that it is actually Sherlock Holmes who creates the murder: "By his presence alone, the investigator of all investigators arouses mystery; with his suspicious disposition and his assurance of infallibility, he is capable of transforming any event… into a criminal matter"

(172). The detective plot requires that the detective and clue define one another, but also that there should exist distance between them. If objects in detective stories were always at hand, legible, and exhaustible, there would be no mystery, only solutions. “The Adventure of the Blanched Solider” is an unusual Sherlock Holmes mystery because Watson—having recently wed—is not on hand to narrate, leaving Holmes to tell his own story. Halfway through the investigation he solves the puzzle, but realizes that in doing so, he has ruined the story: “I passed on into the study with my case complete. Alas, that I should have to show my hand so when I tell my own story! It was by concealing such links in the chain that Watson was enabled to produce his meretricious finales” (551). The resolution is antagonistic to storytelling, and so it is by protracting the space between detective and clue that the author enables fiction-making.

Within such a world, extra importance is accorded to perception—the forms of seeing, feeling, and reading that make Holmes so successful. The emphasis on observation and the need to find literary strategies to represent it produce moments in the text where perception materializes in the story. Consider Watson’s depiction of Holmes in the uninspiringly-titled “The Adventure of the Cardboard Box”: “He loved to lie in the very centre of five millions of people, with his filaments stretching out and running through them, responsive to every little rumour or suspicion of unsolved crime” (357). In “The Adventure of the Norwood Builder,” Holmes reminisces about how some faint presence of Moriarty, when he was still at large in London, was always detectable in the morning paper: “Often it was only the smallest trace, Watson, the faintest indication, and yet it was enough to tell me that the great malignant brain was there, as the gentlest tremors of the edges of the web remind one of the foul spider which lurks in the centre” (781). These are remarkable descriptions, in which the material rendering of Holmes’s perceptual powers takes place through language, for in both instances Holmes has been reading

the newspaper. The materialization of perception animates the space between subject and object, while drawing self-referential attention to the role of language and print culture in making the invisible visible.

Detective fiction's representation of perception and indebtedness to the space between subject and object mark the genre as ripe for phenomenological readings. G.K. Chesterton's articulation of the detective's city—in which "there is no stone in the street and no brick in the wall that is not actually a deliberate symbol"—seems to foreshadow Maurice Merleau-Ponty's formulation in "Cézanne's Doubt":

> We live in the midst of man-made objects, among tools, in houses, streets, cities, and most of the time we see them only through the human actions which put them to use. We become used to thinking that all of this exists necessarily and unshakeably. Cézanne's painting suspends these habits of thought and reveals the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself. (16)

The phenomenologist and the detective work to make visible the hoary world of objects around us, a process which, when represented in art, enlists the artistic medium (whether language or paint) to highlight the matter of perception. As a result, description in such work tends to favor exteriority. In literary fiction by existentialists, "Consciousness can never be directed inward; it must have an object; and experience always precedes empathy," which is a description we might apply to detective fiction and the novels in this chapter (Lehan 28). The corpus of Tom McCarthy "presents us with a world… but a world that must ultimately remain secret. …Ultimately, the life of a character is not known to us: not to the reader and not to the writer either" (De Boever 141-2). It is not that any of these novelists necessarily discount or discard the

subject; instead, they point to a form of subjectivity that is outward-facing, visible in its embodiment and always constituted by its relations with the object world.

The grouping of American detective fiction, French phenomenology, and the novels of Tom McCarthy and Lavie Tidhar is by no means arbitrary. In "American Novelists in French Eyes," an article that he wrote for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1946, Jean-Paul Sartre outlines how developments in American fiction might propel the French novel beyond the analytical description of Proust or the realism of Flaubert, Maupassant, or Zola. The new author "never enters inside his characters" but "describes them always from the outside. He is only the witness of their conduct. It is from their conduct that we must, as in life, reconstruct their thought" (117). Sartre is writing about Hemingway, Faulkner, and Dos Passos, but his vision is deeply tied to American detective fiction, which in mid-century France was "popularly read and respected by even the most serious writers" (Lehan 62). "If the French existentialists admired the newness and the sense of *dépaysement* in American fiction in general, they admired the American detective story"— what they termed *la littérature noire* —"in particular" (Lehan 61). The Second World War gave the French new access to such books: though the American library in Paris was established to service American soldiers, around 60% of its subscribers were French (Lehan 36). Following the liberation of France, "people devoured American crime movies and, from the *bouquinistes* along the Seine, they bought American fiction. The most popular writers were the hardest-boiled ones: James M. Cain, Dashiel Hammett and Horace McCoy… Camus had emulated the style of American noir novels in *The Stranger*, and Sartre and Beauvoir were also fans" (Bakewell 168).

This influence is evident throughout Camus's novels; the author "saw that the world in the detective novel was not dissimilar from the violent world of the twentieth century and that it

compactly organized and dramatically revealed a hostile and indifferent universe" (Lehan 66). But it as early as the 1938 publication of *Nausea* that a modern template emerges for novels like *Remainder* or *Osama*. It is the narrator Roquentin's estrangement from objects that provides the impetus for fiction making: he decides to "keep a diary to see clearly" the objects around him, to "classify them," "this table, this street, the people, my packet of tobacco" (1). As the novel progresses, the object world becomes increasingly strange and estranging. Roquentin reports that:

> Things are divorced from their names. They are there, grotesque, headstrong, gigantic and it seems ridiculous to call them seats or say anything at all about them: I am in the midst of things, nameless things. Alone without words, defenceless, they surround me, are beneath me, behind me, above me. They demand nothing, they don't impose themselves: they are there. (125)

Objects in their sheer contingency, their threatening immanence, take on an uncanny liveliness that nauseates Roquentin: "Objects should not *touch* because they are not alive. You use them, put them back in place, you live among them: they are useful, nothing more. But they touch me, it is unbearable. I am afraid of being in contact with them as though they were living beasts" (10). Though *Nausea* is not a detective story, there does seem to be a mystery. The novel's unease is generated not by a particular crime, but the condition of being situated in a world of objects that are separate from us and fundamentally unknowable. If the detective plot relies on the distance between subject and object as something to be bridged through thorough investigation, the plots of Sartre's novel and those in this chapter maintain this distance as a sign of the disabling condition of modernity.

The link that joins Sartre and Camus to McCarthy and Tidhar is Alain Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman*. For Robbe-Grillet, difference between the subject and object is a predictable result of the "bourgeois class… gradually losing its justifications and its prerogatives;" "Balzacian objects"—which "belonged to a world of which man was the master," and so serve only as "chattels, properties, which it was merely a question of possessing, or retaining, or acquiring"—no longer have purchase (140). If at one point, "there was a constant identity between these objects and their owner" (140), in the new regime, "the significations of the world around us are no more than partial, provisional, even contradictory, and always contested" (141), a development that Robbe-Grillet attributes, in part, to the popularization of phenomenology. The *nouveau roman* is *nouveau* because of the new relationship it describes between subject and object, and its task is to depict the *thisness* of the world around us, to create new forms "capable of expressing (or of creating) new relations between man and the world" (9). What we see happening in Robbe-Grillet's novels, "again and again, is space and matter inscribing themselves on consciousness, whose task, reciprocally, is to accommodate space and matter" (McCarthy "Geometry" 173). The novels of Sartre, Camus, Robbe-Grillet, McCarthy, and Tidhar form a lineage of fiction that frustrates the "resurrection of the figurative" and "the celebration of language in which 'the object and substance have disappeared'" (Terentowicz-Fotyga 307). For the detective and the phenomenologist, to use a phrase McCarthy attributes to Robbe-Grillet, there is "No art without world" ("Geometry" 173).

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The Plum Survives Its Poems

At the beginning of *Remainder,* the narrator learns he has received 8.5 million pounds as settlement for an accident about which he is unable to speak. "It involved something falling from

the sky. Technology. Parts, bits" (3). In the middle of the conversation with his lawyer, he accidentally yanks his phone out of the wall: "The whole connection came out: the wire, the flat-headed bit that you plug in and the casing of the hole that that plugs into too. It even brought some of the internal wiring that runs through the wall out with it, all dotted and flecked with crumbly, fleshy bits of plaster" (7). The narrator stands there, staring, unable to move, "holding the dead receiver in my hand and looking down at what the wall had spilt. It looked kind of disgusting, like something that's come out of something" (8). Connection is disrupted—setting the mood for the rest of the novel, leaving us with a weirdly flesh-like object. Rather than lean towards J.G. Ballard or David Cronenberg, *Remainder* resists the fetishistic and erotic merging of subject and object; instead, it is a novel predicated on the separation of these terms, despite the narrator's desperate desire to reach some authentic communion with the world around him. The former-phone object is beyond understanding and language, evident in the empty tautology of this simile "like something that's come out of something."

Much of *Remainder* describes the elaborate reenactments the narrator stages using his settlement money, a decision inspired by a crack in the wall of a bathroom that triggers an experience of nostalgia for a place he seems to remember, a place in which everything had been real, remainderless: "Right then I knew exactly what I wanted to do with my money. I wanted to reconstruct that space and enter it so that I could feel real again. I wanted to; I had to; I would" (67). The narrator, possibly traumatized by the accident,[9] orchestrates scenes that play over and over again—daily life in the apartment building with the cracked bathroom wall, a drive-by shooting, a mishap at an auto repair shop, a bank-heist—but he is unable to bring about his reconciliation with the world. As he repeats throughout the book, "My undoing: matter" (17). This is a vision that haunts more than *Remainder*, appearing elsewhere in McCarthy's writing. In

an essay about Kathy Acker, whom he labels a "hardcore materialist," McCarthy quotes her plagiarization of Flaubert in *My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini*—yet another repetition of a repetition: "One could say… that he seeks to merge with unnameable nature, fleeing the weight of nomination in the unnameable texture of things, I want people to treat me as an animal, in the irregular indefinable movements of the foliage, of the waves. To be matter" ("Kathy Acker" 256). Like Acker's Pasolini, the narrator's vision is one in which he had "merged with" the things around him, "run through them and let them run through me until there'd been no space between us. They'd been *real*; I'd been real" (67). Distance must be bridged and difference elided between the narrator and the material world—a pull which puts the narrator at odds with the structure of the novel.

In order for the reader to experience the narrator's dislocation, this distance must feel meaningful, and so *Remainder* and *Osama* work to convince the reader that objects in the novel can actually exist at a remove from the characters. What literary strategies give objects the effect of distance or substance? This is, in part, an effect of genre. By adopting some of the hallmarks of detective fiction, both novels prime the reader to anticipate objects that have narrative significance but are not immediately available for scrutiny. But on a rhetorical level, distance is manufactured by representing objects that seem inured to language, like those "nameless things" in *Nausea*. There are moments throughout *Remainder*, as when the phone looks like "something that's come out of something," where objects cannot be articulated. The novel is filled with descriptions like this: "It's just a… a thing. A patch. A little bit repeating" (300). The book opens with "something falling from the sky," but what it is cannot be named, for reasons that seem part memory failure and part gag order. At one point, the narrator manages to find the right word to describe objects, "R-e-c-i-d-u-a-l," but finds that it is not a word at all, though it is one that

manages to have within it an inexplicable material artifact (270). One factor emerges that seems to unite a number of other objects that fascinate the narrator, including the disconnected phone, a "two-part construction" coffee demitasse that looks like "those moon landing modules from the Sixties, the way the segments slot together" (48), and a broken escalator, which is no longer "one object, a looped moving bracelet, but in fact it's made of loads of individual, separate steps woven together into one smooth system. Articulated. These ones had been dis-articulated…" (16). These objects are all *disarticulated*, joining the problem posed by these objects to the problem of language. Objects that cannot be articulated create space between themselves and the narrator, but also between the reader and the fictional world; while the language available to the character is unable to grasp certain objects, the reader understands that objects in the novel only exist through language.

Though McCarthy is no *nouveau romancier*, his emphasis on unassailable objects betrays the influence of Robbe-Grillet: "Around us, defying the noisy pack of our animistic or protective adjectives, things *are there*. Their surfaces are distinct and smooth, *intact*, neither suspiciously brilliant nor transparent. All our literature has not yet succeeded in eroding their smallest corner, in flattening their slightest curve" (Robbe-Grillet 19). Intransigent matter shows up throughout McCarthy's writing as General Secretary of the International Necronautical Society (INS), a laddish pseudo-serious organization that McCarthy founded. In his "Tate Declaration on Inauthenticity," McCarthy, along with Simon Critchley, INS Chief Philosopher, writes: "what is most real for us is not form, or God, but matter, the brute materiality of the external world" (111). The manifesto continues:

> We take the side of things and try and evoke their nocturnal, mineral quality. This is, for us, the essence of poetry as it is expressed in Francis Ponge, the late Wallace Stevens,

> Rilke's *Duino Elegies* and some of the personae of Pessoa, of trying (and failing) to speak about the thing itself and not just ideas about the thing, of saying "jug, bridge, cigarette, oyster, fruitbat, windowsill, sponge." (111)

McCarthy champions the plum that "survives its poems" (Stevens, "Comedian," 70), positing a literary object whose material existence extends beyond language, beyond the bounds of the sensible, beyond text itself.

McCarthy's novelistic project, in which the author is to "let things thing, to let matter matter, to let the orange orange and the flower flower," stretches the capacity of the form (International Necronautical Society 111). And it is unclear whether the novel is hospitable to such objects. When "things thing," the syntactic effect is certainly unsettling: the object is now subject and verb, a grammatical and lexicological monolith that presents no interpretive openings. But it is hard to imagine sustaining this mode for even the most experimental of novels, and looking at McCarthy's corpus, it is clear that his "novels still operate (and largely succeed) as novels" (Vermeulen 555). Put another way, "the hospitality of *Remainder* to allegorical readings might just as easily be read as a failure of its ability to resist metaphor, or to foreground language's inability to do so—to capture materiality in the sense of 'thingness'" (Hallberg). I agree with Hallberg, though I do not see McCarthy's project as a failure, or at least not an unintentional one. McCarthy's experiment in pushing the object past the bounds of the intelligible acts as the counterbalance to the narrator's dream of subject-object reconciliation, revealing again the tension between storytelling and resolution.

Another way to describe this strain is as a formal problem. Though McCarthy works in a novelistic tradition, there is something anti-novelistic in his approach and rhetoric. The influences that he names most frequently are the poets Francis Ponge, Wallace Stevens, Rainer

Maria Rilke, and Ezra Pound. Unlike prose fiction, poetry can represent objects wholly apart from a subject; the palm at the end of the mind is "Beyond the last thought;" the bird in its branches sings "without human meaning / Without human feeling" (Stevens, "Of Mere Being," 398). McCarthy, in seeming to combine a novelistic narrator with poetic objects, stretches the limits of the form. His conception of an object world that is outside the bounds of narratability is more at home in poetry but also in the visual arts, evidence, perhaps, of McCarthy's early career in the London art scene. Indeed, *Remainder* was first published by Metronome, a small, French, alternative art press, and sold in art galleries. In poetry and visual media, it is possible to represent the object as detached from a perceiving subject and to portray worlds of things that do not disclose a human presence. But the novel is bound to character and the passage of time in ways that poetry and the visual arts are not. However remote objects may seem in *Remainder*, we are tethered to a novelistic narrator, one who experiences profoundly the loss and estrangement produced by a remote object world. If there are ways that *Remainder* moves the novel away from the thinking, feeling subject, it never quite replaces it with the thinging thing; it is, instead, a negotiation of the two.

In order to construct objects that are convincingly substantial and withdrawn, McCarthy also conjures objects that are insubstantial and wholly present. While the narrator recovers from his accident in the hospital, he begins rerouting, finding new neural pathways with which to execute basic motions.[10] He prepares the simple gesture of bringing a carrot to his mouth:

> There are twenty-seven separate manoeuvres involved. You've learnt them, one by one, in the right order, understood how they all work, run through them in your mind, again and again and again, for a whole week—lifted more than a thousand imaginary carrots to your mouth, or one imaginary carrot more than a thousand times,

> which amounts to the same thing. But then you take a carrot—they bring you a fucking carrot, gnarled, dirty and irregular in ways your imaginary carrot never was, and they stick it in your hands—and you know, you just know as soon as you see the bastard thing that it's not going to work. (20)

There is a performed split between real and imagined carrots. The irreal carrots are impoverished, "[maintaining] no relations with the rest of the world," while the real carrots espouse the "infinity of relations… that constitutes the very essence of a thing. Hence a kind of *overflowing* in the world of 'things': there is, at every moment, always infinitely more than we can see; to exhaust the richness of my current perception would take an infinite time" (Sartre, *Imaginary* 9). The real carrot has something that is, in this passage, literally ungraspable, and the humor of the "fucking carrot" and "the bastard thing" gestures towards the profane unapproachability of the material. The real carrot's solidity, its haecceity, are made possible by the imaginary carrot's thinness. Here I draw from Elaine Scarry's writing on materiality in the novel, which is produced when "the mental image of a wall can be coaxed into solidity by the passing of a transparent surface over it" (12). The narrator's ability to imagine objects—fictional objects *within* the fiction—gives material substance to the "real" objects that exist around him.

Though objects in *Osama* seem at a similar remove, their distance is defined by the subject's immateriality and not the object's strange remoteness. In the novel, Joe, a private detective, is hired by a mysterious woman to track down Mike Longshott, the author of a series of pulp novels titled *Osama Bin Laden: Vigilante*. The world of *Osama* is a counterfactual one, where global terrorism does not exist outside these books, but as Joe travels from Vientiane to Paris, London, New York, and, eventually, Kabul, his reality begins to slip, and we catch glimpses of our own world. As Joe becomes more and more spectral, the reader comes to realize

that he is actually dead, a victim of a terrorist attack in our world. The alternate universe of *Osama* is a fiction in which Joe is given the opportunity to confront his own death.

The solidity of objects in the novel points to Joe's incorporeality, and in doing so, objects become clues that refer to absent humans. When Joe gets out of bed, he notices that it "looked undisturbed. It always did, even though he must have fallen asleep on it. Sleep, for Joe, was merely an absence" (232). At the end of the novel, he thinks back to all the beds he's slept in and realizes "they were never disturbed when he woke up. He could never remember sleeping. He was just… he just wasn't there" (294). The bed is an inverted clue: rather than something that points to the subject, it marks an absence, but one which still leads to Joe. In one scene, Joe is walking along the railroad tracks behind the Gare St. Lazare in Paris:

> It seemed a wild wasteland that took him by surprise. Beyond the gate, at the back of the station, pools of standing water littered the ground, and amidst them, like a still landscape, were strewn abandoned objects, broken and unwanted, like sacrificial offerings to St. Lazare. Joe paused as his shoes squelched in the water, and watched a man leap from a floating wooden ladder, his reflection caught in the smooth surface of the water. (74-5)

The passage continues, as Joe stares out at "the sea of debris, that geography of abandoned human lives" (75):

> He saw bicycle tires, and disused pipes, a wet newspaper, an army helmet, clothes pegs, a broken torch, an upturned beer crate, a pair of spectacles with the glass missing, a toy monkey with its eyes missing, something that looked like the inside of an electronic device of some sort, all wires and copper, lines in complicated patterns, a milk bottle, an empty packet of cigarettes, a floating ticket stub for a train or a cinema, a broken pencil,

> white toilet paper strewn this way and that like bandages that had been torn away from a rising corpse. (75).

Though these scenes are largely devoid of people, the adjectives used imply humans who are not present, including Joe. The toilet paper that looks like bandages torn "from a rising corpse" refers to Joe, as well as to Lazarus, the namesake of the train station, but the paper is just the remainder. Objects are "abandoned," "broken," and "unwanted;" but by whom? Seeing them as a "geography of abandoned human lives" testifies to the spatial and material dimensions of human existence, but these objects are unable to provide the missing subjects. In *Osama*, it is ghostly subjects and not gauzy objects that testify to the solidity of certain things.

If objects in *Remainder* evince the philosophical or linguistic problems inherent in the perception of fictional objects, those in *Osama* highlight the thinness of fictional character. On a "conveyor belt at the airport, amidst the luggage, there were cases and bags that belonged to no one, it seemed, that kept circling indefinitely, like planes overhead which will never now be granted permission to land" (226). The existence of these objects seems to come after or beyond the subject, adding to the novel's post-apocalyptic atmosphere. When Joe takes a bath and puts his head underwater, he almost disappears: "No thought, no sound, no sight, no taste, no smell, no touch. For a moment there was no one there, just the empty bath, the water cooling at a rate of zero point one five degrees a minute" (233). Even as the material world is produced by Joe's perception, it is Joe and not the objects around him that evaporate in the absence of sensation, like with his always-perfect bed linens. This is a deeply fragile vision of the subject, one which seems a response to the threat of global terrorism, but in this context, the solidity of the material world is actually sheltering, a space Joe can inhabit outside reality. And so the deeper Joe's investigation goes, the greater the risk that he must face his own death, with the ironic

consequence that every clue which refers back to an absent Joe actually threatens what identity he does retain. This inverse progression aligns Joe with the "doomed detectives" of metaphysical detective stories, a sub-genre in which the detective "may even learn that he himself is the victim he avenges… In such tales, the answer to the detective story's perennial question—"Whodunit?"—is "I." And "Who is 'I'?" is another question entirely" (Sweeney 248). By failing to follow certain clues, Joe avoids having to confront his own death, so that once again the distance of objects is actually an enabling condition for narrative production.

Though the world around Joe provides a buffer against the knowledge of his mortality, his frailty makes him vulnerable to objects that intrude upon his fantasy. At two different moments, Joe confronts an advertisement for Mike Longshott's books, "a large poster showing a man with clear, penetrating eyes and a long beard, and beneath it the caption read: *Wanted: Dead or Alive. Osama bin Laden, Vigilante*" (92). In both instances, the poster initiates a shift in language. In the first encounter, Joe is drinking a glass of scotch, and he notes that "the liquor tunnelled through him and he felt distant explosions erupt deep inside him" (92), and that "his mouth tasted raw and full of smoke, like the inside of a collapsed building" (93). He next sees the image in the window of a bookstore in London: "there was that poster again… the man with the long beard and the clear, penetrating eyes that seemed to look inside him, to sift through the dust and debris that made up his life, and to know him" (136-7). For the reader, there is something deeply discomfiting about the novel metaphorizing terrorist attacks; it seems in bad taste. But this is in some way the point: the narrator, Joe, and perhaps even the author lose control of language in the face of this charismatic object that ruptures the integrity of the text. Though bin Laden no longer poses a physical threat to Joe, his image precipitates a violent shift in language that highlights the fragility of the subject—who, under the terrorist's "clear,

penetrating eyes," is himself reduced to a composite of stuff, nothing more than "dust and debris."

If the objects surrounding Joe often point to his metaphysical shallowness, there are also those that form the grounds of an argument *for* shallowness. In his investigation around Paris, Joe winds up at the Parc Monceau, in which he finds that "there were curious structures dotted around the park. There was a Chinese fort. There was a Dutch windmill. There were Corinthian pillars" (83).

> The word was *fabriques*. Those things, those structures erected in Monceau in miniature, were things made to resemble the real, but not real in themselves. They were architectural fabrications, an invented scenographic landscape: they were lies, constructed for the purpose of art—but they were not real, Joe thought. They were not real. (83)

At first glance, the *fabriques* seem like yet more objects that point to Joe's artificiality and threaten the integrity of the fictional world. But this shifts as Joe contemplates the miniatures further:

> The English word for *fabrique* was folly, and Joe wondered what it meant, that difference in languages. Was it really folly, to exist in a world that was a fabrication, that was not real, but only made to seem it? Or did existence itself count for something, the statues, though not real, nevertheless existing as a reminder of what had been before, markers of memory in the terrain of shadows and half-truths that was the past? (84)

The distinction between reality and existence, or presence, is an important one, because it lays the groundwork for fictional entities to matter in a way that is not predicated on their substantiality. The *fabriques*, like other objects in the novel, still point to Joe's irreality, but through them he is able to fashion something out of his spectral being, a space between life and

death sustained by fiction. Unlike *Remainder*, in which the divide between real and imagined objects constructs an extra-fictional material presence—a thingness which transcends the text—in *Osama*, it is the solidity of the fictional world that makes it habitable, an alternative to the harsh reality of global terrorism.

*

Material Traces

In "The Professor and the Detective," a wickedly clever exegesis on professors' affinity for mystery novels, Marjorie Nicolson elaborates upon the compact between detective writer and detective reader:

> We learn new moves and tricks at every game. We can distinguish with deadly precision among tobaccos we have never seen; let but a character casually be caught smoking an exotic cigarette in a yellowish paper, and we have our eye upon him till the end. You cannot fool us with the obvious tricks of a decade ago—and what scorn we heap upon an amateur who attempts to write for us, knowing far less of technique than we know ourselves. We are aware that finger prints may be forged; we can tell you more accurately than many a scientist what will happen to your footprints if you try to walk backward, if you are wearing borrowed shoes, or if you insist on carrying through the garden the corpse of the gentleman you have recently killed. We can tell you the exact angle at which your body will hang if you commit suicide with your silk stockings. We can detect with unerring precision whether the body found by the railroad tracks is that of a man killed by accident or murdered before the train passed. We can distinguish with more deadly accuracy than your hairdresser whether your hair is dyed, whether its wave is permanent or real. (120-1)

Readers of detective fiction cannot help but become detectives themselves; once trained by the novel, they too become object oriented in the search for clues. But as readers, we have access to the text in ways the detective does not. In *Remainder* and *Osama*, the investigative reader uncovers how metanarrative elements adopt a material presence within the text, becoming evidence in our bid to decipher narrative meaning. Because this activity takes place outside or above the fictional world, the work of the detective and reader, once aligned, can diverge, while at other moments, the reader finds himself tricked by the novels into repeating, outside the text, the same fruitless motions as the characters, producing a vertiginous *mise-en-abyme*. Clues, we come to find, play a significant role in the reader's experience of synchronicity with or divergence from the activity of the novel.

Both novels prepare the reader to look for textual artifacts by demonstrating how narrative gives substance to immaterial phenomena. In *Remainder*, the narrator fixates on ways to fashion the ineffable into something tangible, which explains his detailed models of the reenactments and his interest in forensic science. Using the latter, not only can he trace the marks humans and object leave on one another, but turn absence into a kind of presence: "Shoe and tyre prints are captured by pouring plaster into the mould the rubber promontories have cut in the earth or mud, letting it set and then lifting it away again, turning space hollowed out by action into solid matter" (188). Later in the novel, he realizes that "We had to treat information *as* matter: stop it spilling, seeping, trickling, dribbling, whatever: getting in the wrong place and becoming mess"—where "whatever" recalls the excessive, inexpressible quality of matter that escapes description (265). In *Osama*, living characters can perceive the novel's spectral inhabitants by smoking opium. As Joe's friend Alfred says to him: "And if I didn't smoke? I

might not even see you" (33). Substance, in these fictional worlds, is a matter of contract; language bestows and retracts thingness all the time.

Reading for clues, then, we start to see the text as itself a material artifact. The objects we find are invisible to characters; their meaning registers above the level of narrative. No one within *Remainder* comments on how the apartment where the narrator finds the crack in the bathroom is located on "Plato Road" (61), or that the name of the apartment building he buys is named "Madlyn Mansions," evocative of Proust's madeleine (104). "*Remainder*'s allusions to other texts," both oblique and manifest, "remind us of its status as text," evincing how "the novel's material elements (roads, buildings) are drawn in sync with its immaterial operations (simulacra, memory), without the narrator seeming to notice" (Serpell 240). By interrupting the coherence of the text, these allusions give *Remainder* the feel of an assemblage, which allows for the constant reordering of interchangeable parts, as in the reenactments. The resultant aesthetic recalls McCarthy's origins in the visual art world. He remembers, "I had this project at the Institute of Contemporary Arts London where we were cutting up text, very William Burroughs, and recompiling it and reading it out over the radio" ("Tom McCarthy"). *Remainder* is a novel in which "pieces—of matter, of time, of perception—collect but do not cohere," which leaves it to the detective/reader to make order out of the parts (Serpell 248).

In *Osama*, strange and estranging hints of other texts point, like clues, to Joe's own incorporeality. After following a lead to London's Chinatown, Joe is told: "Forget it, Joe. Forget Chinatown," echoing Roman Polanski's 1974 film (191). He buys a "purple rose" in "Little Cairo," unwittingly reproducing the title of Woody Allen's 1985 comedy (166). A man in a robot suit selling half-price theater tickets tells Joe "There's no place like home, mate" (188), and a chanteuse at a bar sings "Over the Rainbow" (203). Joe passes an actor on the street poorly

reciting lines of Hamlet: “he had never heard Hamlet done with so many exclamation marks before. Hamlet spoiled it even further by sticking a question mark over the next line—‘For in that sleep of death what dreams may come’” (155)? What Joe perceives to be a misreading of *Hamlet* is understood by the reader as more properly a reference to *Osama*. The distance between Joe and the reader is compounded by the fact that most of the references scattered throughout the novel deal with the confusion of real and fantasy worlds, or shadowy systems from which characters cannot escape or recognize the extent of their entrapment. Joe’s inability to read these clues is itself a sign of his remove from the world.

References that point outside the text—which are meaningful beyond or above *Remainder*’s narrator and Joe—ensure that the reader is working on a level of understanding inaccessible to the characters. Returning to the description of the ruins behind the Gare St. Lazare, we remember how Joe “watched a man leap from a floating wooden ladder, his reflection caught in the smooth surface of the water.” There is nothing to differentiate this line from the text that surrounds it, yet it is not of the novel: it is an ekphrastic description of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s photograph “Derrière la gare de Saint-Lazare” (see fig. 1). Because there is no indication that the description refers to Cartier-Bresson’s photograph, the careful reader who spots this interpolation is left with the sense that he is missing other, similar moments; what else might be hidden that he simply does not have the information to recognize? It is not simply that readers have access to worlds that characters do not; instead, the novel reproduces the characters’ difficulty in knowing, seeing, or experiencing the world as coherent or comprehensible. Each allusion we do find reminds us of those we never will.

(Fig. 1)

Tidhar's use of intertextuality can prove estranging, which the author accomplishes in part by using the reader's investigative zeal to entrap him. In *Osama*, a number of clues within Joe's world refer back to major terrorism events of the last decades—so they are, again, legible

to us and meaningless to the detective. When Joe is first hired to track down Longshott, he is shot at by mysterious figures driving by in a car. As they race off, a piece of paper comes flying out the window. Joe "smoothed it open and looked at it. A dirty scrap of old newspaper, barely-legible but for the date: eleven September, two thousand and one. He shrugged, crumpled it back into a ball, and went to deposit it in the rubbish-bin" (43). In London, Joe notices that "someone had spray-painted 7/7 on the wall," the date of the 2005 London suicide bombings (118). Later still, Joe follows a trail of graffiti: "*7/7* again. *9/11. 7/8. 11/12*. It was as if a mad mathematician was let loose in the city with unlimited cans of paint," where the latter dates reference the 2006 transatlantic aircraft plot and 2007 Algiers bombings (136). When Joe flies to New York City and checks into the Hotel Kandahar—another clue—he notices that: "Above his head a row of round clocks showed the time in Tokyo, Los Angeles, Kabul and Bombay as well as New York. Only, New York time was frozen at 8:46," which is the time that the first plane crashed into the World Trade Center (232). The efficacy of these allusions relies on the reader's familiarity with a history of terrorist activity. When, in researching this chapter, I had to look up several of these dates and events, I ended up falling down an internet rabbit hole of suicide bombings and plane hijackings. The reader's role looks less like a detective than a conspiracy theorist, following disturbing leads and drawing lines between horrific events that no one else sees; in the course of his investigation, the reader fills in the bodies of victims that Joe refuses to see. These clues illustrate the strange and complicated lives of literary objects: Joe's rejection of global terrorism's reality renders clues that refer to it as meaningless rubbish, and so the reader—eager to pick up on what Joe misses—follows these leads, and is compelled, outside the text, into the terrible knowledge that Joe denies.

In *Osama*, the reader's examination of objects foists onto him an unwelcome comprehension—which suggests one possible avenue for object-oriented reading's ethical claims. In *Remainder*, the reader's experience of the text as a material construction reimagines the nature of the subject at the novel's center. In the past, McCarthy has spoken of the narrator as a rejection of "a certain set of assumptions, certain models of subjectivity—for example, the contemporary cult of the individual, the absolute authentic self who is measured through his or her absolutely authentic feeling" ("In Conversation"). McCarthy's poetics "aims to disrupt our ideas of psychological integrity and the customary ways in which the self relates to society—ideas it associates with the novel genre as such" (Vermeulen 553). Writing about the novels of Jean-Philippe Toussaint, McCarthy notes, "we're being given access not to a fully rounded, self-sufficient character's intimate thoughts and feelings… but rather to an encounter with structure," an observation that might be equally true of *Remainder*'s narrator ("Stabbing the Olive"). It is in *Remainder*'s "cerebral and linguistic glitches," moments in the novel that do not quite seem *of* the novel, that the mimetic representation of a coherent narrative subject seems to flicker and fray (S. Miller 645).

At the beginning of *Remainder*, as the narrator passes a former crime scene, he observes that you would not know, looking at it, that something had happened on the spot: "But it had. There must have been some kind of record—even if just in the memories of the forty, fifty, sixty passers-by who'd stopped to watch. Everything must leave some kind of mark" (10). Much later in the novel, the narrator wonders how to go about locating the building in his vision: "I'd probably passed it at some point over the last few years already—which meant that it would be recorded somewhere in my memory. Everything must leave some kind of mark" (99). Both quotations make connections between the mind and the material world; they are cryptically

chiasmic, so that the imaginative experiences of people leave a mark on the world as the physical world makes an imprint on the mind. What stands out is the narrator's repetition of this sentence almost a hundred pages apart, without remark or self-awareness—which occurs again, yet another hundred pages later: "Everything must leave some kind of mark" (198). The sentence enacts what it signifies: the narrator's preoccupation with the material world produces a material-semiotic mark on the text. The sentence performs its own argument about the world, so that it is both meaningful expression and material object. And just as *Osama* forces the reader into the same modes of detection as Joe, *Remainder* requires the reader to mimic the repetitive and recursive logic of the narrator in order to make sense of these moments buried throughout the text.

Despite *Remainder*'s representations of reenactments, the plot still proceeds linearly. But material interruptions in the text confuse the novel's temporality. When actors begin rehearsing a bank robbery in a warehouse near Heathrow, the protagonist observes a large black patch on the tarmac:

> Something must have happened there, some event, to have left its mark. After we'd finished practicing one day I went over to it, crouched beside it, poked it with my finger. It was hard, but not brash or unfriendly. Its surface, viewed from just an inch away, was full of little pores—cracked, open, showing paths leading to the growth's interior.
>
> "It's like a sponge," I said.
>
> "What's that?" asked Samuel, who'd appeared beside me.
>
> "Like a sponge. Flesh. Bits." (278)

Again the appearance of the mark notifies us to some strange thingness about the text. Later, when the fake bank-robbers unwittingly become real bank-robbers, one is shot and lies bleeding

on the ground—a moment in which the fictional becomes startlingly, violently real. The narrator inspects the dying man's wound:

> When I brought my eyes right up to it, I saw that it was riddled with tiny holes—natural, pin-prick holes, like breathing holes. Much bigger, irregular cracks had opened among these where bits of shot had entered him. I could see some way into the tunnels that the cracks' insides formed, but then they turned and narrowed as they disappeared deeper inside him.
>
> "Yes, really like a sponge," I said. (294)

What happens to causality? It is not, as we expect, that the narrator thinks of the tarmac and uses that language to describe the flesh. Instead, the two descriptions seem to be uncannily simultaneous, or in multidirectional conversation, as the abruptly revived sponge exchange suggests. The stain on the tarmac is fleshy before the narrator sees the flesh. Confusing matters (and matter) further, both tarmac and flesh resemble the "crumbly, fleshy bits of plaster" that cling to the telephone ripped from the wall. The novel's encroaching monism—everything is more or less fleshy, spongy, plastery bits—erodes the stability of the subject, but it also interferes with coherent narrative progression—in the same way that the narrator loses time whenever he enters one of his reveries that are brought on by moments of subject-object cohesion. In these moments and others,[11] the reader's role in rooting out extra-narrative objects brings the novel closer to collapse, and so, as in *Osama*, aligns the unwitting reader with the narrator's desires. In *Remainder*, this collusion produces a novel in which subject, object, space, time, and language are reified into little bits and pieces, and where story cedes to an unintelligible junk heap, threatening to collapse the differences that allow for the continuation of the novel.

*

The Imploded Novel

In her excellent study *Seven Modes of Uncertainty*, Namwali Serpell characterizes *Remainder*'s mode as one of *synchronicity*, drawing on Jung's definition of "a coincidence in time of two or more causally unrelated events which have the same or similar meaning" (Serpell 244). She traces levels of synchronicity throughout the novel: the narrator's desire to "synchronize himself with matter," the "simultaneity of art and reality," and "the collaborative coordination of action" (235); the fact that "the novel's material elements (roads, buildings) are drawn in sync with its immaterial operations (simulacra, memory), without the narrator seeming to notice" (240); and the novel's final image, of a looping plane, which conjures up the novel's opening image, of debris falling from the sky, intimates "that the perfect concordance of time and space to which synchronicity aspires will be complete just past its last page" (261). Even the reader's experience aligns with the novel—as Serpell suggests through a smart reading of online book reviews: "Metareading heightens the novel's experiential synchronicity, coordinating our feelings and knowledge with the narrator's until they are near simultaneous" (251). Serpell's reading is persuasive. *Remainder*'s strange enchantment emerges as the novel's loops and layers align form, affect, experience, art, and life.

But what if synchronicity looks less like a superstructure and more like an implosion? If everything is reducible to infinitely repeatable and reconfigurable "parts, bits," does the novel simply collapse in on itself? For both McCarthy and Tidhar, the answer seems to be, at least in part, yes. Though there is a pull in both novels to make everything material—a project that aligns with those of Joe and the narrator—the success of this force would inaugurate a collapse of narrative. This eventuality, which is avoided in *Remainder*, is realized in *C*, McCarthy's third novel. *C* is a Bildungsroman that follows Serge Carrefax through seminal moments of the early

20th century, and here too it is unclear how human the protagonist is—"Serge" is also "surge," a burst of electricity, the fuel of modernity. The novel's culmination is Serge's fever dream, in which he marries the ghost of his sister Sophie. The priest performing the ceremony recites "liturgical oratory" that "slips by in a smooth and constant thread. This turn of phrase, this figure of speech, 'a smooth and constant thread'… is far from metaphorical: a silken thread is *actually* running from the priest's mouth" (382). The incestuous marriage of siblings is replicated in the newly vertiginous quality of the text, with its self-quotation and insistence on its own literalness. In the final moments of his dream—which ends in his actual death—Serge finds "he's become the sea of ink": "Like time itself, he's flattening, turning into carbon paper: the black smear between the sheets, the surface through which things repeat, CC themselves, but that will always remain black, and blank" (385-6).[12] The novel ends in a series of collapses: brother and sister join together, language becomes both semantic and physical, and character implodes into text, rendering Serge indistinguishable from the page itself.

Even before Serge's death, *C* is a novel filled with complex apparatuses that overwhelm and absorb the human: the loom in Serge's mother's silk operation which consumes not only the materials but the laborer, the "a human go-between" (39); the "clockwork choreography" (159) of Serge's plane, which reorganizes its pilot's perceptions so that "all displacement and acceleration, all shifts and realignments *must* proceed from the machine" (156); the British intelligence machine that resembles a "huge square harp," picking up every vibration produced by the guns in the Great War to feed to army HQ (192); the hybrid plane outfitted with "no fewer than seven Lewis guns," forcing its operator to "learn to play the whole contraption like an instrument—an organ say" (203); the possibility, behind the static on the receiver, of a human operator, "sitting at some kind of switchboard shaped like an outlandish loom" (249); the

Levantine desert in which Serge "has the impression of being not in nature but in some giant mechanism, like a clock, sextant, or theodolite" (354); the Egyptian god Isis, who Serge calls "a coherer," like the radio, and whose chest Serge imagines "as a wireless set, filled with black metal filings" (355); and, in his final dream, when Serge imagines himself as "all the insects [combined] into a single, giant one," connected so intimately to "a giant tentacular wireless set, an insect-radio," that "he's *both*" (376). This list is overwhelming, like the machines themselves. These world-consuming objects, which gather up everything into their own structure—including the reader—point not only to a *Modern-Times* modernity in which humans become instruments of machines, but to the novel itself, thus foreshadowing Serge's total integration into the text.

C collapses in on itself because narrative cannot exist without difference. This is, for McCarthy, the end-point of fiction, an argument he makes again in reference to *Moby Dick*:

> A book that devotes so many of its pages to the sheer materiality of what lurks on the horizon and beneath the surface—their fat, sperm, bones, bile, liver and so on—can only have one winner. The whale's materiality, its excessive weight, shatters the Pequod, rendering all self-projections void—or, to put it another way, the screen becomes blubber. ("Tate Declaration" 110)

Letting "things thing" ends in an implosion that consumes fiction. Without the interplay of subject and object, language and matter, reader and text, there is no novel.

Of course, *Remainder* avoids *C*'s final collapse; despite the sometimes-thingness of narrator, objects, world, narrative, and language, the novel continues. Serpell suggests that what breaks the novel's synchronicity is the reader's laughter. The novel's comedy, in the face of the narrator's humorlessness, is what gives the reader some hold outside the text. For Serpell too, collapse is avoided through difference. I propose two additional reasons for why *Remainder* does

not simply become a block of undifferentiated matter. The first concerns the demands of storytelling. *Remainder* runs on fission: the narrator's separation from the world propels the plot forward. Because the novel is structured around a problem that needs solving—the dilemma of being-in-the-world—whenever the narrator is close to collapse, to nothingness, form intervenes almost as a character would to ensure the novel's continuation. Lying in a coma, the narrator finds himself in "the no-space of complete oblivion," but which then "stretched and contracted itself into gritty shapes and scenes in my unconscious head—sports stadiums mainly, running tracks and cricket pitches—over which a commentator's voice was playing" (4). He later elaborates on this experience:

> …when my mind was still asleep but getting restless and inventing spaces and scenes for me to inhabit, I'd found myself in large sport stadiums… There'd been a commentary and I'd had to join in with it, commentate as well. I'd had to speak my commentary to the rhythm of these beeps and rasps or else I'd fade out of the scene. I'd known the situation was a strange one, that I was unconscious and imagining it, but I'd also known that I had to keep the commentary up, to fill the format, or I'd die. (54)

At the end of the novel, in another repetition, the narrator explains, "There was a format… and I had to fill it, or I'd die" (239). Narrative form materializes as athletic structures, spaces with physical features that determine how people move within them. This is McCarthy at his most Beckettian; "Ah if only this voice could stop, this meaningless voice which prevents you from being nothing and nowhere" (*The Unnamable* 364). Like a marble on a gently-sloping table, the novel form, structured around how subjects and objects incline towards one another, slowly and almost mysteriously continues to move.

The second possibility for the novel's persistence concerns character. The narrator's failure is that though he "expresses his desire for a totalizing, mystical transcendence," "in each case, the transcendence is denied—experience is inauthentic because it remains within the phenomenal" (Lea 467-8). But the novel's emphasis on the narrator's perception—the language of "seeing," "visualizing," "looking," "envisaging," and "picturing," which often takes the "place of novelistic consciousness" (Serpell 233)—suggests that there is something that differentiates him from the rest of the novel. This implies that there is some aspect of literary character that cannot be reduced to text. It also gestures towards the narrator's title; just as Joe, the detective, exists in a particular object world by dint of his profession, the narrator's privileged relationship to seeing and describing distinguishes him from all that he sees and describes. I argue, against extant McCarthy scholarship, that the remainder of the title refers not only to the material bits and pieces that thwart the narrator but to the narrator's own subjectivity, which is what prevents him from reaching the sameness with objects that he desires. There is nothing valorous about this McCarthyian subjectivity, which he describes elsewhere in *Remainder* as "the background noise we all have in our head that stops us from forgetting we're alive" (198). Yet however slight, however insubstantial, this irreducible remainder that prevents the narrator from becoming object or text is what enables the novel's existence.[13]

Joe faces a similar existential crisis in *Osama*, in that he will disappear if he does not fill the form: "What held him together was little more than a name, an occupation. There was a man named Joe and he was a detective. What led him on, what kept him bound into the strands of that identity, was a question" (277). This idea is repeated again and again: "'Where is Mike Longshott?' the prisoner [Joe] said. More and more that became his focus, the lode-star to which he could pin the shreds of himself." "Finding Mike Longshott gave him his purpose back. He

began to rebuild the detective out of the floating fragments loose in the darkness. He began to map a landscape, a vista of *fabriques*" (257). The detective plot is the only thing that keeps Joe together, even as everything else collapses: "The pulp writer was leaving him a trail of crumbs to follow, and he was following, and the world was slowly unravelling around him, a threadbare tapestry that could no longer quite comfort him against the chill" (133). When Joe gets lost or confused, he reminds himself:

> But what was the trail? These were the facts: his name was Joe. He was a private investigator. He had been hired to find a man, and given more-than-adequate funds to do so. Everything else…
>
> These were the facts. Facts were important. They separated fiction from reality, the tawdry world of Mike Longshott from the concrete spaces of Joe's world. Everything else… (103)

When Joe repeats "Everything else…," he means to say that everything else was extraneous; but each time, as he trails off, the enormity of the world beyond his constructed fiction proves overwhelming. Joe's investigation gives him an identity, but it also limits the scope of his world. The detective's universe is typically circumscribed—a manor house, a train car, a city—and the objects available for inspection limited; Joe adopts the detective mantle in part for the relative comfort of so bounded a universe. In *Osama*, the demands of genre prop up a world that might otherwise cease to exist.

The book object plays a strange double role in *Osama*. The *Osama bin Laden, Vigilante* novels disrupt the integrity of Joe's world; though they are nominally fictional, they have an eerie power to intrude into Joe's reality while remaining impossible to comprehend: "They were full of exploding planes, exploding buildings, exploding trains, exploding people. They read like

the lab reports of a morgue, full of facts and figures all concerned with death. He did not understand them" (57). But Joe, who is also a fictional character, benefits from these features as well. He experiences books as lively and vibrant: under his fingers, books "felt like skin, were warm to the touch" (273). A used bookstore is "filled with worn, battle-weary books that had seen more of the world in their time… than [the owner] had and, like himself, had finally come to rest, for a while at least" (33), and in another shop, Joe spies "more books pressing against the windows inside the shops, looking out as if trying to escape" (89). In another instance, Joe imagines books as "a sort of migratory bird. Here they rested a while, weary of their travels, before taking flight again, before moving, settling in another nest for a time. They seemed to him like a flock that had descended on these tables, pages fluttering like wings, and here they rested in the shade, enjoying the lull, knowing it would soon be time to go on their way again" (274). Elsewhere in this dissertation I explore in greater depth the role that books play as objects within literature (Ch. 2), but in *Osama* they prove another avenue for suggesting the autonomy of the literary world. The strange distance of books in *Osama*—how they move on their own and contain important, if inscrutable, meaning—points to the kind of existence that fictional worlds and objects seem to have beyond the character's comprehension, which for Joe, like the *fabriques*, also gives value to his particular mode of being.

At the end of *Osama*, the curtain of fiction is pulled back, and Joe is confronted by his wife, who was killed in the same attack:

> 'I remember the explosion,' she said, in a small voice. 'At least, I think I do. Or maybe it's just that, knowing there *was* an explosion, my mind reconstructed it, a memory that isn't real—but how do you know?' she said, almost pleading, it seemed to him. 'How do you know what's real? All of us, imagining lives like something out of a screen.' (298)

The passage continues:

> 'You have to choose,' she said softly. 'You have to choose what to be. When you've been stripped of everything: a name, a face, a love—you could be anything. You could even choose to be yourself.' (299)

Joe says, "I know," and the chapter ends (299). But the epilogue finds him back in Vientiane, where the novel began. Joe sits in his office, from which he sometimes sees, "for just a moment," "a girl standing there, in the place where sunlight pierces rain" (302). The epilogue's title, "puddles of rain," echoes that of the first chapter, "puddles of light," suggesting that like *Remainder*, *Osama*'s narrative moves in a loop. Form has to start again, because when it stops, there will be nothing. Joe has the choice to exit the fiction, but he opts instead to renew the literary compact. The mystery in *Osama* will never be solved, because doing so would bring about the end of Joe and the novel.[14]

In "Kathy Acker's Infidel Heteroglossia," McCarthy returns to *Moby Dick*, this time to discuss the death of Queequeg:

> …having first contracted a fever that convinces him he'll die, and had a coffin built for him by the ship's carpenter, he makes a complete recovery; after which he whiles away the time transcribing his tattoos from his body to the outer surface of the coffin which is—for now and for him at least—redundant. When the Pequod sinks and he does die, it's Ishmael who'll float on the coffin back to safety: the crafted box becomes the craft, or life raft, that conveys the narrative to us. (265)

This is an evocative image of the novel form: a structure that is both coffin and life raft, covered in writing that is illegible to most readers, testifying to the existence of people who no longer exist, and whose material properties—size, buoyancy, and so on—are integral to and inseparable

from its representational abilities. McCarthy has called the novel "a peculiarly zombie art form," which "stumbles onwards, ineluctably, gorging and disgorging its own death, its own deadness" ("Tom McCarthy"); and he has suggested that "life can only enter into the work of art as death. The work of art can only begin to include life in its destruction" (De Boever 126). This helps make sense of *Osama* and *Remainder*'s affinities to detective fiction, a genre which typically opens with an offstage murder. This "is always one and the same story that is told. There is only one story of the corpse that is discovered and of the reconstruction of the murder, a reconstruction that gradually places the figures of the suspects, thrown together at first in an arbitrary manner, into a more and more orderly pattern" (Heissenbüttel 84). The corpses, in *Osama* and *Remainder*, belong to Joe and the narrator, where the events of their deaths are what produces their dislocation and subsequent investigations; the work of art does "begin to include life in its destruction."

Implicit in these images of the novel is a sense that form endures past death. We find similar moments throughout McCarthy's oeuvre: "Leaves leave marks too, sometimes," says the narrator of *Remainder* to Naz. "Outlines on the tarmac, their own skeletons. Like photos. Or Hiroshima. When they fall" (279). In *C*, Serge and a companion study the human-shaped splotch on the ground ("Everything must leave some kind of mark") where a pilot fell out of his plane:

> "The acid from his body," Stedman says as he and Serge stand above the patch one afternoon. "Stops new grass growing."
>
> "It's a good likeness," Serge says.
>
> "All his memories, and everything he ever thought about or did, reduced to battery chemicals."
>
> "Why not?" asks Serge. "It's what we are." (162)

Later in the novel, Serge participates in a séance where a huckster medium channels a small girl named Tilly who describes heaven and the houses people build there. When asked by an audience member how they have bricks in heaven, Tilly responds that "things rise up, atoms rising, and consol, consolidate when they get up here. We collect them, and make them solid again. There's always something rising from your plane; when it comes through the aether, other qualities gather round each atom, and our people manor-factor solid things from it" (282). She continues with a strange exegesis on how decomposing matter on earth rises to heaven as smell and becomes reconstituted, "so decayed flowers make new flowers; rotting wool makes tweeds; dung makes food" (283). In all of these instances, form survives death, which makes the space of the novel, in a strange, moldering way, sustaining—much like McCarthy's zombies, which maintain human form evacuated of life. The first point of the International Necronautical Society's "Founding Manifesto," which appeared as an ad in *The Times*, is "that death is a type of space, which we intend to map, enter, colonise and, eventually, inhabit." The manifesto ends with this promise: "Our ultimate aim shall be the construction of a craft that will convey us into death in such a way that we may, if not live, then at least persist." Form's ability to continue—which we can attribute in part to the continuation of difference between subject and object—makes the novel a space well-suited to the exploration of death.

*

<u>All That You Touch, and All That You See</u>

Several times in this chapter I have insinuated that a focus on fictional worlds as constituted by the relationships between subjects and objects narrows the aperture of the novel. In this final section, I consider the ramifications implied by such a closing off. What this does not suggest is that *Osama* or *Remainder* are parochial texts; both take place in major

cosmopolitan cities, both feature diverse casts of characters, and both take up questions of citizenship and class. In these ways, McCarthy and Tidhar's novels seem characteristic of contemporary Anglophone fiction. Yet both feature a certain evacuation of global concern. This seems related, in part, to the curious absence of the economic conditions of late capitalism. Early in *Osama*, when Joe's wife hired him to find Mike Longshott, she gives him "a slim, square object" (27) a credit card, "matte-black, with no writing on it, merely a long string of numbers" (28). "Expense," she tells him, "is not an issue" (27). This is, of course, a noir cliché, but here it opens near-magical possibilities. Whenever Joe takes out money using the card, the novel points to money's immateriality: Joe "laid cash on the counter. The bartender made it disappear" (201). Joe bribes a maître d' to sneak into a private club: "He made some cash materialise. The man followed it. 'Always a pleasure to welcome new members, sir,' he said, making the money dematerialise" (208). When Joe needs to secure a room in a booked hotel, he "put down another, thinner wedge of money. Machine-cut, printed in the US of A. Dead presidents stared up at the man in reception. 'Tenth floor,' the man said. The money disappeared. Perhaps he was an amateur magician" (231). Money is not invisible, but continually and conspicuously *made* invisible. The materialism of *Osama* is decidedly material.

The same is true of *Remainder*. The narrator's reenactments are only possible because of his settlement, which he invests in "telecommunications and technology" (50). The financial market's virtuality overwhelms the narrator, so when he does decide how to invest his settlement, he tells his financial advisor, "I want to know where I am. To occupy a particular sector, rather than be everywhere and nowhere, all confused. I want to have a… a…" and then he finds the word, "position" (49). The narrator must locate himself in order to deal with the vagaries of the market. As the narrator spends large sums to realize his fantasies, he does not lose

money: “The amazing thing, though, is that… my portfolio’s value had risen back almost to the level it had been at before he’d sold the shares.” “It’s like yoghurt,” the narrator says to his financial advisor, “or a lizard’s tail, that grows back if you yank it off” (121). Unlike objects, which are obstacles for the narrator, money is wondrously immaterial, responsive to the needs of the narrator and not some external reality. Once again, in order to describe something so insubstantial, the narrator needs to position himself, here resorting to concrete similes—yogurt, a lizard’s tail. Recreating a bank heist, which becomes into an actual heist, has nothing to do with money—the narrator claims it is to feel “intense, beautiful and real” (243)—and its distance from financial necessity is signified in the episode’s distance from the novel: the scene is one originally proposed by Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation,* another moment that points outside the limits of the novel (Vermeulen 560-1). Form supersedes content, money is illusory, and *Remainder* and *Osama* become fantasies where capitalism and its consequences disappear.

Yet we might understand the narrowing of concern in these novels as a product of international violence and global capitalism’s instrumentalist logic. In *Osama*, the narrator describes groups of people in the same way as lists of objects. In one scene, Joe sits in an airport and watches travelers go by:

> An elderly Indian man went past, dressed in a suit, wearing an expensive-looking gold wristwatch. A Chinese family went past, the father ramrod-straight, the mother plump and wearing a loose dress and a worried expression, then two children, a boy and a girl, the boy holding a soldier doll, the girl a paper-bound book, a Lao nanny bringing out the rear of the campaign with the youngest member of the regiment in her arms, a boy or a girl, it was impossible to tell. Three white men casually dressed—the kind of casual it

> cost money to achieve—two in their twenties, one with silver hair and black shades, talking to each other in French. (47)

This list goes on for more than a full page. Like the description of debris outside the Gare St. Lazare, there is no sense of accumulation or culmination; the logic here is one of procession or extension. Joe's inability to make anything of the pieces is linked to how the list, with its emphasis on number and national or ethnic origin, also sounds eerily like a record of casualties. Similar catalogues tend to appear when Joe is in airports and train stations, spaces in which he becomes particularly distressed. Though terrorism is absent from this alternate reality, the threat of violence—which here produces a rending of the human subject—haunts the sites of terror attacks, dehumanizing the people who move through them. By investing in a particular subject's movement through a meaningful object world, *Osama* reclaims some ground from the anonymizing, dislocated violence of terrorism. The novel reels back global threat so that it becomes something tangible and contained, something you might pass in a shop window.

In both *Osama* and *Remainder*, living in a networked, global world is a source of dread that cannot be articulated. The narrator of *Remainder* panics when he takes the Tube, moving through the undifferentiated darkness: he "felt the need… to picture the terrain the hurtling car was covering," "the space, the overground space, London." He keeps his nausea at bay "by thinking that the rails were linked to wires that linked to boxes and to other wires above the ground that ran along the streets, connecting us to them and my flat to the airport and the phone box to Daubenay's office" (15). Later in the novel, the narrator encounters "some men laying wires beneath the street" (102); these are "Brahmins," "gods, laying down the wiring of the world, then covering it up" (103). Unseen systems of communication and transportation can only be tolerated if they can be imagined as material. Joe has a similarly difficult time in *Osama*,

where the difficulties associated with networks are also tied to the trauma of terrorism. Also in a train station, Joe "studied a map of the tube network, different coloured lines twisting and intersecting, and realised he had to take the line to King's Cross and change. The picture on the map looked like spilled intestines," pointing to the absent victims of the subway bombings (162). As with the phone ripped from the wall that was "all dotted and flecked with crumbly, fleshy bits of plaster," both novels are filled with images where communication is disrupted. In *Osama*, communications technologies are hardly present, so that when Joe is interrogated about what he knows of our world, he is asked: "How do cell phones work?" "What is an iPod?" or "How do you make a computer the size of a briefcase" (255)? In *Osama* and *Remainder*, both characters move through decidedly local spaces and express suspicion towards technology that could shatter their worlds, a caution and circumscription necessitated by the anxiety produced by modern forms of transportation and connectivity.

These failures of connection comment on the status of the contemporary novel, particularly as a global genre. Before the narrator of *Remainder* decides to spend his settlement on the reenactments, he asks his friends what to do with the money. Catherine suggests founding a charity in Africa:

> "You think I should invest in development in Africa, then, rather than here?" I asked Catherine.
>
> "Why not?" she said. "It's all connected. All part of the same general, you know, caboodle. Markets are all global; why shouldn't our conscience be?"
>
> "Interesting," I said. I thought of rails and wires and boxes, all connected. "But what do they, you know, *do* in Africa?" (34)

Catherine's vision of the global as conflation of market and affect is notably simplistic and can be construed as an indictment of the global literary system. Once again, the narrator cannot imagine such a virtual and delocalized space:

> I wanted to feel some connection with these Africans. I tried to picture them putting up houses from her housing kits, or sitting around in schools, or generally doing African things, like maybe riding bicycles or singing. I don't know: I'd never been to Africa… I tried to visualize a grid around the earth, a kind of ribbed wire cage like on the champagne bottle, with lines of latitude and longitude that ran all over, linking one place to another, weaving the whole terrain into one smooth, articulated network, but I lost this image… I wanted to feel genuinely warm towards these Africans, but I couldn't. Not that I felt cold or hostile. I just felt neutral. (38)

The narrator attempts to make sense of the indistinct space of the global by using an object in front of him (the bottle of champagne at the bar), but finds it inconceivable. He struggles "to understand such extensivity, such economies of feeling and giving without loss" (Nieland 587). The narrator's language (of "these Africans" "doing African things") stresses the imaginative gap that words cannot fill. When the narrator decides to spend his money on his reenactments rather than invest in charitable work in Africa, it represents a pivot inward, away from the social, global, or connected, and towards the personal and local. The narrator's project might seem solipsistic—in many ways it is—but it also suggests that the novel, as a form that centers around the perceiving subject and his perceptible world, may be best suited to modest representational claims. An "I," a "here," a "now," a "this."

In *Osama*, the pivot from the global to the local is deeply tied to colonialism's role in producing global terrorism. Wandering around London, Joe sees the colonial past built into the

fabric of the city. He passes bookshops that "specialised in what the British called the Far East, and the Middle East," "large bright stores selling cargo," and "giant warehouses filled to the brim with the produce of a hundred different places" (170). When he looks around, Joe sees "Arabs and Indians and Chinese and Malay, Jews and Africans, a whole planet of refugees seeking shelter in the mothership that was London" (169).

> No wonder we come here, he thought. The city was a cuckoo-bird mother, taking children that did not belong to it, annexing them, bringing them up in a strange mix of missionary activity, trade exploitation and good intentions. When the time came and the children wanted their independence, the mother was hurt, and they fought. And now some of the annexed children, who were not children at all, came back, because they had nowhere else to go. (169-70)

Joe's sense of London as a landscape built from the plunder of the colonial enterprise reaches its peak when he visits the British Museum:

> There were statues, sculptures, bas-reliefs, manuscript tablets, paintings, coins, jewellery, knives, corpses, vases, Greek gods, Egyptian gods, Buddhas, books, the loot of an entire world hoarded, stored, collected and guarded. It came from China, from Iraq, from Tasmania and Benin and Egypt and Sudan, from India and Iran and Ethiopia. It was as if the British had gone out into the world, stripped it of its heritage, and returned, laden with their cargo, to decorate their city with it. (172)

The way in which colonial history is encoded into objects drives Joe's unease about globalism. As he stands in the British Museum, Joe realizes that it is "a terribly arrogant building," and he "thought again about the books he'd read, about their secret war. Why did they fight? He thought, there at the peaceful museum, that he could see just a hint of that, the fingers of

antiquity crawling into the present day and shaking it" (172). Objects give Joe access to what otherwise cannot be articulated. Clues from his surroundings provide a sharper, clearer picture of the whole than what might be apprehended from the distance of the dislocated networks of empire and violence that produce the world of the text.

These objects communicate the source of Joe's dispossession, aligning him with this "whole planet of refugees." Throughout the book, he and the other spectral people who roam *Osama* are referred to variously as *fuzzy-wuzzies* and *refugees*; the former term in particular connects colonial violence, with its reference to Rudyard Kipling's poem "Fuzzy-Wuzzy," to Joe's incorporeality, his fuzziness around the edges. One reading of *Osama* and *Remainder* says that in the face of the characters' dislocation, the savvy and angsty reader recognizes that to be modern is to be nowhere. Except both novels give real ennobling value to the problem of dislocation and engage in earnest—like Joe and the narrator—to achieve some sort of hereness. As McCarthy and Tidhar reanimate detective fiction, it is this process that forecloses on the possibility of superficial global consciousness. To take an object seriously is to neglect shallow figurations of globality. But this does not signify a retreat into solipsism. If the novel self-consciously figures itself as a habitable form in *Osama* and *Remainder*, it seems in contrast to the unimaginable and violent non-space of the global. This vision of the novel privileges a form of being in the world that precludes other kinds of seeing and feeling, but perhaps this is, in its way, quite enough.

Chapter 2

After Reference

We didn't genuinely appreciate the value of individual objects, or their particular beauty. It was greed our materialism celebrated, greed and status, not the being and texture of things. (42)
Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*

In the near future depicted in *The Bray House*, Ireland as we know it, as it could be known in the way we know anything, is gone, decimated by ecological catastrophe and unchecked British nuclear ambitions. The narrator, Dr. Robin Lagerlof, is an archaeologist with an authoritarian streak who mounts an expedition to Ireland from Sweden, leading a small team that includes Karen, also a researcher, and two young volunteers, the couple Karl and Jenny. They land near Dublin, and after exploring Bray's desolate landscape of ash, discover and excavate the titular house. Robin's report, which occupies the entire midsection of the book, details what she discovers in the home, which was inhabited by the MacHugh family at the end of the 20th century. As the novel progresses, flaws in Robin's narration raise questions about her personal trustworthiness, about the validity of her methodology—through which she claims the ability to assemble a true and full account of the MacHughs from their possessions—and literature's susceptibility to anthropological prerogatives. The MacHughs' things, as rendered by Ní Dhuibhne, resist Lagerlof's stern management, and as the gap widens between Robin's report and the world represented by the novel, the reader is drawn to ask: how faithfully do objects—those in the novel and the novel itself—refer back to the world?

This question complicates some of the assumptions of my first chapter. In order to count as a clue, the object must transmit some kind of information to the detective that forwards plot. Clues can't lie; as soon as they do, they become red herrings and false leads. But outside of the system dictated by the expectations of the detective genre, readers have few guides for how to

approach objects. The problem that I tackle in this chapter is what happens when readers encounter objects and, in bad faith or out of misrecognition, treat objects as entirely informative or entirely mute, as an instrument to some other end or as completely inaccessible. This is a problem not only within the space of the novel, but also with the practices that we bring to the study of literature, and so my discussion of *The Bray House* spills over into a correction of thing theory, the dominant object-oriented practice in English departments. Treating the novel or objects primarily as historical documents, as thing theory sometimes does, elides the space between fiction and reality, without which literary objects are flattened, their meaning affixed.

Robin sees objects as unequivocally referential. Her report, she insists, "illumines the lives of millions. It documents a really important, lost culture. A great civilisation" (203). Jenny, disillusioned with Robin's methods by the end of the novel, sardonically raises the possibility of a living MacHugh coming along and repudiating the findings in the report, to which Robin responds:

> my story is true. It doesn't need a MacHugh to prove it. It's true because my methodology is foolproof: positivistic and holistic. It has to work. Solid empirical research, rigid logical analysis, coupled with a vast knowledge of all circumstantial data. The story I'll write is the true story of the MacHughs. Even if a MacHugh came along and suggested otherwise, I would believe that. The MacHugh would be wrong. [15] (248)

Objects become repositories of social history with referential capabilities that exceed those of people. But in *The Bray House*, objects do not always tell the truth. They slip away and recede; now they seem one thing, now something else entirely. In a broad sense, the instability of meaning surrounding objects forestalls interpretive practices like Robin's that see literary objects simply as information-rich artifacts; if no one can agree on what objects mean, clearly they do

not refer directly or unambiguously to any one thing or participate in simply one narrative. In *The Bray House*, the uncertainty of objects mirrors anxieties about the preservation and transmission of Irish identity just as the nation belatedly entered the age of late capitalism, emerging from the Troubles and on the verge of the Celtic Tiger. The interpretive difficulty posed by objects in *The Bray House* reflects an atmosphere or mood in Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's Ireland, at a time when questions about what objects can or cannot represent were especially fraught. Insofar as objects refer back to this moment, it is often not as reliable informants, but as markers of the ambivalence about representation, of history, of memory. Historical crisis gets taken up in the structure of objects, which recede from interpretation and become sites of narratological and epistemological contestation.

The MacHughs, who led typical middle-class lives at the end of the 20th century, form the link between *The Bray House* and the political and cultural moment of the novel's publication. By turning her present into the novel's past and her nation into a site of archaeological inquiry, Ní Dhuibhne foregrounds the ignored detritus of everyday life. Objects that might seem mundane to the author become of scholarly value to the narrator, denaturalizing assumptions about historical and geographical frames, demanding contemporary readers turn their investigative faculties back at themselves, and questioning the novel's resistance to or accommodation of anthropological priorities. This narrative displacement binds the contested status of objects in the novel to the historical moment at which *The Bray House* appeared. In 1990 the Irish public had recently voted on a referendum to amend their constitution in order to sign, in 1987, the Single European Act, which represented a milestone in a multi-decade trend of Irish support for involvement with Europe. But with the rapid development sparked by Europeanization came the threat of eroded military neutrality and the loss of economic and political autonomy (Crotty:

2002; Tonra: 2006). The same influx of European and American investment that had created more wealth for the Irish than ever before now threatened Ireland's ability to control its own affairs, an irony summarized by Fintan O'Toole when he wrote: "This is the paradox of the Republic in the aftermath of the British Empire: its national independence is underwritten by transnational corporations and by a supra-national European Union. Its sovereignty is a power that can be exercised mostly by giving it up" (*The Ex-Isle of Erin* 20-1).

This self-sabotaging national autonomy left Irish social and cultural identity—always to some extent fictive, muddled, and tenuous—equally vulnerable. If joining the European Community accelerated the rate of positive social change in the face of external pressure, catapulting ahead the rights of women and minorities (Jackson 386), what looked like progress to some was perceived as a loss by others. Many shared a sense that rapid economic growth made Irish society "more selfish, less open and less sensitive to the plight of those marginalised at home and abroad" (Tonra 24), and the Irish citizenry "individuated subscribers to the anonymous society, acquisitive, rootless, unbonded" (Browne 14). The exportation of Irish culture across the world was accompanied by the fear that it would become, as the journalist Liam Fay put it, "slurry soft," making it easier "to channel into the ongoing campaign to sell Ireland abroad and to ourselves as a bucolic idyll peopled with happy-clappy bodhran rapping riverdancing rustics" (Ferriter 743). If cultural artifacts no longer protect and reflect national identity, and Irish sovereignty is severely compromised by globalization—even as it is enabled by it—what will remain of Irishness, and where will it reside?

National and cultural anxieties are always close at hand in *The Bray House*. When Robin and her team first explore the house, they find newspaper articles detailing the events that led to Ireland's destruction. One report foreshadows the explosions that devastated Western Europe:

"The Republic's minister for energy has speculated on the possibility of legal proceedings against Northern Ireland" over their nuclear program's violation of Irish sovereignty (156). Another reads: "Britain yesterday ordered the Northern Irish port of Larne to accept the *Katherine A*, a container ship carrying toxic waste which has plied the seas from Nigeria to Britain in search of a taker for its noxious cargo" (151). Many of the events Ní Dhuibhne includes mirror those taking place in her own time: an irradiated ocean in the novel recalls the outrage in Ireland over Britain's Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant, which dumped radioactive waste into the Irish Sea (Ferriter 731-2). In *The Bray House*, another article—"IRISH IMMIGRANTS RECRUITED TO IRANIAN ARMY"—seems to play on Irish preoccupation with the Iranian-backed kidnapping of Brian Keenan, who was released the year of the novel's publication. The report ends with an endorsement of the plan by the Taoiseach, who "said that he wished the drive every success. 'Ireland has had a long and happy relationship with Iran,' he went on 'and, and we have been exporting beef to its markets for many years'" (150). There is something haunting about that doubled "and, and," both prevarication and insistence on the likeness of Ireland's exported beef and able bodies.

There are also material ways in which we might consider how objects participate in bolstering or undermining a sense of Irish autonomy. Objects become particularly visible during crises of sovereignty—including the Famine, mass emigration, sectarian violence, and globalization's transformation of the Irish economy, environment, tourism market, and so on—because they mark otherwise intangible phenomena. (The only way to perceive the Invisible Man is when he wears clothing). In the instance of the Troubles, as sectarian violence increased in intensity in the years leading up to the publication of *The Bray House*, the flow of contraband across Irish borders during the period constituted a network of violent objects with an ambiguous

relationship to the state. Weapons and cash flowed north from sympathizers in the Republic to the Provisional IRA, through channels sub-, supra-, and national (Jackson 397); the Arms Crisis of 1970 revealed a "plot by senior members of the government to assist the importation of arms into the state to be used by Northern republicans" (Ferriter 688). Irish bodies became objects too under such conditions of violence, traveling south across the same border: during the Troubles, some sixteen people now known as The Disappeared were abducted and killed in Northern Ireland and buried in the Republic. John McClory and his friend Brian McKinney were abducted from Belfast in 1978. A 30-day search in 1999 led to the discovery of their double grave, in the bogland at Colgagh, Iniskeen, Co. Monaghan. Danny McIlhone went missing in West Belfast in 1981 and was found in a bog in Co. Wicklow in 2008 ("The Disappeared"). Seamus Heaney imagined his Bog Poems as "defenses against the encroachment of the times" and "a prayer that something would come" of "the bodies of people killed in various actions and atrocities in modern Ireland," and we might see this as an attempt to recover these transient corpses from their flow across space (Cole).[16] Violence makes objects out of subjects, initiates movements of objects that destabilize the national space, and those objects in turn become markers of instability.

Ireland's too-permeable borders and too-easily confused citizens and objects point insistently to the nation's colonial past. The interchangeability of Irish subjects and objects within the British imagination and financial system adds a material dimension to the multiple levels of alienation (including economic and linguistic) that define the colonial experience. As such, objects become vital, if still ambivalent, sites in Irish literature for understanding locality and identity in the face of global concerns, from James Joyce to Samuel Beckett, W.B. Yeats to Seamus Heaney, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, and Paula Meehan. Indeed, *The Bray House* was

published in the same year as Eavan Boland's collection *Outside History*, in which the poet grapples with the rival representational commitments demanded by objects. In "Object Lessons"—whose title is a provocation in its own right—a coffee mug mediates a narrator's personal experience of loss while connecting intimate emotion to the menacing hunting scene it depicts, "revising the fixities into which local history has become frozen" (Matthews 32). "The Shadow Doll" filters a woman's sadness through the titular object, a wedding ornament that "survives its occasion," in which "she could see herself / inside it all." But private melancholy is offset by the ethnographic note that frames the poem, explaining the meaning of the title: "(*This was sent to the bride-to-be in Victorian times, by her dressmaker. It consisted in a porcelain doll, under a glass dome, modelling the proposed wedding dress*)" (Boland 17). From poem to poem, Boland's objects are sites of exchange between the personal and political, where subjective experience is shadowed by the troubled historical conditions that force subject and object into negotiation.

This proximity is not always violent or disabling. At times, the particular conditions of Irish history suggest that objects, even, or especially, when they participate in the colonial enterprise, are uniquely positioned to narrate Irish experience. Rather than posing representational problems, the object, given its closeness to the subject in the eyes of the empire, has a privileged role, as testament. However poorly executed, Robin's attempt to locate something authentically Irish amidst the rubble of global late capitalism relies on this assumption; that objects are able to preserve national identity after nation. The idea that in objects lies the possibility of recovery exists not only in literature. David Lloyd has shown how "kitsch preserves, in its congealed and privatized, mostly portable forms, the memories of a community that cannot quite be a people" (94). "What passes for kitsch in the light of aesthetic

judgment," he writes, "is recovered as the emblem of cultures that have been cast from futurity by the state, as commodities are thrown out of circulation, only to discover in their wasted particulars the elements of another living" (100). Lloyd's kitsch echoes Svetlana Boym's descriptions of the knickknacks diasporic people bring with them to their new homes, "transitional objects that reflect multiple belonging" (336). Time and again, precarity necessitates a closeness between humans and objects, so that "people in flight store, so to speak, their precluded social personhood within mementoes of mind and matter, including cherished small objects… which can, under favourable circumstances, be re-articulated (even re-created) as the bases of social activity" (Parkin 315). For Lloyd, Boym, and Parkin, objects bear witness and tell the stories of people who are unable to tell their own.

This vision of a responsive and restorative material world fits with recent trends in Irish studies, a field which has shifted towards "local, recuperative projects," and "has been more in the direction of local, national projects based in new archival research rather than finding new models of Irish comparison" (Malouf 55). In 1989, around the time of *The Bray House*'s publication, Margaret MacCurtain and Mary Cullen established the Irish Association for Research in Women's History—now the Women's History Association of Ireland—as both "a political gesture and a call for women 'to search their houses, open the tea chests, scour the attic to find the letters, diaries, and committee books of their grandmothers and mothers,'" in the hope that they might use these objects to reconstruct a history that was long obscured (Ferriter 750-1). In *A History of Ireland in 100 Objects* (2013), Fintan O'Toole writes, "What makes [the object] pulse with life is the idea of the people who touched and were touched by it. It is the hands that made it, the eyes that feasted on or feared it, the terror, wonder or delight it evoked. It is the simple, awe-inspiring thought—this thing connects me to my ancestors" (x). In this narrative,

objects are miniature safety deposit boxes which "contain secrets that can be unlocked with ever newer techniques," now concealing and now divulging the parts of ourselves that we secret away for safe keeping (O'Toole *100* Objects, x).

Robin subscribes to a framework in which objects seem conduits to a particular time and place, connections through which she might recover something lost to the homogeneity of the global; objects are solid and safe, the fragments we shore against the "dematerialization" of late capitalism (Renfrew 188). Yet Robin's certainty overlooks the potential for confusion and misunderstanding, as if she were the only actor involved in interpretation; as if that interpretation could occur without loss. Though her report on the Bray House is ostensibly meant to preserve Irishness, it "tells readers more about the narrator's assumptions about Irish culture" than it does the actual MacHugh family (Wightman 173). Concluding the report, Robin writes of the MacHughs: "it is alas true to say that… [they] were on the whole part of the global society. Their lifestyles, their ideas, their customs, were not essentially different from those of anyone in Sweden, France, Germany or any other developed European country" (165). Robin, in dismissing the family whose belongings she so carefully documented, re-inscribes the same loss of identity and culture she proposed to amend, and in doing so reproduces the colonial dynamics that led to the island's decimation. She is, in the end, "yet another invader of Ireland" (Morris 138). The reassuring solidity of objects seems to allow Robin to cut through the knot of Irish history, but she only finds herself irredeemably tangled. This is the trick objects play: "They seem precise and fixed, literally tangible. When so much about the past—especially the Irish past—is contested, physical things seem to provide secure anchors in history. They ought to make things simpler. Yet, when you actually examine any object, this apparent simplicity quickly falls away" (O'Toole *100 Objects*, xi).

The Bray House suggests that objects resist simplification and reference. An object cannot be used for reductive or monological political or cultural ends, in part because it "continually [slips] out of any order that claims to explain it—economic, symbolic, psychoanalytic" (Schwenger 79). This instability of signification is a useful lesson for Irish studies—objects in mirror are more complicated than they seem!—but it is also a corrective for object-oriented criticism in English departments, which has come to be deployed most often under the heading of "thing theory." Thing theory is a critical approach that relies on a Heideggerian distinction between object (*gegenstand*) and thing (*ding*) to excavate the social and literary importance of things. Unlike objects, which "we look *through,*" things appear when objects stop working, naming "less an object than a particular subject-object relation" (Brown, "Thing Theory" 4). A practice around things, then, should generate "new thoughts about how inanimate objects constitute human subjects, how they move them, how they threaten them, how they facilitate or threaten their relation to other subjects" (7).

However, as I suggested in my Introduction, thing theory sometimes assumes a correspondence between the novel and the world in order to investigate objects as repositories of social history. In an analysis that evinces some of these limitations, Elaine Freedgood writes of domestic objects in *Jane Eyre*:

> Each of these objects, if we investigate them in their 'objectness,' was highly consequential in the world in which the text was produced. Accordingly, the knowledge that is stockpiled in these things bears on the grisly specifics of conflicts and conquests that a culture can neither regularly acknowledge nor permanently destroy if it is going to be able to count on its own history to know itself and realize a future. (2)

The subject of study in this analysis is culture or history, not literature, objects, or, critically, objects in literature. Readers who look to objects for what they say about the real world fundamentally alter the nature of the novel's material landscape; here, Freedgood's language of "stockpiled" knowledge assumes strictly defined relationships between human and object, text and world. Though most literary objects can be hollowed out and pressed into telling secret histories, readers should ask first: "is [this] the most interesting thing about them" (Honig 172)? If the answer is no, the next question should be: then what is? In *The Bray House*, the reluctance of objects to convey information turns the focus from what objects report to the very possibility of reference.

I argue that when objects operate in these ways in novels—disclosing information, storing personhood, etc.—doing so refers not to the lost identity or hidden information, but comments on the processes of human-object engagement that structure such moments. Such is the case in this famous example from *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which occurs just moments before the narrator's auspicious encounter with a madeleine:

> I find the Celtic belief very reasonable, that the souls of those we have lost are held captive in some inferior creature, in an animal, in a plant, in some inanimate thing, effectively lost to us until the day, which for many never comes, when we happen to pass close to the tree, come into possession of the object that is their prison. Then they quiver, they call out to us, and as soon as we have recognized them, the spell is broken.
>
> Delivered by us, they have overcome death and they return to live with us. (Proust 47)

This has the appearance of Parkin, Lloyd, and Boym's descriptions of human-object interaction, but we should see it working on a level above their analyses. Proust gives little attention to objects themselves, but lights upon "some inanimate thing" or "the object that is their prison" or

a cookie tasted in childhood or something else altogether to reveal a moment of experience and exchange. This description turns the reader not towards some quality of the object but the act of object orientation enabled by storytelling, a reframing which intimates that the popular narrative of recovery is not something that objects do, but one thing that readers do with suggestive objects.

*

<u>Towards Polyphony</u>

From early in *The Bray House*, the dissonance between Robin's measuredly rational voice and perceptibly biased narration exposes the interpretive mechanisms through which objects become translated into knowledge. Robin is no avatar for an actual social scientist—she is too blinded by personal traumas and private agendas—but rather the extra-disciplinary scientist of the object whose methods are so rigid that they reveal the limits of the discourses she caricatures. Robin touts her methodology, a hodgepodge of archaeology, anthropology, and ethnography, as "one of the most revolutionary aspects of our excavation" (117), but seems herself a victim of its strictures, a scholar trapped by "the imprisoning definitional terms of male (scientific) discourse" (Pordzik 343). By compiling and compounding the weight of various methodological approaches, Robin's claim to interdisciplinarity is a bid for authority, but her failure, when the objects of study do not match the prerogatives of her narrow interpretive lens, leaves a vacancy of meaning.

This absence leaves the work of reclamation to the reader, who, by skirting the narration, gleans knowledge from the objects that Robin dismisses. In a letter that Fiona, the MacHugh daughter, sends her father from a trip to her grandmother, she writes:

> I've collected some harebells for drying—I haven't got any, they don't seem to grow anywhere else that I've seen. There are a few other interesting flowers: some thrift left, and yesterday I saw an ox-eye daisy. But no fuchsia at all any more. Even I remember when it was all over the place. Isn't it astonishing? And not a single dogrose, and they used to be growing like grass here. (134)

Robin's reaction to the letter is that Fiona is lazy for going on so many vacations, and that "Although we have no concrete evidence of it, we can be sure that she drank cider on the beach at Bray on weekends, probably experimented with drugs, and most likely have died of AIDS or some similar malady had the Incident not occurred" (165). The juxtaposition of "no concrete evidence" and "we can be sure" is comical and points to the fallacy of a reader who approaches the text laden with *a priori* convictions rather than interpretive openness. If nothing else, objects cannot be informative when "Robin, like many colonizers before her, expects certain answers" (Fulmer 92). Robin remains convinced that the story she builds about the MacHughs from their possessions corresponds perfectly with their lives, yet these attempts to collapse the space between the report and the world simply draw our attention to it.

It is not enough to critique Robin;[17] the inadequacy of her account is an invitation to linger on the Bray House's objects and construct a more responsible and persuasive narrative. The reader adds Fiona's letter to a constellation of other objects that Robin neglects as she catalogs the contents of the house, which might include the floral watercolors Fiona painted that hang in her room (129), the flower pots in the kitchen (125), the flower-print curtains in the drawing room (121), Fiona's mother's watercolors of natural landscapes (122), Fiona's detailed dried flower collection, which identifies each specimen in Irish, English, and Latin, notes its location, and keeps track of declining ecological diversity (130), and, hanging on the wall of the

kitchen, "a calendar, Premier Dairies, portraying flimsily dressed women of exceptional beauty drinking pints of milk in scenic surroundings," an image, with its amalgam of women, dairy farming, nature, and nation, that evokes a de Valeran Irish pastoral (124). To read *The Bray House* is to become gatherer or curator, bringing objects together in various temporary assemblages that suggest different meanings and recover lost narratives. The above set of objects indicates a family absorbed by their locale, its ecological health, and the threats posed to it by shifting global conditions. A different collection of objects selected from the dozens Robin lists might produce a different story. As the number of possible narratives proliferates, Robin's understanding of objects as unambiguously referential collapses. The novel becomes a space of excess—of objects and meanings—which curtails autocratic narrative control.

Readerly self-consciousness about these processes connects objects within the novel to the material representation of words on a page. Elinor MacHugh, Fiona's mother, maintained her own "Flora Collector's Checker," in which she documented the varieties of flowers she found around Kerry. A first list, dated from "the summer of 199-," catalogues twenty-eight types of flower; a second, from the year "202-," lists only five (140). The importance of this artifact derives not from its ability to convey empirical data, but in how it facilitates an experience of loss for the reader. The lists force him to digest the decline of twenty-eight to five, first typographically and then, as he considers it further, ecologically. Their verticality breaks the left-to-right motion of the text, a change in reading that attunes the reader to the interruptive presence of literary objects. By reproducing the object on the page rather than filtering it through Robin's narration, the novel allows—and sometimes forces—the reader to pause on certain objects and process their significance outside Robin's narrative control. In such moments, "the fictive life of

objects resonates with the texts' own thingness" (Tischleder 44), illustrating how objects make themselves matter *in and as text*.

We are not the only ones working to bypass Robin's control: the novel's invitation to participate creates a community of interpretive actors that extends into the novel itself. Karl and Jenny, who become increasingly disgruntled with Robin's authoritarianism, disrupt her readings at every turn. As Robin catalogues and puts into storage a pair of Fiona MacHugh's lacy underwear, Karl interjects:

> Really! I am surprised. You see, I must admit, Robin, that I have grave reservations about the validity of that approach. …This garment has a unique cultural value. From it, we can learn a great deal about a society which has vanished, we can learn much more about Ireland from this single garment than we can from dozens of books. Isn't that so, Robin, isn't that what archaeology, and ethnology, is all about? This garment, in my humble opinion, should be displayed in a museum, where the public can examine it, enjoy it, taste from it a culture which is no more. Just imagine how much it would mean to millions of Swedish teenagers to see a garment like this, properly displayed, of course, with proper contextual information, in a nice, accessible, friendly folk museum! To put it away in a plastic bag… For shame, Robin, for shame! (199-200)

Karl apes the knowledge claims and academic tone that undergird Robin's authority. His exaggerated speech is as vulgar as the joke about the Swedish public tasting Irish culture from a teenager's panties, and his scorn undermines Robin's insistence that her report "illumines the lives of millions" (203), mocking her conviction that objects are "portals through which may be glimpsed the contours of an overarching structure or system" (Harris 114).

As Robin and Karl have this conversation, Jenny, in the background, "had now wrapped a spotted nightgown around her waist, as a kind of avant-garde belt. It held up wide striped pyjamas, and she danced slowly around the room, wearing this silly looking outfit, and looking amazingly graceful in it, like a prima ballerina playing the part of a clown" (200). Robin becomes furious over Jenny's misappropriation of the archeological object, but she acknowledges the beauty of the scene's juxtaposition. Though Robin asks us to see objects as repositories of social history, Karl and Jenny save those objects from death-by-museum, the former through his anarchic disruption of Robin's methodological claims, the latter through her misuse of Robin's objects of study. The couple continue to be an unsettling presence throughout *The Bray House*, reminders that "the nature of objects is too protean to be circumscribed by any one approach" (Schwenger 17). While the generic affordances of Robin's report allow her to exclude Karl and Jenny—coding her work as solitary rather than collaborative, monological rather than composed of an assembly of discordant voices, and necessarily mediated by expertize rather than elucidated through amateur, casual, playful, or artistic exploration—the novel lets them in.

As long as Karl and Jenny are around, the dialogism they introduce into the text poses a threat to Robin's control. After they wander off into the Irish waste to conduct their own investigations, they return with an emaciated survivor of the Incident, who they claim is Elinor MacHugh. Jenny narrates their journey as if it were a fairytale: "Once upon a time… two people called Karl and Jenny were feeling very sad and dejected. … A spell had been cast upon them by a wicked old witch" (218-9). Robin interrupts to ask, "Must you use this style? It's irritating, frankly, in my opinion." Jenny responds: "Too bad… It's this or nothing" (219). The fairytale stands in contrast to Robin's report: it makes no claim to the truth, nurtures a range of

interpretations, and keeps finality at bay. Jenny's turn to an alternate narrative mode represents the assertion of the legitimacy of other kinds of knowledge, forms that Robin patronizes earlier in the novel: "I had no training in anthropology, ethnology or folklore—but what the hell? Those are the sort of pseudo-sciences that any intelligent person can learn in a week" (79). Throughout *The Bray House*, "Ní Dhuibhne ties the disruption of binaries through folk women, and other folk references in the novel, quite closely to the overthrow of Robin as a cultural imperialist" (Fulmer 89). Here, as before, the novel's capaciousness lets in other voices, and thus it aligns much more with the hermeneutic openness of the folktale than Robin's report.

The progression of the novel, then, is one of multiplication: what starts out as one story becomes fractured into many, with multiple narrators; objects that appear one way reveal hidden depths; and even Robin's report become replicated, with the discovery of the second Elinor MacHugh. Even though Jenny and Karl lie about Elinor's identity to antagonize Robin—she is in fact Maggie Byrne, who survived the blast because her paranoid husband had been stocking a bomb shelter for years—Karl and Jenny's excavation of this other Elinor's Bray House undermines the singularity of Robin's findings. The notes Karl makes of their discovery represent an alternative record, which is so threatening to Robin that she kills Karl in order to obtain and suppress it. She finds:

> It included an inventory of the artefacts found in the tumulus—mostly empty baked bean cans and cereal packets, as well as one skeleton, some inscribed stones, a well, and the woman—who was here referred to as Maggie Byrne, not Elinor MacHugh. There were some elliptical descriptions of this individual, and notes on her background, which had been so hastily and haphazardly jotted down that I had difficulty in deciphering them. Much more care had been devoted to the transcription of the writings on the stones: these

> I immediately recognised as Ogham, but was unable to interpret since I am not an Old Irish scholar, as it happens. In any case, I found them much less interesting than the information about my passenger. (241)

What is striking about this description is how much it differs from Robin's report. Robin goes to great lengths to impress on her audience how perfectly the Bray House was preserved, untouched by the Incident. She notes that in the drawing room, "The paper is peeling off the wall in one corner, but this is thought to be due to damp which affected the house in the past rather than to the effect of the recent disaster or of recent climactic factors: the house, as has been pointed out before, seems to have been impervious to any influence from the late events in Ireland" (121). There is something magical about Robin's account of the Bray House's preservation: it reflects perfectly one moment in time, one context, without contamination.

In contrast, Karl's report is a study of disaster. Against Robin's studied insistence on the purity of the archaeological site, Karl chronicles the messiness of lived experience, and the various histories and narratives that intersect in the world. Such messiness requires Karl to let irreconcilable objects sit together; though it is hard to make anything of the juxtaposition of the contemporaneous food packets and ancient stones, by allowing them to remain present on this scene, Karl seems to capture some larger picture of Irish context. But for Robin, there remains something illegible about this scene, encapsulated in the Ogham writing; she literally cannot read the objects properly to make meaning out of the archaeological site. The proliferation of reports and objects and stories and Bray Houses undermines any sense of singularity, so that even the novel's title feels a bit of a feint. Once the validity of the testimonial or evidential is undercut by the novel's multiplicity, it becomes untenable for the narrator or reader to turn to literary objects for information.

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The Voice of Fictional Objects

Robin's narration, which homogenizes objects by stripping them of distinction and detail, severely limits what objects can do or say within fiction. Her indifference to the local, specific, and lively relationships between humans and objects aggravates her colonial presence in Ireland by contributing to the "image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter [that] feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (Bennett ix). Her failure of deduction suggests that the reader, to avoid replicating these mistakes, must adopt inductive close reading practices in order to attend to the particularities of objects in *The Bray House*. At first this seems a difficult proposition: in a novel full of objects, there are noticeably few moments when Robin lingers on the material world. Descriptions in the report and outside of it are clipped and utilitarian; her tone remains "peculiarly cold and disaffected" (Mahoney 259). By the end of her time in Ireland, Robin "had come to appreciate this barren place. To tell the truth, I had come to love it. … Unfussed by the work of human hands, which always tend to overdo things, to leave the parts of the world they touch as gaudy and messy as a Victorian drawing room" (215). This is a distinctly antagonistic outlook for the archaeologist excavating the "fussy and Victorian" Bray House (121), and seems to account for her spare descriptive style.

Indeed, what we learn of Robin's past helps contextualize her stance towards objects. When Robin meets her husband, the encounter takes place at a conference at the Open Air Museum in Lyngby, but Robin quickly decides that "we had more important things to do than listen to dull lectures on ploughshares and oatmeal bread" (33). Of course, ploughshares and oatmeal bread are precisely what should interest Robin; but she never demonstrates an attention to the particular and minute that her profession demands. This much is evident in the project

closest to the Bray House excavation on Robin's resume, her work on a bothy in Shetland: "I'd reconstructed the whole thing, of course, using bits and pieces of material I'd found in the process. It had looked quite impressive, in the end. But I'd never actually found an intact building, or anything that wasn't broken. Indeed, it is true to say that prior to this I'd dealt exclusively in smithereens" (71). There is a vital distinction here between smithereens and objects, where the former are too fragmented to communicate anything. Smithereens give Robin free reign to impose her vision on the landscape; objects ask us to listen. And though Robin attempts to render the Bray House in similar terms, there is a significant exception, where the material world refuses the order imposed by Robin's narration: in her dreams, two of which bookend the novel.

Robin's first dream occurs as the archaeological team sets out from Sweden. "And before my half-opened eyes the knobs and buttons and levers and lamps of the control room dissolved, and transformed slowly and inexorably into quite other objects of the most brilliant colours: purple, yellow, pink, blue, every hue the very essence of itself" (17). The fluidity of a utilitarian object scene morphing into a less rigid one is replicated in the evocatively dreamy sentence shift, as the mechanical and precise polysyndeton of the instruments ("knobs *and* buttons *and* levers *and* lamps") melts into a flowing asyndeton of colors ("purple, yellow, pink, blue"). For the first time in the novel, Robin's certitude cedes to unknowing—these new shapes are "quite other objects"—and each object refers not elsewhere but is "the very essence of itself." "Quite other objects" is striking because it sits somewhere between the literary and material—it is imprecise and gestural even as it continues to denote actual things before Robin, so that Robin's unknowing is built into the objects themselves. The dream offers a peek behind the curtain, exposing the cagey play between language and matter that produces literary objects.

The second dream takes place at the end of the novel, as the team leaves Ireland. In it, Robin sees her mentor, Per Bishop:

> He was sitting at a table, a breakfast table, holding in his two hands a quite ordinary mug, white with some blue harebells on it, the type of mug one will buy very cheaply in a supermarket, or receive as a free gift with a purchase of petrol. Someone at the table—some old friend, perhaps Selma, a girl I had shared a room with in Uppsala—said: "What a wonderful mug that is!" I felt surprised, because it was so terribly ordinary and unimpressive. And then I noticed that Per was moulding the mug. Or rather that it changed shape in his hands, as he held it: it grew long and round, it sprung a spout, it was a coffeepot, it became slender like a vase for tulips, it widened into a fat flowerpot, it became tiny as a delicate china cup. (204-5)

In this dream, as in the other, Robin is at first unable to understand the significance of the object before her. As in the other, the object's shape-shifting produces an alteration in the language. The anaphoric series "it grew," "it sprung," "it was," "it became," "it widened," and "it became" reflects the object's improbable and unaccountable multiplicity, but it also foregrounds the agency of the thing itself. After Robin notes that "Per was moulding the mug," she corrects herself: "Or rather that it changed shape in his hands." The mug adopts a vague agency, while at the same time the repetition of the pronoun "it" and the mug's changing shape defer attempts to pin down its exact identity or meaning, much like those "quite other objects." In both dreams, objects tend to be active in grammar and manner, and when considered in detail, they disclose initially unrealized and complicating attributes, revealing as much about the objects as the novel's representation of perception and experience.

Waking from this second dream, Robin quickly asserts: "it is my experience that my dreams often tell me facts which are perfectly well known to my conscious mind already. The dreams simply confirm that knowledge, often using another set of images. Per Bishop had moulded me. I was the mug. The vase. The china cup. And that was not news to me" (205). Robin employs paratactic declarations to recover from her loss of certainty, separating and restricting the dream terms that had blended together so riotously ("The vase. The china cup."). She rejects the possibility that objects conduct lives outside of the human; by saying "I was the mug," Robin collapses an independent object world back into herself. But the novel denies the psychoanalytic interpretation of dream objects as expressions of ourselves rather than *as* objects, in part by couching them in their own narrative register. These withdrawn, resistant objects stand in for less dynamic objects throughout the novel, which can be described and arranged but rarely point with certainty to any one thing.

The dreams, then, depict objects that have little to say about Irish history or the MacHughs, but participate in debates over narrative meaning itself; that is, they resist interpretation while they comment on the ability to interpret. The difference between these and other objects is marked by a style unique to the dreams. This register, a narrative voice provoked by objects and characterized by sequences of excited asyndetic clauses, does not occur elsewhere in the novel, but it does look similar to another descriptive mode that a reader of *The Bray House* would recognize, given its ubiquity in the report: the list. Robin resorts to lists as a form of control: the catalogues that go on for pages speak to the rigor of her methodology and her dominion over their contents. Everything, in a list, is accounted for. But there are moments throughout the novel that point instead to the openness, elasticity, and incompleteness of lists. Her lists of objects describe and delineate while remaining arbitrary and incomplete, so that

"taken together, they do not stand for a single idea; moreover, they do not add up to a single logical and coherent picture of the world nor to a classification system of all the world's objects" (Honig 179). For the critic of the literary list, "there is the ever-present danger of interpretive overdetermination" (Belknap 39), which, in *The Bray House*, seems precisely the logic that the dream voice exposes.

Robin catalogues the MacHughs' objects for dozens of pages on end, and while these lists and the dreams appear similarly enumerative, they are in important ways distinct: Robin's catalogues list many objects one way, while the dream series list one object many ways. The former attempts to secure things in place, the latter upends imposed order. Read aloud, Robin's descriptions halt the reader, separating and distinguishing the objects; the dream descriptions accelerate the reader, blending and merging terms. One's objects are inert; the others' pulse with life. The dream voice emerges as an alternative narrative presence to Robin's report, the anarchic twin to the order and control of the list. It suggests that objects in dreams repurpose the very descriptive mode Robin uses to define them throughout the novel, attuning the reader to the ways objects take part in shaping the language through which they are mediated.

The object-oriented narrative voice of the dreams challenges the authority of Robin's narration, but also the bounds of the text itself. Walter Benjamin ends his essay "Unpacking My Library" by returning to the title's task:

> Now I am on the last half-emptied case and it is way past midnight. Other thoughts fill me than the ones I am talking about—not thoughts but images, memories. Memories of the cities in which I found so many things: Riga, Naples, Munich, Danzig, Moscow, Florence, Basel, Paris; memories of Rosenthal's sumptuous rooms in Munich, of the Danzig Stockturm where the late Hans Rhaue was domiciled, of Süssengut's musty book

> cellar in North Berlin; memories of the room where these books had been housed, of my student's den in Munich, of my room in Bern, of the solitude of Iseltwald on the Lake of Brienz, and finally of my boyhood room, the former location of only four or five of the several thousand volumes that are piled up around me. (67)

Benjamin's prose exhibits the same breathless and expansive energy that characterizes *The Bray House*'s descriptions of dream objects, as do David Parkin and Marcel Proust's representations of object encounter referred to earlier. Here is the elevated language that swells and unspools, where objects lead not to one end or meaning but trigger a flood of association, experience, and memory, often in the language of revelation. Objects do not necessarily speak in these instances—though there are plenty of novels in which they do—but they illuminate a recurring configuration of humans and objects in which the latter act on and alter how they are represented by the former, as if the person meditating on the object cannot remain distinct from it. If there is something hubristic in imagining that objects preserve and transmit human meaning, it is perhaps tempered by the hidden ways objects order human thought and expression.

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On Intermateriality

The repeated emphasis, in this chapter, on the reader and the reader's role making sense of the fictive material world gestures towards the participatory nature of object orientation. As part of this framework, readers become nodes in a network of objects that extends beyond the bounds of *The Bray House*. Discussing Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, Babette Tischleder shows how by "revealing the uncanny within the ordinary world of things, thereby relying on the reader's own experience with clutter and decay, the novel purposely defies a strategy of containing its object matter in a realist mode," which "conjures up a sense of material reality that

goes far beyond the novel's scope" (256). Tischleder's observation speaks to the transgressive nature of literary objects, which form shifting configurations of author, reader, text, and world. Once imbricated in the material reality of the novel, the reader makes connections between texts and their object topographies. This is an intertextuality that is also an *intermateriality*, extending the lives of objects outside the text without terminating in the real world or erasing the material presence of the novel itself.

It is the reader of *The Bray House* who situates the novel in an ecosystem of other texts, some of which are more explicitly suggested by Ní Dhuibhne than others. The barrenness of post-Incident Ireland, for instance, strongly evokes the landscapes of Beckett. As in plays like *Waiting for Godot* or *Happy Days*, it is the sparseness of the world, its impoverishment of things, that highlights the objects that *do* exist. Teapots and calendars in *The Bray House* glow with the same aura as Estragon's bowler or Winnie's hairbrush, a radiance which comes not from the fetish of commodity but the phantasmal imprints of utility and routine these objects carry into a world in which they no longer belong or operate as intended. In these texts the conditions of collapse foreground the relationships between humans and things, making visible objects which might otherwise, in a different context, disappear into the scenery. Eleanor MacHugh's hairbrush is not literally the same as Winnie's—what a plot twist that would be—but their commonalities suggest a transitive quality about literary objects; similarities in properties, functions, the places they hold, what they do, or how they are described allow objects to cluster in the imagination of the reader. One hairbrush calls out to the other across the space between texts.

This constellation of intertexts and the objects that move through them is a way of understanding the lives of objects outside a given text without transporting the reader away from the literary. Rather than refer to an originary real-world object, at which point object-oriented

literary criticism reaches its terminus, literary objects reflect and refract one another, reverberating back and forth across texts. Relation disrupts the teleology of mimesis, so where Robin imagines that objects correspond to the world, the reader understands objects to be in distributed and ongoing conversation. To quote *Ulysses*, another of *The Bray House*'s interlocutors, the literary object that seems to signify its referent perfectly instead, like foil flowers at a gravesite, "expresses nothing" (Joyce 113). Both *Ulysses* and *The Bray House* stage mimetic failure in the face of anthropological imperatives, documenting Irish life at a precarious historical moment while keenly aware of that project's limitations. The text can never be the world, despite our keenest desires. The ambivalence of the Irish context bleeds into Hugh Kenner's reading of *Ulysses* when he writes first that "objects are even more enigmatic than stories" (25), but then, channeling the Robin-like archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, suggests a practice of reading novels for those "who read kitchen middens as Sherlock Holmes or Flaubert could read a room and as Joyce's readers are expected to read his book" (50). But Schliemann was wrong—and wrong only as someone that slap-happy with dynamite around archaeological sites can be—and his failures illustrate how literary objects sometimes obstruct mimesis rather than ensure it. Resistant objects reveal more in conversation with each other than they do when measured against the real world. As such, literary objects that defy mimesis help make the claim for fiction's particularity; as Borges warned in his story "On Exactitude in Science," the map that comes to exactly represent its subject is worthless.

For any given text, a reader's internal network of associations will help make sense out of that text's material world. But Ní Dhuibhne complicates this intermateriality by introducing intertextual sources as objects within *The Bray House*. One such text is *Robinson Crusoe*, which shares with *The Bray House* a narrative of sea voyage and island isolation, first-person narrators

who, in industriously explicatory voices, view the material world through similarly narrow lenses of need and prescribed meaning, and sudden shifts in formal register midway through their narratives that consolidate authorial power. Certain episodes from *Robinson Crusoe* appear wholesale in *The Bray House*—like the shock of the footprint on the abandoned beach (70)—and thematically the two novels' takes on colonial ambition form an interpretive loop, so that "*The Bray House* is a novel about examining what remains of Ireland, the well-mapped, well-known island nation colonized by the budding empire that Crusoe's island invokes" (Wightman 165). If nothing else, most readers should draw a connection from the over-determined likeness of the protagonists' names.

What makes Defoe's presence unusual is that Robin has been reading *Robinson Crusoe* during the length of the expedition. The text that haunts *The Bray House* is also a book on the narrator's bedside table. And this keeps happening. At one point Robin mentions her fondness for *Brideshead Revisited*, immediately following which she and Karl reenact Waugh's cruise-ship scene, in which Charles and Julia's romance blossoms when their respective partners are bedbound with seasickness (98). Before picking up *Robinson Crusoe*, Robin tries to read *The Magic Mountain*, which she describes as "the adventures—though that is hardly the *mot propre*—of a diseased man, which was supposed to be an allegory for a diseased, twentieth century society. I found the German hard and the pace slow" (17). Robin recognizes the allegorical function of Mann's novel without noting the similarities to her own situation. That this knowledge evades Robin, even though she has the guides right in front of her, does not simply confirm that she is a bad reader; it shows how literary objects, exemplified in the book-as-object, so precede and exceed the reader's experience of them that it makes it difficult to know them in some absolute way. The novel and the world, even when they seem to correspond,

are still separated by the confounding material artifact of the book and the distorting brackets of fictionality.

Books become exemplary objects, insofar as they evince a materiality which extends beyond the narratives they contain—whether you have read them or not, books still move through the world in meaningful ways. At the beginning of the novel, Robin confesses that: “I do not, I must admit, like novels, or any kind of literature” (16). Robin seems to have inherited her affection for English literature from her mother’s love of literary film adaptations: “she was forever borrowing videos of *Little Dorrit, Pride and Prejudice* and *Brideshead Revisited,* and possessed a fairly vast video library of films based on literary works of one kind and another” (41). “The books,” Robin complains, “always seem so stodgy and dull, I really don’t know why people bother to do them any more, unless they are, like me, scholars” (42). Erasing print culture seems to confirm Robin’s antagonism towards objects; yet despite her antipathy, Robin owns a large collection of novels which, she stresses, “are always printed on special long-life acid-free paper, as is only proper, and will be almost immortal, if it is not, of course, destroyed by some environmental disaster before their own span has been exhausted” (42). Robin’s attachment to her books is distinct from their contents or a sense of aesthetic appreciation for them, yet it is a powerful force in its own right; it is what pulled Robin to London in the first place, what enabled her to meet her Irish husband, and what compelled her to return to Bray.

The meanings of books, for Robin, are multiple and contingent, and seem detached from their narratives—an ironic disconnect from her deterministic approach to the MacHughs’ possessions. Robin’s attachment to her books is based on a cocktail of childhood nostalgia, spousal regret, and a doomsday-prepper’s enthusiasm for the non-perishable, and yet this connection preserves these objects and a link to their country of origin, which no longer exists.

As if in an unknowing symbiotic relationship, the collector appreciates qualities of an object that are not related to its primary or original use, but through which that object ensures its continued importance and future transmission. By enacting this version of its objecthood, the novel makes a case for its own materiality, challenging the assumption that "a novel's success no doubt depends on eliding itself as the object in hand—paperback or leather-bound—on behalf of providing access to its represented world, the world residing somehow within, somewhere beyond, the printed page" (Brown 60). We already have a model for this counterargument, in the Benjamin essay referenced earlier in the chapter. There he writes that, "for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object." What matters is not only everything "remembered and thought" by the collector but also "the period, the region, the craftsmanship, [and] the former ownership" of the books, which is to say their material existences (60).

The resistance of elision in *The Bray House* has politically generative implications; Rey Chow, expanding on a Benjaminian model of assemblage, writes of how the act of collecting produces "identificatory anarchy," disrupting the ways national ideology orders attachment (Chow 376). In the short story "Lian" ("Attachment") by Lao She, Chow argues, the problem for the collector Zhuang Yiya is that "he is faithfully attached to *something other than the national community itself*" (375). Approaching the politics of collecting from a different direction, Wai Chee Dimock describes the Soviet poet Osip Mandelstam's habit of carrying around a pocket-sized edition of the *Divine Comedy*. "Its very existence gave Mandelstam a different reference point, dimensions of space and time not reducible to the arm of the Soviet government" (174). It is not just the contents of the book that are important, but "the physical presence of the poetry inside his pocket" (174). That the stories we tell about people and their books also crop up within

novels themselves reveals something about the genre's history: Cynthia Wall ties forms of collecting and object-attachment to the moment of the rise of the novel, excavating, in *The Prose of Things*, "the intensely personal and private possibilities for self-description and self-creation in the choice and care and arrangement of things—a Lockean sense of possession and identification that derives from labors of intimacy, from knowledge of detail, or even from a precapitalist conflation of subject with object" (4-5). The novel has built into it from the beginning a defense for its own matter's meaningfulness. I argue that representations of books and book collecting in novels serve to highlight how the novel's own materiality resists effacement in light of the discursive.

The distinction between the novel (narrative) and book (object)—the lack of a necessary relationship between the material and the semantic—means that no analysis of an object can result in a single, settled conclusion. *The Bray House* leaves the reader with a final instance of this ambivalence. The last page of the novel is a one-page epilogue, an obituary for Robin, who kills herself upon returning to Sweden, in which its author notes that "An exhibition on the Ireland excavations will open early next year at the Archaeology Archive in Uppsala, and Dr Lagerlof's book on the expedition, which was completed before her death, will be published posthumously on the same occasion" (255). The suggestion is that "Dr Lagerlof's book" is *The Bray House* itself, in which case the object succeeds but also precedes its human narrator, creating her as much as she creates it. The book has its beginning in its end, creating a recuperative loop that tells Robin's story again and again.[18] But this preservation is deeply ironic. Just as Robin's report said more about the archaeologist than her subjects, *The Bray House* is foremost a story about Robin, not a lost Ireland. The same irony is reproduced in Robin's library: the books she saves—which besides *Robinson Crusoe* and *Brideshead Revisited* include *Little*

Dorrit and *Pride and Prejudice*—are emblematically English novels, enshrining Robin's colonial presence on the island in the records she leaves behind. By refusing to elide the novel's thingness, Ní Dhuibhne emphasizes its materiality by performing its circulation beyond the life of the narrator and narrative, where it will move and move us in unpredictable ways. The author leaves her readers with no way to read objects *in* the novel or the object *of* the novel as unambiguous or legible records. Objects, like books, continue to tell stories, but it remains unclear how trustworthy they are, given the vexed status of objects in the postcolony.

Returning to the disciplinary questions from earlier in the chapter, what we find is that thing theory has not developed a vocabulary to address how the material object of the book informs, interacts with, or inclines our reading of objects inside the novel. By considering how the anxieties of Éilís Ní Dhuibhne's Ireland become imprinted on objects in *The Bray House*, and how, in turn, book-objects within the novel that highlight the significance of books as artifacts implicate the copy of *The Bray House* that we hold in our hands, I have begun to sketch out a reading strategy that accounts for how novels ask us to reconsider their own materiality. At the same time, objects in *The Bray House* that are sites of narrative ambivalence and unsettled meaning tax the limits of an anthropological practice's analytic capabilities. In presuming literary objects matter more the more real they seem, referential critical apparatuses privilege realist novels to a restrictive degree[19] and establish a false dichotomy between mimetic and non-mimetic objects, mistaking rhetorical sleight for ontic voodoo. It is clear from *The Bray House* that objects in dreams can have as much consequence as those in archaeological reports; they, too, clamor to be understood—and they too, in turn, question the limits of understanding. To account for such objects, object-oriented literary criticism should balance the new-historicist leanings of thing theory with an increased attention to the particular affordances and capacities of

literature and literary form. We ought not sell the literary object as the "reassuringly safe ground upon which to acquire a more or less unmediated access to the real" (Harris 114), because to do so is to make the same mistake as Schliemann and forfeit that which distinguishes us from new materialists in other disciplines: the imaginative, even utopian possibilities of the fictional. Object-oriented literary criticism must describe not only how the world is, but how the novel imagines it could be.

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Epilogue: The Future Library

We might find, currently growing in the Nordmarka Forest, an example of how the material lives of books reconfigure our relationships to literature. In May of 2014, the Scottish artist Katie Paterson planted one thousand Norwegian spruce trees, just north of Oslo. In one hundred years, these trees will be chopped down to supply the paper for copies of one hundred books. Every year until then, a board of editors, publishers, and writers—on which Paterson will sit until her death—will select an author to contribute a literary manuscript, to be held in trust until 2114. Besides the authors—who currently include Margaret Atwood (2014), David Mitchell (2015), and Icelandic novelist Sjón (2016)—no one will see the text until the 22nd century. The room in which the final works will reside, a special area in Oslo's as-yet unrealized New Public Deichmanske Library, will be lined with wood panels from the forest and contain a printing press, to ensure that the people of 2114 have access to print technology. Paterson calls the project the *Future Library*.

The *Future Library* grounds the novel in its materiality. It ties the book to the conditions of its production, pointing not just to analog print technology but also the trees and larger ecosystems from which paper is derived. This sense of materiality marks the novel's origins, but

also the way it extends into the future. As Paterson puts it, this is a project that "questions the present tendency to think in short bursts of time, making decisions only for us living now" (Flood). This is not an incomprehensibly vast timeline, but one that extends our imaginations just beyond ourselves: "In many ways, the human timescale of 100 years is more confronting. It is beyond many of our current lifespans, but close enough to come face to face with it, to comprehend and relativise" (Flood). Contemplating the *Future Library* connects things that novels do well—extending time so that it stretches beyond the perspective of any one human life or highlighting how the narratives of non-human actors intersect with human stories—to the matter of books—how they circulate through the world after their owners or are inextricably tied to the natural world. When Margaret Atwood became the first author selected, she immediately accepted the offer. She bought archival paper, to ensure that the manuscript will not decay in its sealed box: "I think it goes right back to that phase of our childhood when we used to bury little things in the backyard, hoping that someone would dig them up, long in the future, and say, 'How interesting, this rusty old piece of tin, this little sack of marbles is. I wonder who put it there'" (Flood)? Atwood uses this description of finding buried treasure to imagine the feeling of excavating these novels in the future, a feeling which will in turn inform how readers of the 22nd century will read the objects in her novel. The literary object and book object circle back and forth in conversation, speaking to who we are, our time and place, but far more than that, filling us with a sense of wonder and discovery.

Chapter 3

A Politics of Mattering

The whole world into which I was born had become an unbearable burden and I wished I could reduce it to some small thing that I could hold underwater until it died. (128)

Jamaica Kincaid, *Annie John*

If the preoccupations of my first chapter were onto-phenomenological (what existence do literary objects have, how do they structure fictional worlds, and how does the novel position characters and readers in relation to them?) and those of my second chapter were epistemological (what can we know about or from literary objects, and how is it distinct from what we can know about or from objects in the world around us?), in this final chapter I move to the political. Any consideration of the politics of object-oriented literary criticism must account for the novel's particular amalgam of the discursive and material; but where does this leave the novel in relation to other materialist politics? The material turn is widely understood as a shift away from the poststructuralist emphasis on discourse; yet in our haste to embrace the material, there is a danger of abandoning that which makes fiction a possible site for an object-oriented politics. In this chapter, I am reviving the discursive through the lens of object-oriented criticism to understand what political ends may or may not be forwarded through a consideration of things in fiction.

Holding aloft both the material and discursive, the politics that emerges in my study of Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is one of *mattering*, a term that illuminates how the process by which language allocates a sense of substance across the fictional world is tied to the distribution of political and narrative value. What becomes clear, comparing the two texts, is that this is not a fixed relationship, and

that the relative benefits or dangers of mattering becomes itself a political question—under what conditions, in what contexts, and for what subjects can mattering help produce a better world? We cannot speak about the set of possibilities available relations in a given context between subject and object without addressing the conditions that govern *which* subjects have access to those relations. If a politics of mattering draws attention to various ways in which language participates in the construction of objects, so too does it implicates subjects—characters, authors, and readers—into the allotment of value and meaning.

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The Language of Mattering

In a moment that is likely to resonate with other object-oriented scholars, Stephanie Clare recalls having her fields, new feminist materialisms, "described as the 'end of feminism'" (Clare 58). To some, it is not readily apparent that the study of objects supports a politics. However, most of the scholars who appear in this dissertation have vigorously articulated how object-seeing enlivens and expands political discourse. Actor network theory reimagines how power moves through assemblages of human and non-human actors; Jane Bennett shows how "the figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and materially sustainable modes of production and consumption" (ix); the essays in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost's important collection *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* propose "new concepts and theoretical frameworks in order to understand the complexities of global capitalism (in its broadest sense) and its diverse, localized effects on everyday lives" (25). Despite charges of disinterestedness and quietism, object-oriented scholars from across disciplines have turned to matter, bodies, objects, and nature in the last several decades as a way to reinvigorate our politics.

The question in this chapter is not whether object-oriented literary criticism can support a politics, but what form such a politics might take. It is unclear that any one extant object-oriented theory maps onto the demands of literary criticism, but perhaps the most commensurate body of scholarship comes out of new feminist materialisms and their antecedents, including feminist phenomenology and ecofeminism. New feminist materialisms is the umbrella heading for a loosely affiliated set of practices that share the goals of moving feminist theory beyond the "impasse caused by the contemporary linguistic turn in feminist thought" (Alaimo 1), and reconciling "the insights of constructionism with the need to take up the 'real,' fleshly body, nature, and ontology" (Pitts-Taylor 9). New feminist materialisms emphasize practice over theory because practices are "by nature, embodied, situated actions," and their focus on embeddedness and situatedness proves valuable to the relational world of the novel and the reader's position to that world for which I have argued in this dissertation (Alaimo 7). Above all else, it is new feminist materialisms' insistence on "the deconstruction of the material/discursive dichotomy that retains both elements without privileging either" that makes it so provocative to an object-oriented literary criticism (Alaimo 6). We cannot leave the discursive behind entirely: "We have learned much from the linguistic turn. Language *does* construct our reality. What we are discovering now, however, is that this is not the end of the story" (Hekman 91-2).

The imperative in new feminist materialisms to balance the discursive and material—to tease out how each constitutes the other—fits the demands of the novel much better than object-oriented theories that entail an ontic leveling. Though object-oriented ontology is anti-hierarchal insofar as it obviates subject-object and subject-nature binaries, feminist new materialists have disputed OOO's de facto feminist street cred, which hinges on the philosophy's general tendency towards the egalitarian, asking whether it is enough to identify a feminist politics by "affirming

that it undoes dualisms and is therefore feminist 'by nature'" (Hinton 1). Besides the fact—as I laid out in my introduction—that the flattened world described by OOO has little purchase on the novel, I argue too that its displacement of the subject, which might seem democratic, or at least doctrinally impartial, has destructive institutional and theoretical consequences.[20] The abnegation of the subject, which seems to occur when outsider groups claim subjectivity, is itself a political move, ones that make the turn to objects seem neutral or natural while reproducing its own agenda and excluding others.

David Simpson argues that the crisis of the subject is really another way of reinforcing that very category, whereby, he writes, "the avowed instability of the subject is its very mechanism of self-insurance, its strategy for holding on to its gains and privileges, so that the anglophone construction of crisis becomes itself ideological, a pathos of imagined dispossession that signals the exact opposite" (9). I build on Simpson by way of Gayatri Spivak and argue that this play of insecurity is strongly gendered and racialized, for where confusion and unknowing so often work to the advantage of the white male subject, the same symptoms are conventionally deployed to discredit non-white and non-male subjects. The crisis of the subject shores up a *particular kind* of white male subject, evinced in object-oriented criticism's moral and imaginative failure to take into account the ways in which other kinds of subjectivity have always been unstable or contested and the ways in which certain subjects have always been made object-like.

Despite new feminist materialists' reinvigoration of matter, they are comparatively silent when it comes to objects. There are historical reasons for feminist theorists to be suspicious of the turn to objects:

> Feminism has its own complicated relationship to things, colored by a perception that women have often been treated as akin to objects. Objecthood was something to be disavowed, even repudiated, a pitfall rather than a promise. Feminists have been far more invested in thrashing out questions of subjectivity as they relate to women… than in investigating the mysteries of the object. (Felski 185)

Privileging objects and objectivity has led to the erasure of certain kinds of subjects and subjectivity, consolidating power in regimes of knowledge that traditionally exclude women. As such, accounts of objects "can seem to be either appropriations of a fixed and determined world reduced to resource for instrumentalist projects of destructive Western societies, or they can be seen as masks for interests, usually dominating interests" (Haraway 591). Some contemporary feminist theorists who are skeptical of feminist materialisms see the material turn as disciplinary vampirism, suggesting that "OOO has been so provocative for feminist theorists because of its canny and knowing usurpation of the energies of feminist thought and its relegation of that history to footnotes within its own autobiography" (Sheldon). Rather than conclude, as Sheldon does, that there can be "no such thing as an object-oriented feminism," one way forward from here is to acknowledge how there have *long been* object-oriented feminisms.

The speculative realist critique against the efficacy of new feminist materialisms as object-oriented practices, as framed by object-oriented ontologist Ian Bogost, goes: "The big question is how critical approaches like feminism (and political economy, and psychoanalysis, and many others) will deal with OOO's charge to extend beyond human interests." Or as Paul Reid-Bowen writes to Bogost, "The main problem for a feminist version of OOO will probably remain the focus on the human" (Bogost). I disagree with the assumption in Bogost's question, and wonder why new feminist materialisms must renounce these attachments when they are

perhaps especially equipped to attend to the object world without claiming, erroneously, to bypass human—and gendered—interests.

At the same time, it should also be possible to envision the non-human world and its relations to feminist prerogatives without collapsing that world back into the human body, as is frequently the case in new feminist materialisms. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman introduce their important collection *Material Feminisms* by asserting that "women *have* bodies," and that "we need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit" (3-4). Introducing a special edition of *Women* published in 2014 titled "Feminist Matters: The Politics of New Materialism," Peta Hinton and Iris Van der Tuin write that "culture is manifestly biological at the most intricate, molecular level," which "makes feminist political practices and interventions themselves expressly, and irrevocably, material, and biologically reconfigured" (4-5). A renewed focus on bodies and embodiment is unequivocally central to the material turn—and in feminist writing represents an important recovery of women's lived experience—but staking an object-oriented feminism on such grounds threatens to fold the non-human world back into the human. If the matter of new feminist materialisms points no farther than women's bodies, it will produce a practice unable to recognize the objects that hum and scuttle and squat beyond the body but within the scope of human perception, knowledge, imagination, and meaning.

In our world, feminist discourse is bound to the female subject. As Stephanie Clare eloquently puts it, we

> cannot but return to the study of power relations between humans, for it is humans whom we address in our writing and it is, arguably, human lives, enmeshed in more-than-human worlds, that we care most about. We might critique what or who counts as human, how

> the human has been produced, and how we understand the human, but it is to this "human" that politics remains turned toward. (Clare 68)

But the world of the novel comes with no such obligations. Though readers exist in relation to the text are implicated in its construction of literary worlds, they are not embodied within the fiction. Unbound, the subject is not longer the necessary starting place. The reader, in the role of coherer, has a much more expansive view of the relationships between human and non-human actors, including those which are characterized by distance, distrust, or unknowing, allowing objects to occupy a more central place in feminist literary criticism. Here, as we find when I turn to the question of *mattering* in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and *The God of Small Things*, political possibility exists largely in the realm of the imaginative. As Frederick Aldama has shown, "Demanding that literary texts provide a clear political agenda for emancipation… both overestimates what literature can do in the realm of society and underestimates what it actually accomplishes in the realm of the imagination" (Jani 229).

The disembedded vantage of the reader—disembedded in the novel, even as her inclusion in this picture animates how books orient readers—emphasizes language's ligamentous role in producing and negotiating the space between subjects and objects. Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* and Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* both articulate how language mediates these spaces. Barad suggests replacing the object with the phenomenon as the unit of study, rejecting distinctions between epistemology and ontology by marking the "inseparability of the object and the measuring agencies" (Barad 139). Ahmed, taking a different approach, queers the *orientation* in object-oriented. She shows what is obscured in the production of philosophical writing, which often brackets the lived and living material world—including gendered labor—in order to "confirm the fantasy of a subject who is transcendent, who places

himself above the contingent world of social matter" (33), and then Ahmed rejects such erasure by reinstating the "thisness" of objects, making them "'matter' in our reading" (44). For object-oriented literary criticism, Barad's agential realism and Ahmed's queer phenomenology point to the possibilities of folding seeing and reading into the purview of the object, so that the means by which subject and object interact is not in the domain of the perceiving human but located in the space between—in other words, the text.

For Barad and Ahmed, language and perception connect humans to the object world; for ecofeminism, humans and objects are empirically tied by the concurrent exploitation of the natural world and the oppression of women. Whether looking at "ways in which environmental destruction disproportionately affects women and children" (Warren, "Taking" 13) or "the symbolic connections between sexist and naturist language, i.e., language which inferiorizes women and nonhuman nature" (Warren, "Ecological" xv), ecofeminists make political affiliations between women and nature by describing how such connections already exist in the world, without subordinating one concern to the other. Particularly relevant for this chapter is ecofeminist literary criticism, which attends to how texts structure the relationships between human characters and literary worlds, and how different structures offer different political possibilities. Wendy Lee-Lampshire uses Wittgenstein to show how adopting a language of psychology to describe ostensibly non-thinking objects or "treating something as a subject is informative" (416). Through this, "we may conceive the application of psychological terms such as *subject* or *I* as an act of taking responsibility for the evolving and complex world described by such an application (Lee-Lampshire 421). Gretchen Legler employs a similar concept, that of the "postmodern pastoral," which is "a posthumanist construction of human relationships with nature that makes more sense in a postmodern world; a vision that is informed by ecological and

feminist theories, and one that images human/nature relationships as "conversations" between knowing subjects" (Legler 229).[21] These approaches show how literature performs the displacement of the human subject—or elevation of non-human subjects—without jettisoning human political attachments, and in doing so, they outline the capacity of literary language and novel form to generate an object-oriented politics.[22]

Turning to objects in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and *The God of Small Things*, these feminist practices keep aloft the irreducible systems of relation that structure the literary object, the novel, and the reader's relationship to both. They hold together the substance of language and discursiveness of objects, which leads to a politics of *mattering*, in which I include how language produces the phenomenon of materiality, what Bill Brown calls the "*materiality-effect*" (60); how narrative configures the political possibilities of things that matter—opening them up to creative play or outside manipulation; how language and narrative thicken and point to their own materiality, often showing how the discursive produces material consequences in the world; how the productive distance between reader and text is abbreviated by Ahmed's call to make things "'matter' in our reading," implicating the reader in the production and thus the politics of the text; and how a focus on the mattering of the novel suggests a certain consequentiality of literary objects and their strange insistent lives that exist after the reader turns away, positing the novel's role in the imaginative making and re-making of the world.

*

All Things Fall and Are Built Again

Published in 1985, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* was Jeanette Winterson's first novel, and, with the help of the widely-seen BBC adaptation that followed, it quickly launched her career. Closely modeled on the author's own life, it follows a girl named Jeanette who grows up

with her intensely religious adoptive mother in an industrial town in post-war northern England. Constrained by her increasingly suffocating Pentecostal community, Jeanette spends much of her time in her fantasies, dreaming up tales that interrupt the flow of the narrative. Storytelling helps her cope with the world around her, but after a series of attempts to heal Jeanette of her lesbianism, which culminate in a violent exorcism, Jeanette leaves home for London and a new life.

The narrative is, in many ways, a classic *bildungs-* or *künstlerroman*, but it is notable in how sharply attenuated the possibilities are for Jeanette's social growth and identity formation; Jeanette is kept out of public school for as long as legally possible, restricted to interacting with her mother's church friends, and given limited access to secular reading material.[23] In so circumscribed a world, without access to a wider social environment, where lies the potential for growth? Under these circumstances, Jeanette forges an identity in dialogue with objects. Coming of age, which for Jeanette means coming of age as a queer woman, becomes an object-oriented practice. That it is the conversation between Jeanette and the material world that produces a habitable future suggests a politics that lies not in the subject or object, but which emerges out of the set of possible relations allowed between the two, and in the scenes and seasons that make the turn to objects necessary.[24]

Remaking the world becomes an ethical imperative for Jeanette, trapped as she is among people and objects that are shaped by and in turn promulgate repressive discourses. The differences between Jeanette and the male religious figures in her life are clearly tied to their Pentecostalism and its attitude towards the material and natural worlds, which replicate misogyny, homophobia, and racism in and through objects. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is filled with religious kitsch, objects which have no artistic or material value but which are

hollowed out to afford only one signification, leading the viewer's thoughts to God. Religious kitsch functions to "evoke unambiguously, dispelling ambivalence and abstraction" (Olalquiaga 41). Celebrating a Christmas with her family years after she leaves home, Jeanette looks on as her mother frantically unwraps a present sent to her from their Pastor Spratt while on his mission in Africa: "It was an elephant's foot, with a hinged top. She hesitated a moment, then flung back the lid. It was an elephant's foot Promise Box; two layers of little scrolls, all rolled up, each with a promise from the Word. My mother had tears in her eyes, as she put it carefully on top of the sideboard" (181). Religion rhetorically hollows out this object which has been literally eviscerated to make space for the word of God. The foot begins as a complete object, the noun phrase "an elephant's foot," but upon further inspection it transforms into an adjectival one, "an elephant's foot Promise Box." The thing itself disappears; it is a medium, a way to get to something else, something transcendent. That the Promise Box was once part of a living creature only amplifies the sense that there is something perverse in hollowing out objects.

The language of Christian orthodoxy allows characters "to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects" (White 1205). The effects of this "Christian arrogance toward nature" are not only antifeminist, and various repressive systems conjoin within objects (White 1206). The elephant foot Promise Box is not just religious kitsch but colonial kitsch, one piece of many in the novel. Jeanette's mother keeps a picture by her bed of Pastor Spratt "surrounded by black men with spears" (8), and it is "Pastor Spratt's crocodile nutcracker [that] took pride of place on the mantelpiece" (98). Even non-Christian objects become converted, as it were, under Pastor Spratt's watch: he celebrates his "ten thousandth convert" by touring Europe with "his collection of weapons, amulets, idols and primitive methods of contraception. The exhibition was called 'Saved by Grace Alone'" (35). These

artifacts are “saved” from their original context when relocated to another. Pastor Spratt is absent throughout the novel, but his presence is reinforced in the system of objects and signs that refer back to him. Religion embeds in objects certain directives for their intended use, which, when those directions are followed properly, replicates that ideology.

For this loop between object and orientation to function smoothly, the object must be neutered of features that could interrupt the flow of meaning. When Jeanette is told that “God’s in everything” (30) and that “everything in the natural world was a symbol of the Great Struggle between good and evil” (16), it effectively oversaturates objects with a single meaning that points in a single direction. But Jeanette, flirting with apostasy, reasserts the immanence of objects. Consider how she describes the painting of Christ that her family keeps in the kitchen:

> It was a watercolour about nine inches square, painted by Pastor Spratt for my mother, before he left with his Glory Crusade for Wigan and Africa.
>
> It was called ‘The Lord Feeding the Birds’ and my mother put it over the oven because she spent most of her time there, making things for the faithful. It was a bit battered now, and the Lord had a blob of egg on one foot, but we didn’t like to touch it in case the paint came off too. (20)

The watercolor Christ is another example of religious kitsch, the materiality of which remains invisible as long as it continues to lead the viewer to the intended signified. But here, Jeanette’s attention pauses on the object itself, snagged on the blob of egg’s interaction with the paint, and refuses to be transported elsewhere. The splattered icon becomes scrambled (ahem), which allows for a moment of object-seeing in the wake of transcendence’s failure.

Recognizing the materiality of religious discourse—the ways it coalesces in her environment—Jeanette can manipulate these manifestations of ideology and remake her world. Early in the novel, Jeanette plays with the odds and ends she finds in a church classroom:

> There was some Fuzzy Felt to make Bible scenes with, and I was just beginning to enjoy a rewrite of Daniel in the lions' den when Pastor Finch appeared. I put my hands into my pockets and looked at the lino.
>
> 'Little girl,' he began, then he caught sight of the Fuzzy Felt.
>
> 'What's that?'
>
> 'Daniel' I answered.
>
> 'But that's not right,' he said, aghast. 'Don't you know that Daniel escaped? In your picture the lions are swallowing him.'
>
> 'I'm sorry,' I replied, putting on my best, blessed face. 'I wanted to do Jonah and the whale, but they don't do whales in Fuzzy Felt. I'm pretending those lions are whales.'
>
> 'You said it was Daniel.' He was suspicious.
>
> 'I got mixed up.'
>
> He smiled. 'Let's put it right, shall we?' And he carefully rearranged the lions in one corner, and Daniel in the other. 'What about Nebuchadnezzar? Let's do the Astonishment at Dawn scene next.' He started to root through the Fuzzy Felt, looking for a king.
>
> 'Hopeless,' I thought, Susan Green was sick on the tableau of the three Wise Men at Christmas, and you only get three kings to a box. (12-3)

As other scholars have noted, Jeanette's revisionist remixing of biblical stories undermines male power and religious self-seriousness. But what draws my attention to this and similar scenes

throughout the novel is the detail Jeanette pays to the particular material conditions of her handicraft.[25] Jeanette treats biblical stories like she does religious kitsch: though they are meant to point to an established meaning, significance, or moral, by focusing on the materiality of storytelling, Jeanette rearranges the building blocks to create new meanings. She evades the pastor's accusation of heterodoxy by blaming the lack of whales on the makers of Fuzzy Felt, and she knows the pastor will not be able to recreate the scene of Nebuchadnezzar's Astonishment because she has insight into the history of these objects. Her understanding of objects is inaccessible to the pastor, in part because the objects do not matter to him *as* objects. For the pastor, the Fuzzy Felt figures are conduits to ideology; for Jeanette, they are the refuge against it. Objects encourage the pastor's thoughts to fly past the physical towards the heavenly, while Jeanette's remain below, fixed upon the material. By recognizing ideology's materiality[26] and its ability to sculpt the subject's relationship to the material world, Jeanette revises what might otherwise seem intangible and thus unassailable.

Jeanette turns to objects when it seems that she has no control over the language available to her. Language can be slippery; it can be used against her. At one point in the novel she hides out in the library: there "I felt better, words you could trust and look at till you understood them, they couldn't change halfway through a sentence" (72-3). Winterson here distinguishes between spoken language and written language, where the latter proves much safer for Jeanette, given the fixity she finds in its materiality. This is not to suggest that Jeanette is unable to wield language in powerful ways: she promotes herself as a skilled sermonizer. "Some of us could preach," Jeanette notes of the women in her congregation, "and quite plainly, in my case, the church was full because of it" (135-6). Yet the descriptions she provides of her own preaching are notably abbreviated:

> Our first meeting that night was a great success. I was down to preach, and as usual a great number found the Lord.
>
> 'She's lost none of her gifts, has she?' May grinned at my mother. (116)

There is a hole where we expect to find the content of her sermon. We never see a single line of Jeanette's proselytism in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, a glaring omission given the importance she places in speaking in the church. As when she emphasizes the materiality of religious icons, Winterson seems to proceed by misdirection, focusing on what seems like the wrong thing. I connect the absence of the sermon to the eventual decision made by Jeanette's pastor that women can no longer preach, a conclusion he justifies by correlating Jeanette's lesbianism to the congregation's decision "allowing women power in the church" (135). "The message," he claims, "belonged to the men" (136). Jeanette's preemptive excision of her own sermons from the text is a form of self-protection: there is a liability to staking her identity, especially as a queer woman, in a language that can so easily be turned against her. Jeanette's emphasis on language's matter gives her purchase on what might otherwise be taken from her.

Jeanette is a bricoleur, recombining the elements of the world she has at hand to produce new meaning. The novel's descriptions of her art projects point again and again to her ability to remake the world around her; at two different moments, Jeanette refers to her own creations as "masterpieces"—in relation to a religious-themed needlepoint (45) and an eggshell diorama (49), both of which she hand-crafts. We should read these passages as descriptions of Winterson's own labor of crafting the novel. As is frequently true, an attention to objects in novels is also a way of understanding the work of the novelist and the novel as material creation. This is not just to say that Jeanette's feminist constructions mirror Winterson's feminist constructions, as many critics have argued. I mean to highlight the political importance of objects and novelistic

language's materiality to this narrative of feminist bricolage. This connection between the sanctuary offered by literary objects and that posed by acts of making and remaking takes a cue from Susan Fraiman's work on what she labels "shelter writing," in which she shows how a certain mode of descriptive writing about the domestic "may generally go hand in hand with novelistic self-referentiality" (63). Just as Fraiman proposes that "descriptions of characters making and keeping house may offer writers a store of images for their own barely waged work of conjuring and furnishing the spaces in which people dwell" (63), so do I propose that certain representations of women engaging the object world in creative and revisionary ways offer feminist writers models for representing the material processes of their own writing. And by coding the creative process as material—crafting, building, or constructing; making, instead of writing—Winterson avoids re-inscribing the primacy of language. Instead, language matters when the novel points to its materiality. In examples throughout *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit,* materiality overwhelms mimesis; as with the Fuzzy Felt, the true significance of Jeanette's constructions is apparent only in their material form.

Seeing Jeanette as an artisan rather than a writer conjures an image of a more embodied subject, reviving the question of orientation. The possibilities afforded by objects and the materiality of language in the face of repressive social and religious discourses point to the subject who might be erased under such repressive frameworks. Though Jeanette is silenced in her church, she reappears as the maker of things. Object orientation, returning to Sara Ahmed, itself affirms the existence of the (queer) subject who may otherwise be erased. *Someone must be there to be oriented*, producing a moment of identification not just for Jeanette but the reader engaged with the text. Accordingly, the political opportunities this generates do not lie necessarily or indivisibly in Jeanette or the objects around her, in the author or the reader. As

Ahmed puts it: "clearly gender is not 'in' the table or necessarily 'in' the body that turns to the table. Gender is an effect of how bodies take up objects, which involves how they occupy space by being occupied in one way or another" (Ahmed 59). This is a politics that grows like grass in the cracks between bricks in the sidewalk, located amid things rather than in them and corralled into significance by the reader. Animating relation helps deflate accusations Winterson has faced about her supposed remove from feminist politics, the idea that she "creates an alternative to reality and backs off from an engagement with political and material constraints" (Pykett 60). As another young girl is told in another Winterson novel: "if you can't survive in this world, you had better make a world of your own" (*Lighthousekeeping* 5). *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* insists on a politics of the forms of relation that we inhabit, resist, or remake between ourselves and the objects that surround us.[27]

Before proceeding to the role of particular literary objects in shaping alternative modes of relations, we should pause to consider what this tangle of subject and object, language and matter, and perception and orientation might look like. We find a rich example in Winnet Stonejar, the name of one of Jeanette's fantasy avatars. Not only is this a slant- or queer-anagram of "Jeanette Winterson", but it replaces the "son" in the author's surname with "stone," marking the character's pivot from society or family to object. Jeanette sheds her mother's ownership by sloughing off her mother's name, and doing so at the very moment of her exorcism, right when society becomes most threatening. The weightiness of the name "Stonejar" is deceptive, belied by the playfulness of its adoption. Three pages before we learn Winnet's name, we read in passing that the adventuring young girl's "stone jar of food and dry clothes had been lost" (142). This small detail, easily missed, suggests that the name "Stonejar" was not planned or purposeful, keeping with Jeanette's improvisational, make-shift storytelling—a style referenced

by the novel's allusion to the W.B. Yeats poem "Lapis Lazuli": "*All things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay*" (30). The effect is as if narrative, attuned to the material world, snags on certain objects, and pulls them into relation with the subject. There is, it seems, a literary unconscious that keeps narrative's eyes turned towards the ground, attuned to objects that typically slide past human attention.

*

Oranges Are Not the Only Objects

The objects that we have encountered so far—the elephant foot Promise Box, the egg-adorned watercolor Christ, the vomit-bespattered Fuzzy Felt biblical characters—all emerged from a similar religious context and would seem destined, without the novel's distinctive figuring of them, to reproduce that ideology in the world. But not all objects with hardwired meaning in the novel are shaped by the community's Pentecostalism. Foremost among them are the oranges that appear over a dozen times in the novel and which have received a considerable amount of critical attention,[28] yet the harder one stares at the titular fruit, the less substantial they seem. In the novel, oranges derive their meaning not from Jeanette but her overbearing mother, who substitutes fruit for affection: when a young Jeanette is in the hospital, her mother leaves her with some oranges (23, 25, 27-8); when Jeanette comes home from public school feeling estranged and upset, her mother gives her an orange (40); after Jeanette is starved by her mother and congregation to exorcise her demons, she is given oranges to help her recover (114-5). Jeanette tries to engage the oranges on her own terms by playing with them as she did the Fuzzy Felt, but fails: "I tried to build an igloo out of the orange peel but it kept falling down and even when it stood up I didn't have an eskimo to put in it, so I had to invent a story about 'How Eskimo Got Eaten', which made me even more miserable" (26). The orange peel, which cannot

be a home for Jeanette any more than it is for the Eskimo, points to the hollowness of oranges throughout the novel and the absence at the center of Jeanette's relationship with her mother. At the end of her exorcism, the tipping point in the novel to which we keep returning, Jeanette decides of the oranges she is given: "They were pretty, but not much help. I was going to need more than an icon to get me through this one" (134). Icon is a telling word—one which brings back the image of Christ hanging in the kitchen. Icons only work if our relationships with them are fixed, their meaning prescribed by some higher authority, their circuitry closed to outside intervention. In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, oranges seem to glow with hidden meaning, triggering the hermeneutic gears to start turning; but for a curious reader—or the reader who, like Jeanette, looks to objects for their creative potential—these icons, these symbols, quickly prove a dead end. The title, after all, points us away from the oranges rather than towards them. It is only after the glistening oranges have started to tarnish that we notice the pebble.

The pebble first appears midway through the novel, in a daydream Jeanette experiences during her exorcism, timing which suggests that it may provide an alternative to the orange. As she decides to leave her family and start a new life, an orange-colored demon appears. He consoles her, and at the end of their conversation, the demon says:

> "…remember, you've made your choice now, there's no going back."
>
> "What are you talking about? I haven't made any choice." I was struggling to sit up.
>
> "Catch," called the demon and vanished. In my hand was a rough brown pebble. (115)

The pebble resurfaces regularly, appearing in fantasy sequences and in Jeanette's waking life. It is with her when she breaks things off with her second girlfriend: "As I left Katy behind, she was crying. I didn't know what to expect, but I knew I wouldn't live through any of that again. Hands in my pockets, I played with a rough brown pebble" (132). It is with her when she tells her

congregation that she is leaving the church: “They were dumbfounded. I held on tight to the little brown pebble and hoped they’d go away. They didn’t” (138). Readers of *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* have tried to make symbolic claims about the pebble: it is, variously, “the symbol of her self-integrity” (Onega 26), her “own sense of reality and selfhood,” (Cosslett 26), or a “talisman” that is the “symbol of the shriveled heart of those who stay rather than embrace a life of nomadic provisionality” (Makinen 167). Yet all of these accounts are unconvincing, in large part because the pebble resists partaking in the symbolic order of the novel. Though we want to ascribe it talismanic powers, the one time Jeanette explicitly asks the pebble for something magical (for her congregation to disappear), it does nothing.

What could be the importance of an object that rejects our attempts to give it importance? In this respect, the pebble shares much in common with the stones that Beckett’s Molloy moves from one pocket to another, or another pebble that has been discussed in object-oriented literary criticism, that in Zbigniew Herbert’s “Pebble.” The poem begins: “ The pebble / is a perfect creature // equal to itself / mindful of its limits // filled exactly / with a pebbly meaning // with a scent that does not remind one of anything / does not frighten anything away does not arouse desire.” It closes: “Pebbles cannot be tamed / to the end they will look at us / with a calm and very clear eye” (Herbert). Both pebbles are disconcertingly autarkic; both resist impositions of human meaning and feeling; both are immediately perceptible and tangible—Herbert’s narrator holds the pebble in his hand—while both suggest that they contain unknowable depths. Herbert’s pebble marks the “self-sufficiency of the object” (Schwenger 165), and among its uses and meanings figures “the useless and the meaningless” (Frow 354). The only explicit hint the novel gives about the pebble’s meaning comes at its appearance: the orange demon tosses it to Jeanette to mark the choice that she has made—which, we’ll remember, is to turn away from her family

and create Winnet Stonejar. The pebble, I argue, is the embodiment of Jeanette's object orientation, unintelligible as a thing itself but comprehensible through the way it turns Jeanette towards the material world.

Different objects permit or provoke different forms of engagement from subjects, and Jeanette's relationship with the pebble suggests an alternative model of subject-object relationship than those offered by religious icons. Though it is sometimes in Jeanette's pocket, it can hardly be said that she *owns* the pebble. It appears and disappears throughout the book, forestalling the possibility of possession. This is a radical proposition, given the deeply hierarchical world in which Jeanette is raised. The most consistent use of 'possession' throughout the novel is in the context of "demon-possessed," an accusation leveled at Jeanette throughout her childhood (11). A visiting pastor takes one look at Jeanette and says: "This little lily could herself be a house of demons" (12). Before subjected to her day-long exorcism, her own pastor cries: "These children are full of demons" (104). This threat of possession is the flipside of the assertion that "God's in everything" (30), where both represent a violent loss of agency that erases Jeanette's choices and desires. Jeanette's own adoption provides the novel's originary moment of possession as a form of dispossession, which took place after Jeanette's mother had a divine vision convincing her that "She would get a child, train it, build it, dedicate it to the Lord" (9). In the face of this genderless, objectifying language, the pebble's tendency to withdraw thwarts claims of ownership and models anti-hierarchical forms of *being-with*.

The pebble provokes a reorientation that is built into the language used to describe the pebble. Every time the pebble appears, the form remains constant: it maintains the structure "[article] [adjective] brown pebble," where the article is either definite or indefinite and the first adjective is either "rough" or "little." These shifts make the pebble hard to pin down. Linguistic

discrepancies give it an indeterminate quality. That it is sometimes “rough” and sometimes “little” seems a product of Jeanette’s experience, so that the variability of her shifting perceptions becomes encoded into the literary object. This is “a” pebble, not particular, and infinitely interchangeable with other pebbles, its instability a sign of its quiddity. The pebble shifts in language in the same way that it appears and disappears from the narrative, like how it passes back and forth between Jeanette’s fantasies and reality, and, in those fantasies, how it transforms into other objects; now it is a piece of chalk, now the hardened heart of a raven. Then, suddenly, it is “the” pebble, the one that remains in Jeanette’s pocket for whenever she needs it, imbued with the solidity of stone. This persistence is mirrored in the constancy of the syntactical structure and the fixity of the final two words—it is always a “brown pebble”—giving the object a persistent identity, marking the pebble as noumenon, which seems to exist *through* or *behind* language and context, reminding us, perhaps, of Tom McCarthy’s supra-textual matter.

The object’s doubleness is central to the novel’s political strategy. By holding aloft the pebble’s dual contingency and continuity, which mirror the dialectic of the literary object’s discursiveness and materiality, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* signals how the suspension of reconciliation or wholeness may be ethically productive. By being both fluid and solid, enduring and ephemeral, present and receding, the pebble complicates the Manichean worldview in which Jeanette was raised. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* opens with a representation of her mother’s understanding of reality:

> She had never heard of mixed feelings. There were friends and there were enemies.
>
> Enemies were: The Devil (in his many forms)
>
> Next Door

Sex (in its many forms)

Slugs

Friends were: God

Our dog

Auntie Madge

The Novels of Charlotte Bronte

Slug pellets

and me, at first. I had been brought in to join her in a tag match against the Rest of the World. (1)

Just as the pebble's instability is reproduced in the text, so too is the rigidity of Jeanette's mother's orthodoxy enshrined typographically. There is not room for ambiguity in the home or in the church. In another scene, when Jeanette is confronted by her pastor over a budding lesbian relationship, she proclaims,

"I love her."

"Then you do not love the Lord."

"Yes, I love both of them."

"You cannot." (105)

The absolutism of *either/or* and *good/bad* withers under the literary object's ability to be *both*, leading Jeanette into something she has never experienced before: uncertainty. "Uncertainty to me was like Aardvaark to other people. A curious thing I had no notion of, but recognised through secondhand illustration" (99). This sense of the object as a site of relation, uncertainty, and phase-shifting rather than as plenum or fixed and tangible stuff, directs us toward the origin of the word *thing,* in the Germanic *thingan*, which referred to an "appointed time for

deliberation, accusation, judicial process, and decisions" (Graham 299). The nature of the pebble—its ambivalence, its neutrality, its illegibility, and so on—invites Jeanette to form particular kinds of anti-hierarchal relationships with it, which in turn produce a more egalitarian world to inhabit.

The pebble promotes an open and constructive politics against the closed ideology of Jeanette's church and home, but it is not the only such object in the novel to do so. *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* is cluttered with things; the pebble is one of many that do not fit comfortably within restrictive systems of meaning-making. These objects tend to share certain features: despite the fact that much of the novel takes place in a richly descriptive realist mode that details life in a mid-century working-class city, notably few objects are branded or appear in the context of commerce. Even at its most documentary, the novel does not use objects to conjure up reality, in part because like the pebble, the objects here are the odds and ends that *refuse* to take part in the world as Jeanette encounters it. The objects Jeanette lights upon seem at a remove from everyday use or practice, reading like the contents of a *Wunderkammer*. These artifacts have little possible economic value, but are filled with meaning in the eyes of the curious girl: tins of pineapple, old socks, a bit of whalebone, some geranium buds, a scrap of parchment from Lebanon, a ball of plasticine, a coin collection in a glass case that smells of linseed oil, a whelk, a piece of Tiffany glass. Even though these objects do not appear in the fantasy sections of the novel, they contribute to the fairy-tale atmosphere that colors the entire narrative, standing, as they do, outside of a particular time or context. They often straddle the categories in which we place objects: the piece of bone is at once an object from nature (when it belonged to the whale), from fashion (it comes from a cheaply made bra), and from Jeanette's imaginative life (she carries it around as a reminder not to cut corners). These objects do not matter in spite of being

valueless but precisely because of it; it is by passing unrecognized that they provide Jeanette respite from the world beyond. Unlike, as we shall soon see, *The God of Small Things*, mattering—as in being solid—allows objects, and in turn Jeanette, to avoid mattering—as in having value to the rest of the world.

Like the circulating books in *The Bray House* or the materiality that exists after language in *Remainder*, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* suggests a form of mattering that makes objects not only rhetorically or experientially substantial and remote from human activity but philosophically as well. Within the novel, this view is most vigorously articulated by Elsie Norris, a member of the church who becomes fond of Jeanette. It is Elsie who claims that "stories [help] you to understand the world" (28), who loves W.B. Yeats because he understood "the great effect of the imagination on the world" (30), and who believes that "If you think about something for long enough… more than likely, that thing will happen," all claims about how fiction has material consequences in reality (30). In an exchange over tea and cake, Jeanette remarks of Elsie:

> She was an absolutist, and had no time for people who thought cows didn't exist unless you looked at them. Once a thing was created, it was valid for all time. Its value went not up nor down.
>
> Perception, she said, was a fraud; had not St Paul said we see in a glass darkly, had not Wordsworth said we see by glimpses? 'This piece of fruit cake'—she waved it between bites—'this cake doesn't need me to eat it to make it edible. It exists without me.'

> That was a bad example, but I knew what she meant. It meant that to create was a fundament, to appreciate, a supplement. Once created, the creature was separate from the creator, and needed no seconding to fully exist.
>
> 'Have some cake,' she said cheerfully, but I didn't because even if Elsie was philosophically amiss, her contention that the cake existed without either of us was certainly true. There was probably a whole township in there, with values of its own, and a style of gossip. (48)

By subordinating the receptive act to the creative one, Jeanette immunizes her art against outside interference. The object's alterity is politically advantageous. Yet the claim here goes further. The artefactualist position maintains that literary objects require an audience to exist. But Jeanette proposes that they have some form of independent being after their creation. By uncoupling the existence of literary objects from human activity, Winterson makes the case for their radical otherness. This results in a wild proliferation of objects that have being without existing—what Meinong calls *heimatlose Gegenstände*, or "homeless objects" (Chisholm 207)—and suggests how just how ontologically crowded our world might be.[29] Because they do not need humans to maintain their being, these objects appear to be fundamentally unknowable, which raises certain ethical possibilities. Even faced with something so inert and easily consumed—by perception and degustation—Jeanette cannot know with any certainty that eating the fruit cake would not result in grave moral consequences.[30] In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, the inexhaustibility of objects validates the egalitarian modes of relation that Jeanette forms with objects.

*

<u>Look Alive/Play Dead</u>

As Jeanette's object orientation remakes the world around her, it unsettles the divide between subjects and objects. In one of her fantasies as Winnet, under the tutelage of a blind old boat maker, she "learned to handle everything like it was alive." "She didn't understand, but she felt it moving; the rich black tar and the tight thread bound round the stem of her oars" (162). The liveliness of objects here is not a feature of objects—which she "didn't understand"—but of Jeanette's relation to them. In the moment of Jeanette's exorcism, we learn that she "had a heart of stone," and that it is "the nature of stone to covert bone" (114). Jeanette undergoes a hardening, taking on the properties of stone without becoming an object. This heart of stone is metaphorical, deployed through cliché, which is itself petrified language. And where we expect the word "convert," which would signal a change in substance, Winterson instead uses the obsolete verb "covert," which means to cover or conceal. This lexicographical sleight of hand, itself an additional layer of concealment, means that bone is shielded by stone, not altered by it. In the instances where subjects and objects seem to collapse into each other, we find instead that it is language that allows them to assume properties of the other. The distinction between subject and object remains, but this fluidity disambiguates any assumed correlation between subject and liveliness, and object and deadness. Instead of affixing these qualities to people or things, the novel illustrates how vivacity and inertness are also produced by the relationship between subject and object.

Religion's ability to gut objects—as in the obvious deadness of the elephant foot Promise Box—suggests like objects can be lively or deadened. On multiple occasions Jeanette refers to *dead things*: "The dead don't shout. There is a certain seductiveness about what is dead. It will retain all those admirable qualities of life with none of that tiresome messiness associated with live things. Crap and complaints and the need for affection. You can auction it, museum it,

collect it" (95-6). She continues: "being sensible, the collector of curios will surround himself with dead things, and think about the past when it lived and moved and had being. The collector of curios lives in a derelict railway station with a video of various trains. He is the original living dead" (96). These lines recur at the end of the novel, as Jeanette reflects back on the failure of her first relationship: "She said those sorts of feelings were dead, the feelings she once had for me. There is a certain seductiveness about dead things. You can ill treat, alter and recolour what's dead. It won't complain" (176-7). The uncanny similarity in language redoubles things' deadness: like the objects themselves, the words Jeanette uses to describe them are uncomfortably frozen.

Deadness, in these passages, is a way of being towards objects. It entails seeing them as completely controlled by human volition—that which can be auctioned, displayed, collected—and removed from their contexts and relations in the world which give them meaning. In turn, by positioning himself in such a way to objects, the collector risks deadening himself. In the essay "Imagination and Reality," Winterson writes: "The material world is closed to those who think of it only as a commodity market." She continues: "To those people every object is inanimate. In fact they are the ones who remain unmoved, fixed rigidly within their own reality" (146). Though it is the regenerative aspects of collecting that preoccupy contemporary scholarship—we might think back to Benjamin's model and Rey Chow's concept of "identificatory anarchy" that I outlined in my second chapter (376)—Winterson returns to a more Freudian approach, in which collecting is pathologically compensatory. That Jeanette's imagined "collector of curios" is a man genders this pathology, and connects the masculine violence of collecting dead things to the frozen icons of her patriarchal church. By figuring an object's relative deadness or liveliness as a product of its relations to a subject, we avoid the tendency in object-oriented criticism to attend

primarily to objects that seem lively in the ways humans seem lively. Pebbles, bits of whale bone, and all manner of things that might seem inert can be enlivened by language.

Just as the living can become deadened by their relationships to objects, so can the dead become enlivened by theirs. Jeanette works in a funeral home, a job that starts as a part-time gig, and then becomes her refuge when she leaves home.

> I went along to help with the laying out and make up. At first I was very clumsy. I used too much rouge, and smeared it down the cheekbones.
>
> 'Show some respect,' said the woman, 'the dead have their pride.' We always had a check list with the burial instructions, and soon this became my particular task. I went round making sure that the dead had everything they wanted. Some just asked for a prayer book or their Bible, or their wedding ring, but some were positively Egyptian. We did photograph albums, best dresses, favourite novels, and once someone's own novel. It was about a week in a telephone box with a pair of pyjamas called Adolf Hitler. The heroine was a piece of string with a knot in it.
>
> […]
>
> I liked my work. I learned a lot about wood and flowers, and I enjoyed polishing the handles as a final touch. (60)

The dead assume a liveliness in this passage: spending time with them, Jeanette learns that "the dead have their pride" and demand "everything they wanted." The scene suggests that the vibrancy of the dead is strangely tied up in objects; in counterpoint to the mummifying collector, the dead here are enlivened by their attachments to stuff, and their former lives are made legible through their attachments to objects, evinced by the "positively Egyptian" requests of some of Jeanette's clients. Human life, in the funeral parlor, can only be understood through an

elaboration of subject-object relationships—which are perhaps now object-object relationships. The corpse bridges the divide between subject and object, so that if "the dead body has now become object, it is not wholly so; it bears the imprint of a residual subjectivity, residue within residue" (Schwenger 157). There is something democratic about these object-loving corpses, as if understanding subjectivity as a blip in the lives of once and future objects makes it possible to envision a better world.

Just as, for the collector, deadness begets deadness, Jeanette's extension of liveliness to objects allows her to flourish in unexpected ways. Ironically, the funeral home is much more hospitable than her family home: here is where she finds refuge from her mother's autocratic rule, and once she leaves home for good, it is where she makes the money that ensures her financial independence. Furthermore, Jeanette's work connects her back to her childhood mastery of Fuzzy Felt and plasticine sculptures: in this passage we find repeated, "I liked my work," "I learned," "I enjoyed." Jeanette is able to express a gender identity that, in her home and church, left her vulnerable and subject to control. When she learns to apply makeup, she smudges rouge on the cheeks of a dead woman rather than her own. Rouge, in this context, beautifies, but it also gives the corpse the appearance of vitality, so that Jeanette, in a gently grotesque way, is life-giving, and the work she does "laying out" and making sure the dead are united with their possessions reveals a nurturing self. In the funeral parlor, which is a home but not a domestic space, Jeanette's turn to objects enables an unfurling of identity.

Here, in her fantasies, and in moments tucked throughout the novel, Jeanette handles objects as though they were alive. This recalls Wendy Lee-Lampshire's ecofeminist reading of Wittgenstein, in which she shows the political possibilities in "treating something as a subject" (416). In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, this play does not involve collapsing the differences

between subjects and objects but instead uses literature to extend liveliness onto the world. My use of the word *play* is intentional, encompasses the range of Jeanette's creative activities while also pointing to a kind of mood or engagement that facilitates "the ability to imaginatively create another world for the sole purpose of inhabiting this self-creation," which may lead to empathy and have "particular relevance in our human interactions with other-than-human nature" (Kheel 215-6). This is how we might understand the strange inclusion, in the description of the funeral parlor, of the novel Jeanette buries with its author, with the "pyjamas called Adolf Hitler" and the "piece of string with a knot in it" for a heroine. Fiction allows us to reimagine selfhood as a story we tell about some things, rather than an inherent property that divides the world into self and other. Not only is such storytelling something the novel *can* do, but as evinced by the inclusion in this scene of the it-narrative, one of the earliest novelistic genres, something the novel *always has done*. The funeral parlor comes to stand in for the sheltering edifice of the novel, both spaces in which our subjectivity is tempered by the knowledge of our latent objectivity.

*

<u>Postcolonial Clutter</u>

Jeanette Winterson has said that "A work of art… isn't just about something, it is something, and the something that it is connects what has been separated." She continues: "Art's business is to take all kinds of disparate elements and fuse them into new wholes. This is not an imposition; art is not colonialism. It is a revelation, a sense of things appearing as they are." In art, "we recognize life's intrinsic quality, that everything is connected" (Cranbury). This is another way to describe Jeanette's bricolage, and Winterson's articulation of the novel as a site of coherence, as stage of relation, and as material object in its own right coincide with my own

understanding. Yet Winterson recognizes that there is something potentially unsettling about her language of revelatory unity, even as she insists that it is not an imposition, not colonialism. What happens when the mattering of the novel—which occurs, as Winterson puts it, when art doesn't just say something but is something—does become a form of colonialism?

In an interview about *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy explains the novel's ordering logic in a way that speaks to Winterson's remarks:

> It's a story that examines things very closely but also from a very, very distant point, almost from geological time and you look at it and see a pattern there. A pattern [. . .] of how in these small events and in these small lives the world intrudes. And because of this, because of people being unprotected, the world and the social machine intrudes into the smallest, deepest core of their being and changes their life. (Upstone 71)

For Winterson, the novel produces a world that discloses otherwise-hidden patterns. But for Roy, this looks less like coherence than it does collusion, insofar as language and narrative become pressed into the service of the disabling structures they represent. In *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, the *matter* of small things engendered their use in networks of relation outside the dominant systems of power; in *The God of Small Things*, a similar *mattering* makes similar small things subject to the control of others. Dispossession is predicated on loss, and so there has to be something *there*, something that *counts*, in order for it to be lost. A theoretical approach in this final section would raise obvious similarities between postcolonial theory's relation to object-oriented criticism and that of feminist theory's.[31] Rather than repeat my early arguments here, I investigate instead how Arundhati Roy's novel, which has been hailed as a critical text by both feminism and postcolonial studies, figures the political implications of reading for objects in the postcolony.

In contrast to *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, what stands out immediately is the difference in the kinds of objects that characters encounter: Jeanette was able to escape dispossession by turning to a world of objects that moved outside social space and structures of control; but for many of the characters in *The God of Small Things*, objects offer no such recourse because they act as local manifestations of empire, neocolonial capitalism, state violence, rigid social structures, and personal and familial trauma. In the previous chapter I briefly elaborated how the interchangeability of Irish subjects and objects within the British imagination and financial system adds a material dimension to the multiple levels of alienation (including economic and linguistic) that define the colonial experience, while pointing to how such historical conditions suggest that objects, even, or especially, when they participate in the colonial enterprise, are uniquely positioned to narrate Irish experience. This continues to be true in *The God of Small Things*: objects maintain a privileged position in narrative and in acts of fiction-making and storytelling. But the sheer density of the novel, the extent of its clutter, precipitates a seizing up of narrative, so that feeling, event, and language all start to petrify. When everything matters in the novel, objects that take part in narrative necessarily participate in the characters' dispossession; their stories, like the objects themselves, do not belong to the characters.

By now the contours of *The God of Small Things* are familiar to most readers: the cast includes the twins Rahel and Estha, "personifications of Emptiness and Quietness" (Jani 198); their mother Ammu, who loves Velutha, an Untouchable craftsman in the family's employ; their uncle Chacko, whose daughter Sophie Mol's accidental death—for which Velutha is subsequently blamed, for which he is murdered by the police—is the black hole around which the novel slowly orbits; their great aunt Baby Kochamma, who orchestrates her family's

destruction; their blind grandmother Mammachi, the matriarch of their relatively well-off Syrian Christian family in Kerala; and the Ayemenem House where the characters live, and leave, and then return. Perhaps just as familiar are the details of the book's publication: the record-setting advance, the world-wide acclaim and Booker Prize, the backlash in Kerala against Roy's biting descriptions of the state's Communist Party and its leader, E.M.S. Namboodiripad—which would materialize into a lawsuit—the accusations of eroticized orientalism, selling-out as a way to market India to a global literary audience, or, alternately, the book's knowing "*meta*-exoticism," "designed to trap the unwary reader into complicity with the Orientalisms of which the novel so hauntingly relates" (Huggan 77).

Critiques of Roy, which have been revised in light of her decades of political writing, are not dissimilar to those faced by Winterson. Both authors employ postmodern aesthetics, but ones which are disambiguated from postmodern antihistoricism (Jani 193). Both authors trace their politics of fragmentation to their backgrounds: Roy has said, "I was terrified of the place where I grew up; I knew I had to get away. I had to be economically independent: that's the only way you can save your mind in India as a woman" (Prasad 12). The fractured spaces, times, narratives, and structures of both authors' first novels seem to have roots in their own experiences of coming of age; we see how, like Jeanette, Estha and Rahel inhabit a world that is made inhospitable, at least in part, by misogynistic violence and an oppressive degree of social control, and also like Jeanette, how their response involves turning towards small things—though their turn is also oriented inward, towards silence and, eventually, incest.[32]

There are a number of similarities between the novels—enough to suggest that *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* may have been a reference for Roy—and central to this overlap is their mutual subscription to the materiality of storytelling. Estha and Rahel's situation is described on

multiple occasions through the lens of their family's pickling operation, as in the novel's focus on banana jam. Though one of Mammachi's specialties, the jam is declared illegal by the Food Products Organization because "according to their specifications it was neither jam nor jelly. Too thin for jelly and too thick for jam. An ambiguous, unclassifiable consistency, they said" (30-1). The jam's problems with classification are, of course, those of the family. That it is a pickling outfit necessarily summons the chutneys of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, but so too does it evoke *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. Winterson's novel opens with an epigraph from *The Making of Marmalade* by Mrs. Beeton that ties Jeanette's growth to the oranges: "When thick rinds are used the top must be thoroughly skimmed, or scum will form marring the final appearance" (xi). As opposed to, say, Pip from *Great Expectations*, whose botanical name seems to prefigure his successful maturation, the alignment of Jeanette, Estha, and Rahel with pickles and preserves signifies a queering or curdling of the coming-of-age narrative on which both novels play.

There are other moments in *The God of Small Things* where the material process of making stories seems to point to Winterson. Reading the recipe for the banana jam, Estha recalls how he "always thought of Pectin as the youngest of three brothers with hammers, Pectin, Hectin and Abednego. He imagined them building a wooden ship in failing light and a drizzle. Like Noah's sons. He could see them clearly in his mind. Racing against time" (186). Estha shares Jeanette's facility for building new stories out of biblical tales, and what's more, the reference to Abednego suggests one of Jeanette and Elsie's dioramas, which features taxidermied mice as "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace" (31). Reflecting on the damaged twins as adults, the narrator remarks that "anger wasn't available to them and there was no face to put on this Other Thing that they held in their sticky Other Hands, like an imaginary orange. There

was nowhere to lay it down. It wasn't theirs to give away. It would have to be held. Carefully and forever" (182). The orange makes sense within the context of *The God of Small Things*—it points back to Estha's trauma from the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man's assault—but it also seems to gesture vociferously towards Winterson's oranges, which are similarly burdensome, associated with the literalization of intergenerational guilt and violence.

Yet there are serious differences between the novels and how they construct the relationships between characters and the material world, and central to this difference is the role of objects in the postcolony. Whenever the twins turn to objects, what they find are the adverse effects of global capitalism and the legacy of imperial rule, especially in the highly visible environmental degradation. At the end of one chapter, the twins dream of the all-important river, the Meenachal, that flows by their house, and imagine the "fish in it," "the sky and trees in it," and "at night, the broken yellow moon in it" (116-7). The children do not distinguish between what the river possesses (the fish) and what it represents (the sky, the moon), much as the novel itself compounds telling and being when it comes to *mattering*. On the next page and decades into the future, Rahel returns to the river as an adult, and in the river she finds the "silver slant of a dead fish," "succulent weed," "fetid garbage," "bright plastic bags," "the day's offerings and sludge," and "unadulterated factory effluents" (118-9). The river smells of "shit and pesticides bought with World Bank loans," and along its banks sit "new, freshly baked, iced, Gulf-money houses built by nurses, masons, wire-benders and bank clerks, who worked hard and unhappily in faraway places" (14). The river, which in many ways stands for the life of the family, goes from figuratively embodying the natural world to being laden with detritus.

Even things that seem as though they should belong to the Ayemenem family are compromised. On their pickle jars is an image of a traditional kathakali dancer, which Ammu

tells the twins is "a Red Herring and had nothing to do with anything. Chacko said that it gave the products a Regional Flavor and would stand them in good stead when they entered the Overseas Market" (46). This description marks a disconnect between the characters' lived experiences and the objects they produce for exportation, signaled by the design on the labels that "had nothing to do with anything." The image returns later in the book, with the appearance of a kathakali troupe who are forced to perform abbreviated dances for tourists, and in doing so risk "corrupting their stories," "encashing their identities," and "misappropriating their lives" (218). They too become a "Regional Flavor," so that cultural heritage, history, spirituality, like the pickle jars, no longer belong to them. The objects around the twins are not available as sites of play and creativity as they are for Jeanette because they are already filled with externally-imposed meaning. In other places throughout my project, objects work against globalization's homogenizing pull, but here they seem to consummate it. If, as in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, the novel's politics stem in part from the set of relations proffered by objects, *The God of Small Things* severely limits such possibilities.

The novel is replete with images of colonial clutter—of a world populated by things that don't belong to you and reinforce your own outsiderness at home—but none is more striking than when the twins visit Velutha's house. Here they find "a benign, mouse-haired calendar-Jesus with lipstick and rouge, and a lurid, jeweled heart glowing through his clothes," recalling the overdetermined religious kitsch of Jeanette's childhood home. Moving deeper into the shack, they discover a whole array of discarded objects:

> There were other things from the Ayemenem House that had either been given to them or salvaged from the rubbish bin. Rich things in a poor house. A clock that didn't work, a flowered tin wastepaper basket. Pappachi's old riding boots (brown, with green mold)

> with the cobbler's trees still in them. Biscuit tins with sumptuous pictures of English castles and ladies with bustles and ringlets. (199)

Most of these objects no longer have any use: the boots cannot be worn, the clock cannot tell time, and the calendar does not give the date (the twins note that of its sheets, "None had been torn out" (199)). Velutha's family has elevated bits of rubbish into *objets d'art*, but the narrative scorn this occasions suggests that there is something misplaced about prizing objects which should be cast aside. This and other moments of narrative opprobrium and disgust speak to a class politics of repurposing. Where Jeanette was able to enlist objects without regard to context or social milieu, the family of Untouchables privileges these objects *because* of the economic and social value they misread in them. In turn, the misrecognition of worth reinforces class difference, highlighting the family's poverty instead of leavening it—as in the image of the embarrassingly "sumptuous pictures of English castles and ladies with bustles and ringlets." For the abject poor, possession becomes an ironic sign of dispossession.

Poverty's distortion of subject-object relation raises questions about the role of bodies in the postcolony. The scene in Velutha's hut is complicated when the twins discover, lying among the frozen clocks and moldy boots, Kuttappen, Velutha's brother, who was paralyzed years ago when he "fell off a coconut tree and damaged his spine" (74). The shack's other inhabitant is Vellya Paapen, father of Velutha and Kuttappen, who is given a glass eye by Mammachi after he lost the original in a work accident. But the act of kindness seems another form of social control, and Vellya Paapen is left beholden to the family: "He hadn't worked off his debt yet, and though he knew he wasn't expected to, that he wouldn't ever be able to, he felt that his eye was not his own" (73). When Vellya Paapen confesses to Mammachi about his son's affair with her daughter, he offers her "his mortgaged eye" as recompense (241). Given how closely

Kuttappen's broken body resembles the broken objects that surround him and how deeply Vellya Paapen's dispossession is inscribed on his body through this alien object, the novel seems to ask: does the political reality of the postcolony create objects out of everything, including subjects?

In "The Fact of Blackness," Frantz Fanon "described the experience of being 'sealed into… crushing objecthood' upon realizing that he 'was an object in the midst of other objects'" (Behar 10). Yet this seems to describe the situation in *The God of Small Things* only partially. Kuttappen's impotence and Vellya Paapen's dependence are contrasted with Velutha's facility with his hands. A skilled carpenter, Velutha "always seemed to know what smooth shapes waited inside the wood for him," wood which, under his hands, "seemed to soften and become as pliable as Plasticine," a reference that recall's Jeanette's own skill (75). Even as a boy, Velutha would make "intricate toys—tiny windmills, rattles, minute jewel boxes out of dried palm reeds; he could carve perfect boats out of tapioca stems and figurines on cashew nuts" (71). He is a "dangerous artisan," as described by Devon Campbell-Hall, whose "skill-induced confidence" enables him "to make radical decisions" (Campbell-Hall 46).

It is as a craftsman that Velutha distinguishes himself from the physically disfigured and disabled characters who crowd the margins of the novel.[33] His relationship to objects is creative and generative. When these other characters appear, they seem bound to objects in a demented performance of capitalist subjectivity: Vellya Paapen tries to mortgage his eye to Mammachi; a one-legged man in a train station straps and unstraps his prosthetic limb, hoarding in the hollow leg "his ticket. His towel. His stainless-steel tumbler. His smells. His secrets. His love. His hope. His madness. His infinnate joy" (285); a mentally ill woman on a train coughs up phlegm into small pieces of newspaper, arranging "the little packages in neat rows on the empty seat in front of her as though she was setting up a phlegm stall" (69); and Murlidharan, a naked man with no

arms who sits in the middle of a traffic intersection, counting and recounting the "old keys tied carefully around his waist" despite the fact that he had "had no home, no doors to lock," and inventorying, in the cluttered cupboard of his mind, all the things he has lost: "An alarm clock. A red car with a musical horn. A red mug for the bathroom. A wife with a diamond. A briefcase with important papers. A coming home from the office. An *I'm sorry, Colonel Sabhapathy, but I'm afraid I've said my say*. And crisp banana chips for the children" (61).

These scenes, of counting, collecting, selling, owning, mortgaging, and so on, read as attempts by beleaguered subjects to maintain that subjectivity by acting out the now-threadbare rituals of capitalism that re-inscribe the subject-object dualism. In a way, this works: the novel maintains a distinction between abject characters and objects. But the effect is that theirs is a subjectivity that is punitively bound to the material world, tied to things which actually signify a dearth of things. In the process of their performances, these characters seem to generate more objects still; all that the man in the train station owns, including his love and madness, is compacted and crystalized until it fits in the hollow of a fake leg. It is as if these are the vagabonds of Zygmunt Bauman's influential figuration, who move through "heavy, resilient, untouchable" space, which Roy renders not simply physically but rhetorically (Bauman 88).

*

The Tragedy of Counting

Though these marginal figures represent an extreme, throughout *The God of Small Things*, dispossession is encoded in and signified by objects, meeting Roy's description of the novel as a story about how "the world and the social machine intrudes into the smallest, deepest core of their being and changes their life." Literary objects have long served as avatars of colonial dispossession; what I identify in Arundhati Roy's writing in particular is how these

objects burden the narrative to such a degree that the text starts to curdle and become thing-like. Just as "inanimate objects dominate, subsume, even annex the animate ones" in *The God of Small Things* (Nayar 234), I argue that the burden of mattering overwhelms narrative itself. This general thickening means that otherwise immaterial phenomena take on a material presence, making them countable and accountable under the frameworks of global capitalism and state violence.

The way that abstract ideas and feelings stiffen and ossify throughout *The God of Small Things* seems a product of trauma. When Estha and Rahel witness Velutha's murder, they learn history's smell—" Like old roses on a breeze" (53)—and never forget it: "It would lurk forever in ordinary things. In coat hangers. Tomatoes. In the tar on roads. In certain colors. In the plates at a restaurant. In the absence of words. And the emptiness in eyes" (54). The aftermath of their cousin's death is described in similar terms: "The Loss of Sophie Mol stepped softly around the Ayemenem House like a quiet thing in socks. It hid in books and food. In Mammachi's violin case. In the scabs of the sores on Chacko's shins that he constantly worried. In his slack, womanish legs" (17). History and loss take on physical forms—the smell of roses, a quiet thing in socks—inhabiting the ordinary objects that surround the family. Just as globalization materializes in their pickles and river, personal tragedy haunts their belongings; the family's dispossession is always doubly reflected in relics that preserve the memory of local and global trauma.

As intangible phenomena become objects, the novel proliferates with stuff, and this burgeoning clutter is enhanced by a concurrent thickening of language. Description in *The God of Small Things* is dense and sticky, like banana jam or the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man's unwanted semen that Estha cannot seem to wash off his hand. Roy leans heavily on similes,

adding to the piles of objects; the above example—"the Loss of Sophie Mol stepped softly around the Ayemenem House like a quiet thing in socks"—illustrates how when every thing is like something else, the novel creates multiple objects based off one original thing or event. The novel's tendency to capitalize abstract nouns contributes to this narrative density, as in: "And the Air was full of Thoughts and Things to Say. But at times like these, only the Small Things are ever said. The Big Things lurk unsaid inside" (136). The progression of plot is configured less as a flow than as a series of events that have been reduced—like jam as it's slowly boiled down—to discreet objects, as in "the Loss of Sophie Mol." This drying up of storytelling echoes the fate of Ayemenem's Meenachal, which becomes little more than a "swollen drain," as if the ecological burden of human destruction is great enough to weigh down narrative (118).

There are moments throughout the novel when the mechanisms of storytelling become objects within the story itself. Consider Rahel's toy wristwatch, which "had the time painted on it," so that whenever it appears it marks the time as stuck at "ten to two" (37). The temporality of the novel is *frozen solid*, condensed into this unmoving toy watch. In another scene, Rahel watches the highly-scripted affair that is Sophie Mol's homecoming: she "put on her sunglasses and looked back into the Play. Everything was Angry-colored" (176). The artificiality of the proceedings allows Rahel access to the production of mood. In yet another instance, early in Rahel's return to the Ayemenem House, the narrator remarks: "The silence sat between grandniece and baby grandaunt like a third person. A stranger. Swollen. Noxious" (22). The swollen quality of this prose suggests that the third-person narrator's description is self-referential; in this overcrowded text, the narrator cannot help but materialize in the unoccupied spaces. Narrative time, mood, and voice all appear within the text, suggesting that the tools the postcolonial author has at her disposal for novel-making are implicated in the very problems they

represent, and thus cannot remain apart from the text. But we can also see how the narrator's complicity in producing this over-stuffed fictional world—in which language and storytelling cannot be extricated from their material consequences—redounds onto the reader. Like Huggan's understanding of the novel's "*meta*-exoticism," which is "designed to trap the unwary reader into complicity with the Orientalisms of which the novel so hauntingly relates," the novel's manufacture of matter relies on the reader's experience of the fictional world in order to count.

When everything matters, the volume of textual clutter that accumulates seems pathological, recalling Winterson's collector of dead things. That similarity is heightened by the ominous images of cupboards and closets that arise throughout the novel, having first appeared in connection with Murlidharan and the woman on the train. In Chacko's rooms, "Cupboards were dangerous to open because clothes and books and shoes would cascade down and some of his books were heavy enough to inflict real damage" (232). After Sophie dies, "Like a child touched by tragedy, who grows up suddenly and abandons his playthings, Chacko dumped his toys. Pickle Baron dreams and the People's War joined the racks of broken airplanes in his glass-paned cupboard" (266). Nothing disappears in *The God of Small Things*—what's thrown away rematerializes in Velutha's shack or clogging up the river—which is as much a psychic difficulty for its characters as it is a narrative quagmire for its readers. Cupboards become imaginative sites where the characters store their petrified tragedies, a motion that comes to take the place of narrative progression: instead of the forward-moving trajectory of grieving and healing, cupboards point to a narrative of scarring and accumulation. Loss accrues, and festers.

The proliferating cupboards, spaces that store trauma, are versions of the Ayemenem House itself, which becomes clear as the closets swell in Estha and Rahel's imaginations to the size of houses. The twins learn: "Some things come with their own punishments. Like bedrooms

with built-in cupboards. They would all learn more about punishments soon. That they came in different sizes. That some were so big they were like cupboards with built-in bedrooms. You could spend your whole life in them, wandering through dark shelving" (109). After the fallout of Velutha's death, "They only asked for punishments that fitted their crimes. Not ones that came like cupboards with built-in bedrooms. Not ones you spent your whole life in, wandering through its maze of shelves" (309). Loss and punishment come to count too much, threatening to consume the characters. In yet another doubling that reflects both the local and the global, the Ayemenem House, so cluttered with personal meaning, mirrors the abandoned estate across the river, which the twins name the History House. It once belonged to Kari Saipu, an "Englishman who had 'gone native,'" "Ayemenem's own Kurtz" (51). Just as the History House bears the accumulated wealth of violent colonial history—once a rubber plantation, it is where Kari Saipu shoots himself; it is where the twins watch Velutha get beaten to death; and, when Rahel returns to Ayemenem as an adult, she discovers that it has been converted into a luxury resort for tourists—so too does the Ayemenem House become a space where a more personal, familial history condenses and collects and quietly metastasizes.

We face, at this point, an overwhelming accumulation of stuff. Objects, bodies, language, loss, narrative, space, perception, emotion, all of it takes on material presence, so that the weight of the novel is extraordinary. The problem, I propose, is one of *mattering* or *counting*, a term which is similarly deployed and similarly multivalent in the novel. As children, Estha watches his mother as she sleeps, and questions her when she wakes:

> "If you're happy in a dream, Ammu, does that count?" Estha asked.
>
> "Does what count?"
>
> "The happiness—does it count?"

> She knew exactly what he meant, her son with his spoiled puff.
>
> Because the truth is, that only what *counts* counts.
>
> The simple, unswerving wisdom of children. (208)

The novel dismisses an ontological answer for one that is more phenomenological. Counting is not a mode of existence but comes from an experience of something. In many ways this passage is Roy's version of Winterson's fruit cake, Tidhar's untouched beds and undisturbed bathtubs, McCarthy's things thinging, or Ní Dhuibhne's persistent books: even in fiction—represented here by the dream—things (objects, feelings, etc.) are able to assume a presence or being that extends beyond the bounds of that fiction.

Yet there is also something both dangerously anarchic and frustratingly tautological about Roy's formulation. What is the value of counting? What are the consequences? The uncertainty introduced in the sentence that immediately follows this passage adds urgency to these questions: "If you eat fish in a dream, does it count? Does it mean you've eaten fish" (208)? Who decides what counts? Unlike the other novelists in this dissertation, Roy does not locate the apparatuses for determining what counts in the author or artist but rather in the reader or perceiver, leaving the text open to an uncontrollable torrent of counting—which is another way of describing the weight of the text. There are democratic upshots to this construction of counting and mattering, as in the bracingly tender moment, when Ammu and Velutha first come together: "He folded his fear into a perfect rose. He held it out in the palm of his hand. She took it from him and put it in her hair" (319). But in a novel whose characters are as vulnerable as those in *The God of Small Things*, the reader must wonder about the possible costs that come with counting.

And there is a political danger to counting, in the sense of *that which can be counted*. When objects, characters, and language matter or count—in both substance and significance—they become susceptible to exploitation. As the narrator of *The Unnamable* puts it: "I'm tired of being matter, matter, pawed and pummelled endlessly in vain" (Beckett 341). Here I introduce Michael Valdez Moses's as-yet unpublished work based on the anthropologist James C. Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed*, from which he adopts Scott's concept of geographic "shatter zones," spaces that are effectively ungovernable by nation-states. Shatter zones have terrain (mountains, swamps, woods) that make them difficult to tax, conscript, conquer, or census; they feature a deliberate loss of writing technology and the return to retrograde farming and harvesting practices; their populations create fluid histories that join disconnected people in plastic mobile groups; and so on. What unites these features is that they are all strategies people adopt to avoid being counted. Moses illustrates how Kafka, Beckett, and Coetzee use similar techniques to make anarchic, non-state spaces in literature, but reading *The God of Small Things* instead draws our attention to how literary language, novel form, and political demands collaborate to make things count. By the end of the book, we discover that the experiences of Estha, Rahel, Ammu, and Velutha collectively testify to a *tragedy of counting*.

The characters adopt various strategies in attempts to avoid counting. Velutha, an Untouchable, seems as though he should escape notice; his imperceptibility is built into his caste. The narrator recalls how in the old days, Untouchables "were expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their footprints so that Brahmins or Syrian Christians would not defile themselves by accidentally stepping into a Paravan's footprint" (71). Yet Velutha's transgression is one of touching; when he has sex with Ammu, he crosses a border that makes both of their bodies visible, and thus accountable to the state, in ways they otherwise were not—and, in the

process, tying one perceived impropriety to another: his unacceptable skillfulness. Rahel, for a time, is able to escape counting by falling outside gendered expectations: "Without anybody to arrange a marriage for her" or who would "pay her dowry," Rahel has no "obligatory husband looming on the horizon," which gives her a certain degree of freedom: "So as long as she wasn't noisy about it, she remained free to make her own enquiries: into breasts and how much they hurt. Into falsehair buns and how well they burned. Into life and how it ought to be lived" (18).

But it is Estha who works the hardest to avoid being counted. As an adult,

> …he had acquired the ability to blend into the background of wherever he was—into bookshelves, gardens, curtains, doorways, streets—to appear inanimate, almost invisible to the untrained eye. It usually took strangers awhile to notice him even when they were in the same room with him. It took them even longer to notice that he never spoke. Some never noticed at all.
>
> Estha occupied very little space in the world. (12)

Traumatized by his experiences as a child, Estha spends the rest of his life trying to escape notice. This self-effacement is prefigured in his childhood notebook: "On the front of the book, Estha had rubbed out his surname with spit, and had taken half the paper with it. Over the whole mess he had written in pencil *Un-known*. Esthappen Unknown" (149). These attempts not to count fail; there are no quiet, unseen corners of the book where he can hide. Diverging from critical consensus, I argue that the novel's dialectic between the big and small does not actually lead to balance but rather—as Roy herself suggests—the tragic imbalance of these terms.[34] The novel becomes too crowded for the small or slight; when everything is made matter/to matter, when everything counts/is countable, the only possible space of sanctuary is the un-narrated one. That impossible space outside counting is a Beckettian one; for the narrator of *The Unnamable*,

who always threatens to disappear into nothingness, "That's his strength, his only strength, that he understands nothing, can't take thought, doesn't know what they want, doesn't know they are there, feels nothing, ah but just a moment, he feels, he suffers, the noise makes him suffer," and so on (353). The novel moves closer and closer to the border of the insensate, which promises some form of escape, but in narrating that withdrawal language continues, and the subject returns.

The dual nature of literary objects—their discursiveness and materiality—often allows them to escape control.[35] But to *count* or *matter* combines the semantic and physical, so that in *The God of Small Things*, objects are completely caught up in the narrative machinery. Neither the reader nor the characters have secret purchase on objects; there is no dissonance between their material and discursive components. The consequences of such an object world are most visible in the aftermath of Velutha's murder. We discover that it is not only Estha and Rahel who witness the killing, but also the "Essential Provisions" that Estha squirrels away in the History House when he and Rahel flee home: "matches, potatoes, a battered saucepan, an inflatable goose, socks with multicolored toes, ballpoint pens with London buses and the Qantas koala with loosened button eyes" (276). After the police beat Velutha, they look around and see these objects:

> The pots and pans.
>
> The inflatable goose.
>
> The Qantas koala with loosened button eyes.
>
> The ballpoint pens with London's streets in them. (295)

The list goes on, and the policemen realize that the evidence tells a different story from theirs. clearly Velutha did not abduct the children. But the policemen "knew what they had to do," and

proceed to steal or destroy the objects; when they leave, it is with “pockets stuffed with toys” (295). Estha and Rahel are left alone; the narrator remarks: “Nobody saw them” (296). The policemen recognize how objects matter, how the toys’ physical presence testifies to a story they do not want told. And so, because they matter, these objects can be tampered with, suppressed. In the moment objects should matter most in the novel, they fail.

The failure of objects coincides with the failure of speech. To cover for her false testimony that led to Velutha’s death, Baby Kochamma coerces Estha to identify Velutha as his abductor:

> The Inspector asked his question. Estha’s mouth said Yes.
>
> Childhood tiptoed out.
>
> Silence slid in like a bolt. (303)

Like the evidentiary objects, language counts for too much in this moment, both in the sense that it produces serious consequences in the world and also that it can be manipulated. The entanglement of discourse and matter manifests in how thick language suddenly becomes: “Yes” is more thing than word, and the embodiment of “childhood” and “silence” only deepens Estha’s dispossession. These are not two parallel failures, but one. Unlike in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, objects and object-like language cannot provide alternatives to the world as it is, because they constitute and are constituted by it. If other authors in this dissertation play on the fictional object’s language/matter dialectic to produce closeness, distance, polyphony, instability, coherence, and so on, Roy uses it as an indictment, showing how objects participate in repressive discourse and language produces violent material consequences. This is something we already know about the world, but by literalizing the entanglement of matter and language, the novel makes it something the reader experiences about the world.

*

The Novel at the End of the Sensible

If being read exposes one to counting, any alternative to the world as it is would have to be insensate. It would involve a narrator who cannot see or does not hear, for whom the events of the novel are illegible. This is a possibility Roy invokes in the margins of *The God of Small Things*. After Velutha's murder, when the narrator remarks of the twins that "Nobody saw them," there is, in fact, a final sentence in the chapter: "Bats, of course, are blind" (296). In brief glimpses, Roy hints at pocket universes that exist outside the novel's tragic arc. We see such a world when the children first discover an old boat and flip it over:

> A gray old boatplant with boatflowers and boatfruit. And underneath, a boat-shaped patch of withered grass. A scurrying, hurrying boatworld.
>
> Dark and dry and cool. Unroofed now. And blind.
>
> White termites on their way to work.
>
> White ladybirds on their way home.
>
> White beetles burrowing away from the light.
>
> White grasshoppers with whitewood violins.
>
> Sad white music.
>
> A white wasp. Dead. (193)

The boat becomes an important prop in the novel's tragedy—it ferries Ammu to Velutha, it carries Estha and Rahel away from home, it tips Sophie Mol into the river—but before it is reclaimed by the narrative, it belongs to a universe that is entirely removed from the novel's events. The insects of the "boatworld" are indifferent to plot; their chthonic whiteness marks them as apart from Roy's richly colored landscapes and their blindness links them to the

similarly unseeing bat. By attaching the "boat-" prefix to the plants, flowers, and fruits of this space, the novel creates a world apart, but one that lacks any potential for recuperation.

When the police trek through the woods to apprehend Velutha at the History House, "Crimson dragonflies mated in the air. Doubledeckered. Deft. One admiring policeman watched and wondered briefly about the dynamics of dragonfly sex, and what went into what. Then his mind clicked to attention and Police Thoughts returned" (289). The inscrutable lives of insects offer, if only for a brief moment, an alternative logic to the violent order of "Police Thoughts;" curiosity about dragonfly sex distracts from the business of policing the sex of Ammu and Velutha, which, unlike the insect coupling, is all-too-comprehensible. When Rahel returns to the Ayemenem House, she explores the study of her grandfather, who was a famous entomologist for the Raj: "On the top shelf, the leather binding on Pappachi's set of *The Insect Wealth of India* had lifted off each book and buckled like corrugated asbestos. Silverfish tunneled through the pages, burrowing arbitrarily from species to species, turning organized information into yellow lace" (148-9). It is a striking image: the material embodiment of imperial knowledge becomes recolonized by local fauna, turning order and information into abstract art, disregarding category or classification. Insect life, this humming and buzzing and gnawing and burrowing around the periphery of the text, stands apart from official forms of knowledge and power. It resists accounting, which in the above image involves ingesting any physical record. Unlike Robin's long-lasting books in *The Bray House*, which point to the novel's circulation in the world, here the book consumes itself, gesturing, perhaps, to a future in which *The God of Small Things un-matters* itself.

These interruptions are not specifically about bugs and bats and the strange position they occupy between objects and humans. Plants work in similar ways: they overwhelm Baby

Kochamma's orderly garden, the Ayemenem House, the History House, and the old Plymouth in the yard. The "boatworld" passage echoes an earlier one: after Estha is assaulted, he goes to the bathroom of the movie theater to vomit. As he peers down into the toilet, he sees "a brownwebbed mesh of hairline cracks, like the road map of some great, intricate city." He tries to throw up, but nothing comes out except thoughts: "And they floated out and floated back in. … They hovered like storm clouds over the Basin City. But the basin men and basin women went about their usual basin business. Basin cars, and basin buses still whizzed around. Basin Life went on" (103). These small, alien worlds appear not just in nature but in the cracks and crevices all around the characters. When they emerge, the mood of their inhabitants is one of indifference. If to count/matter ropes things into a narrative present in which they exist inescapably and fully, indifference lets things lie, uninterpolated into the text.

The books ends by dangling the possibility that human and non-human worlds might converge. When Ammu and Velutha meet in the History House, night after night, they keep to the Small Things. "The Big Things ever lurked inside. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things" (320). They take delight in the natural world around them: overturned beetles and clumsy caterpillars, a devout praying mantis. But they take particular interest in

> the minute spider who lived in a crack in the wall of the back verandah of the History House and camouflaged himself by covering his body with bits of rubbish—a sliver of wasp wing. Part of a cobweb. Dust. Leaf rot. The empty thorax of a dead bee. *Chappu Thamburan*, Velutha called him. Lord Rubbish. One night they contributed to his wardrobe—a flake of garlic skin—and were deeply offended when he rejected it along with the rest of his armor from which he emerged—disgruntled, naked, snot-colored. As

> though he deplored their taste in clothes. For a few days he remained in this suicidal state of disdainful undress. The rejected shell of garbage stayed standing, like an outmoded world-view. An antiquated philosophy. Then it crumbled. Gradually *Chappu Thamburan* acquired a new ensemble. (320)

Ammu and Velutha seem to escape the strictures of their lives by linking "their fates, their futures (their Love, their Madness, their Hope, their Infinnate Joy)" to the spider's. "They checked on him every night (with growing panic as time went by) to see if he had survived the day. They fretted over his frailty. His smallness. The adequacy of his camouflage. His seemingly self-destructive pride" (320-1).

Chappu Thamburan seems to offer a different mode of being-in-the-world than is available to Ammu or Velutha: he gathers objects but is quick to discard them, his home is mobile and materially unstable, he is self-reliant and adaptable, and the logic behind his ritualistic scrounging is incomprehensible to outsiders—in other words, he resists counting. He is a figure of hope for the lovers because of his slightness and his strangeness. "They chose him because they knew that they had to put their faith in fragility. Stick to Smallness" (321). But the moment cannot last; it was only ever a fantasy that the lovers projected onto an indifferent spider. The last moment of the novel is a scene of *méconnaissance*: Ammu and Velutha are wrong about *Chappu Thamburan*, who "outlived Velutha," "fathered future generations," and "died of natural causes" (321). The novel's ending is a consummation of its ironic pessimism.

The inhuman stirring and murmuring in the margins of *The God of Small Things* point to the limits of the novel. What falls outside the relationship between the perceiving subject and the material world falls outside the novel. In Roy's fictional world, if no one hears a tree fall in a forest, then there is no tree, no forest. Consider, in *Mrs. Dalloway*, the moment early in the novel

when an airplane flies over London, uniting the crowds below, even as they are unable to agree on the message it spells in the sky. After this baroque entanglement of humans, text, objects, and reading, the plane turns away, leaving London behind:

> …away and away it went, fast and fading, away and away the aeroplane shot; soaring over Greenwich and all the masts; over the little island of grey churches, St. Paul's and the rest till, on either side of London, fields spread our and dark brown woods where adventurous thrushes hopping boldly, glancing quickly, snatched the snail and tapped him on a stone, once, twice, thrice. (28)

The plane stretches the bounds of the novel, affording this glimpse of life outside ourselves; but then the narrative snaps back, the plane is gone, and the reader is returned to the very-human business of planning a dinner party. The solemn tapping and gnomic syntax in the woods seem full of meaning but remain inscrutable; like the hints of other worlds in *The God of Small Things*, there is no way to make sense of the scene.

Sara Ahmed's appeal, in *Queer Phenomenology*, was to make things "'matter' in our reading." This is, at it turns out, a complicated proposition. We have less control over what matters than we might like. We are conscripted by the text into complex systems of relation; though agency is distributed across these actors, it is rarely even. When we do make things matter within the novel—when we comply with the text and see the death of Sophie Mol as "a quiet thing in sock" stepping "softly around the Ayemenem House"—we risk feeling uncomfortably like collaborators, abetting the novel's punishment of characters with whom we sympathize. This may be the point—that in *The God of Small Things*, Roy produces in the reader something like her own experience of being "terrified of the place where [she] grew up;" or, conversely, that in *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*, Winterson replicates an attention to and

facility with objects that enables the growth of an artist. Just as for the characters a politics emerges in the forms of relation they are afforded by objects, the reader, in the difference between these two experiences, finds political possibilities in what ways she is enabled, invited, coerced, or exploited as a participant in the making and remaking of the fictional world.

Notes to Introduction

[1] The volume's effect was similar to that of *The Social Life of Things*, in which Arjun Appadurai urged materialist critics to "follow the things themselves" and expand their purview beyond Marxian commodity fetishism (5).

[2] To clarify: I do not subscribe to the philosophical distinction between "thing" and "object" in my writing. Novelists tend to use these two words interchangeably, so in practical terms, it seems unproductive to register a divide where my subjects see none. More importantly, the Heideggerian distinction between object (*gegenstand*), as stable, knowable, and functional, and thing (*ding*), as incomplete, processual, and preceding or exceeding human understanding, makes little sense when applied to literature. All literary objects are simultaneously reducible to their appearance, as products of human cognition and perception, and, because of the play between language and matter, unknowable and unstable. In other words, the difference between objects and things is moot when literary objects are immediately comprehensible and legible, *and* withdrawn and strange. Suggesting otherwise—and importing terms that make sense in our world into the novel without considering what is changed by fiction—reproduces the very problems this dissertation seeks out to redress. I tend to use "object" throughout this project for clarity, and because of my indebtedness to other object-oriented discourses. For similar reasons, critical conversations around "stuff," "clutter," and "hoarding" have little sway over this project. Though a number of scholars have done important work on representations of clutter and hoarding in literature, scenes of undifferentiated stuff have little relation to individuated and meaningful objects. Because the representation of literary objects is so tied up in the nature of the thing itself, if a narrative were to describe each object in a clutter or pile, it would cease, in some important ways, to be clutter.

[3] Explaining, perhaps, why its practitioners, including Bill Brown, are primarily historicist scholars of 18th- and 19th-century realist novels. The ways in which thing theory is restricted by the kinds of texts and objects that it sees as meaningful limit not only what it can say about objects and novels, but what objects and novels it can say things about.

[4] This latter point is one Jane Bennett makes in her response to Harman and Morton in *New Literary History*: perhaps, as Tim Morton suggests, there is no reason to elevate certain kinds of matter—here "lava lamp fluidity"—"*if*, that is, we are capable of transcending the provincial, prohuman-conatus perspective from which we apprehend the world" (229). The implication, of course, is that we are not.

[5] Chief among its drawbacks is new materialism's stress on matter as *stuff*, rather than discreet objects. Because the "materialism" in new materialism refers to a substratum matter that ties together persons, objects, worlds—distinct from Marx's materialism, more a "socialism," "a general model of the causal force of the socioeconomic moments of the social whole" (Frow 33)—it signals a focus on networks and change at the expense of the object-*qua*-object.

[6] Schor's work has particular relevance in my third chapter, where I discuss the gendering of object-oriented criticism and the role objects play in gendered experience: "Viewed as congenitally (rather than culturally) particularistic, the woman artist is doubly condemned to produce inferior works of art: because of her close association with nature, she cannot but replicate it. The law of the genre is that women are by nature mimetic, incapable of creating significant works of art in nonrepresentational art forms" (Schor 17).

[7] I am intrigued by the similarities between literary objects and the "deviant" objects of OOO, which "exist in difference from themselves" because they are "riven from within between what they are and how they appear" (Morton, "All Objects Are Deviant" 73). Because of this internal

rift, deviant objects irreducible; literary objects are similarly unexhausted by an elaboration of their relations.

[8] Bill Brown captures the vertiginous quality of the relation between book and its objects—his study "[objectifies] literary texts so that they become for us objects of knowledge about physical objects" (*A Sense of Things* 18)—even as he elsewhere diminishes the importance of the book's materiality, which must be elided "on behalf of providing access to its represented world, the world residing somehow within, somewhere beyond, the printed page" ("The Matter of Materialism" 60).

Notes to Chapter One

[9] The role of trauma is curious in both novels. Several scholars have written compellingly about the trauma in *Remainder*—rightly pointing out the difficulty describing trauma without a coherent subject and then doing so anyway (Vermeulen; Byatt). I see the traumatic events which open both novels as necessary sparks for genre engines—we need a body to initiate an investigation—and yet the word does not fit easily on subjects who are so emptied of interiority.

[10] Here, as elsewhere, organic and biological processes are described in material terms. "In this day and age, nerve repair might more aptly be described in terms of networks; the materially minded narrator likens it to land, train tracks, floods. Transportation—cars, planes, the Tube—and telephone wires also offer figures for cognition" (Serpell 232).

[11] Another of these moments occurs when the narrator installs swings into the courtyard of his apartment building: "I hadn't seen swings in my original vision of the courtyard—but they'd grown there later, as I thought about it further: a concrete patch with swings on and a wooden podium a few feet to its right" (122). The reenactments are designed from the narrator's memory, and memory is one of the ways in which we perceive the narrator as a continuous, thinking self.

But the pattern-seeking reader remembers the image of the swings from earlier in the book, when the narrator asks his once-lover Catherine, "What's the most intense, clear memory you have" (75)? She responds: "It's when I was a child. In Park Ridge, where I grew up, just outside Chicago. There were swings, these swings, on concrete, with a lawn around them. And there was a raised podium, a wooden deck, a few feet to the swings' right" (75-6). The suggestion is both that Catherine's memory is interpolated into the narrator's, but also that personal memory, part of what constitutes a self, is transitive, or dislocated; the memory of the swings resides somewhere in the unconscious of the book, in the structure, rather than in the mind of an individual.

[12] Serge's collapse into the repeating CC echoes another collapse in McCarthy's writing. When Zinedine Zidane head-butts Materazzi, he sees "themselves compressing, *ZZ* tight against *ZZ*, then springing back and spacing out again. It is perhaps the most decisive rite typography has been accorded in our era" ("Nothing" 235).

[13] Comparing McCarthy to modernists with similar projects, Amanda Claybaugh writes, "For where Musil and Doblin decentered protagonists in order to put a network of relations in their place, McCarthy simply leaves an absence that reminds us of the self that has been lost" (180). I argue that not only does McCarthy maintain some version of self, but that his construction of such a subject is very much in the tradition of modernists such as Musil. Consider this passage from *The Man Without Qualities*: "For the inhabitant of a country has at least nine characters: a professional, a national, a civic, a class, a geographic, a sexual, a conscious, an unconscious, and possibly even a private character to boot. He unites them in himself, but they dissolve him, so that he is really nothing more than a small basin hollowed out by these many streamlets that trickle into it and drain out of it again, to join other such rills in filling some other basin. Which

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is why every inhabitant of the earth also has a tenth character that is nothing else than the passive fantasy of spaces yet unfilled" (30). If other modernists saw the fragmentation of self and society as an opportunity to imagine new forms of cohesion, it is hard to imagine reintegration in Musil's writing—and the same goes for McCarthy.

[14] This accords with Theodore Martin's recent writing on contemporary novels that use the form of detective fiction. He argues that the pleasure in the detective plot come not from the ending, but the waiting: "The essence of the genre must lie elsewhere, not in the ending, but in the temporal distance *between* reading and ending—in the built-in delay that makes the reader wait" (100).

Notes to Chapter Two

[15] Ní Dhuibhne here echoes Einstein's response to a reporter when asked what would happen if Arthur Eddington disproved his theory of relativity: "I would have felt sorry for the dear Lord. The theory is correct" (McKie). Robin, then, asserts the absolute validity of her narrative in the same terms as theoretical physics.

[16] We might also consider another flow of bodies across the Irish border: to circumvent Ireland's strict laws, "over 158,252 women have had to make the journey to the UK to access abortion" since 1980 (Hennessy).

[17] As has been the practice of most critics of the novel. It is certainly the case that Robin "might be considered a model for the unreliable narrator" (Fulmer 86), which in turn "reinforces the suspect, often compromised project of 'documenting culture'" (Wightman 174); but where the extremity of Robin's unreliability should pique our curiosity—what is revealed in the production and failures of such an outsized narrative voice?—the allure of the unreliable narrator proves powerful in Ní Dhuibhne scholarship. Most of the critical writing on *The Bray House* reproduces

Robin's failings, accepting the faulty subject as the focus rather than peering around Robin to excavate what she cannot.

[18] By deferring resolution, *The Bray House* enters a tradition of novels that seem to transcend or resist the anthropological. *Heart of Darkness* is not the seventeen pages Kurtz writes in his report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs—though "a beautiful piece of writing" (155)—and *Things Fall Apart* is more than a chapter—"Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate" (209)—in the District Commissioner's study, *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. All three narratives emphasize the egalitarian possibilities of form by dramatizing their material lives—the novel, in performing its own production, circulation, and reception, lets in the unofficial stories that need telling—but *The Bray House* limits such utopian hopes by allowing Robin's voice to be the one that perseveres, and not those of the MacHughs.

[19] It is no coincidence that a significant number of thing theorists are scholars of the nineteenth-century social realist novel. What works for those texts does not necessarily hold for contemporary, speculative, or non-Anglophone fictions.

Notes to Chapter Three

[20] One effect is that these materialist theories exclude women and feminist writing. Foremost among the critics who have pointed to the gender (and race) problems in OOO and speculative realism is Sara Ahmed, who, regularly tweeting at the handle @feministkilljoy, writes "Interesting that: the post-human seems as white as the human," and, "why not wonder why the agency of the non-human has come to matter when we are dealing with the costs of human agency!" There are a number of ways of describing this deficit in concrete and institutional terms: published articles about objects by women authors tend to be about collecting, curating,

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and affect, particularly in domestic settings, suggesting that female scholars' participation in these new materialisms is bound by traditional gender roles. The literary texts that appear as examples in articles and books about objects tend to be authored by men—and here we will want to look back critically at Tom McCarthy and Simon Critchley, who elevate figures like Pound, Rilke, Ponge, Williams, Stevens, Blanchot, and Robbe-Grillet without once mentioning, say, Lowell, H.D., Stein, de Beauvoir, or Duras. And women authors of object-oriented criticism are severely underrepresented in graduate-level classes on object-oriented subjects: in my rudimentary survey of graduate-class syllabuses related to new materialisms that were accessible online, women authors made up 5-20% of the assigned reading.

[21] Relatedly, Patrick Murphy shows how an ecofeminist literary criticism could "more productively imagine responsible human behavior through working out the implications of a theory of *volitional interdependence* among human and nonhuman alike" (Murphy 150).

[22] This project is intelligible not only through feminist critical thought, but also what Winterson owes to a tradition of women novelists for whom the novel has proved rich territory for rethinking female subjectivity through objects. No predecessor asserts her presence more than Virginia Woolf—a debt Jeanette Winterson acknowledges when she writes of Woolf: "Here she is and here she was, of private ancestors, the most complete" ("Psychometry" 131). Woolf regularly upsets the bounds of subject and object, but she also marks the particular qualities of fiction of knowledge that are necessary for but also get caught up in such confusion. The resultant literature is potentially anti-hierarchical, showing "how texts as discursive environments can constitute models for a symbiotic rather than ecologically competitive coexistence, where cooperation replaces hierarchy and value dualisms" (Kostkowska 6). And yet there is something more there. In the story "Solid Objects," Woolf writes: "Looked at again and

again half consciously by a mind thinking of something else, any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it" (82). In moments like this, Woolf makes it impossible to read for objects without elaborating upon the conglomerations of actors that coalesce around them: the creation of the author, the work of the reader, the play of language and matter on the page, the publication of the book, and so on. Objects do not matter in a vacuum; by demanding that we "*look at* rather than *overlook* [objects]," Woolf drags into the picture the ecosystem in which the production of text occurs (Lloyd 121).

[23] Winterson has written: "My parents owned six books between them. Two of those were Bibles and the third was a concordance to the Old and New Testaments. The fourth was *The House at Pooh Corner*. The fifth, *The Chatterbox Annual 1923* and the sixth, Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*" ("Art and Life" 153).

[24] This argument relies on a continual loop between *object* and *orientation*: the subject's stance towards the material world produces the object, which in turn, after interpolating that orientation into its structure, recommends certain ways the subject might orient herself to it**.** This circuit models a literary version of something like Alphonso Lingis's concept of the imperative from *The Imperative*, or James J. Gibson's use of affordance that he elaborates in *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, both of which might be understood as Heideggerian. For example: built into a doorknob are suggestions for how we are meant to arrange ourselves when we interface with it—we know that we should hold it in our hand and turn it, rather than try to lick it. Of course, we *can* lick doorknobs if we are so inclined, whereas in novels, all objects are produced by discourse, and thus are inured to certain physical forms of misuse and

misappropriation. However, fictional objects are subject to a different kind of hacking. If language modulates the production of the material world, then emphasizing language's physical or material properties makes it accessible to Jeanette.

[25] In another example, Jeanette plays with a collage of Noah's ark, getting "delight [from] a detachable chimpanzee, made out of a Brillo pad; at the end of my visit [I played] with it for five minutes. I had all kinds of variations, but usually I drowned it" (22-3).

[26] It is also the case that this missionary zeal sometimes backfires. One of the objects Pastor Spratt sends the family is a Missionary Map: "On the front were all the countries and on the back a number chart that told you about Tribes and their Peculiarities. My favourite was Number 16, *The Buzule of Carpathian*. They believed that if a mouse found your hair clippings and built a nest with them you got a headache. If the nest was big enough, you might go mad. As far as I knew no missionary had yet visited them" (2). The intent of this document is to make alien other worldviews, but instead, it seems to give Jeanette an understanding that outside her community, people have radically different relationships between subjects and objects.

[27] We might connect this sentiment back once again to Ahmed, who in 2016 resigned her academic post at Goldsmiths and wrote that "Resignation is a feminist issue."

[28] When I have taught the novel, students become set on figuring out the meaning of the oranges—surely they are important: they're in the title!

[29] Towards the novel's end, Jeanette adds imaginary people to our already cluttered universe: "If a potter has an idea, she makes it into a pot, and it exists beyond her, in its own separate life. She uses a physical substance to display her thoughts. If I use a metaphysical substance to display my thoughts, I might be anywhere at one time, influencing a number of different things, just as the potter and her pottery can exert influence in different places. There's a chance that I'm not here

at all, that all the parts of me, running along the choices I did and didn't make, for a moment brush against each other. That I am still an evangelist in the North, as well as the person who ran away. Perhaps for a while these two selves have become confused. I have not gone forward or back in time, but across in time, to something I might have been, playing itself out" (174).

[30] I am reminded of Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who!*, in which Horton the Elephant believes that an entire world exists on a speck of dust, enduring physical hardship and public ridicule in his efforts to protect this microscopic universe.

[31] In her introduction to *Object-Oriented Feminism*, Katherine Behar makes clear that "the 'object' in object-oriented feminism connects with past and present engagements and experiments including nonanthropocentric art practices, queer/postcolonial/feminist critiques of objectification and marginalization, and psychoanalytic critiques of relation" (10). Like feminist theory, postcolonial theory has shied away from—or been left out of—the material turn, and like in feminist theory, we can number the ways postcolonial theory has always been object-oriented. For obvious reasons—chief among them the need to account for the commodification of colonial labor—the strongest object-oriented work to come out of the field continues to operate primarily within a Marxist paradigm, though a number of scholars have begun to explore how historical materialisms intersect with new materialisms. We might think here of someone like Malcolm Sen, who excavates the particular material conditions of empire—say, how Irish lumber was used to build the English ships that enabled the Indian colonial enterprise—to see the costs and consequences of British imperialism as ecological, social, and political, and reveal how attitudes towards objects shaped certain kinds of colonial subjectivity. But postcolonial theory has never had its OOPT. And similarities and differences between how Winterson and Roy envision

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objects and materiality in their novels point to the complicated ways in which feminist and postcolonial concerns about objects fail to map onto one another.

[32] In a strange coincidence, both Tom McCarthy's *C* and Roy's *The God of Small Things* rely on the play between "insect" and "incest;" though these works are as different as can be, they share investments in recursive narrative and human/non-human entanglement.

[33] I have found no criticism that considers *The God of Small Things* through the lens of disability, but it seems to me that Roy's representation of these characters is ultimately problematic; she is at times cavalier, if not downright gleeful, in her willingness to dismember minor characters to make a point.

[34] Most accounts maintains that the novel employs various strategies of resistance to protect the small things from the large forces that dominate the novel. For some scholars this is evident in the book's nonlinearity, so that "a different time sense is important for small things to matter" (George 182). For others, Roy's insistence of big and small as a dialectic puts them into balance, in which case "no act of rebellious agency can exist that is not circumscribed by forces of oppression, but no oppression exists that cannot be challenged, that will simply stamp out all traces of the small" (Jani 205). For others still, resistance is embedded in the kind of materiality I discuss, where the Ayemenem House's "ability to hold memories and a personal history at odds with official accounts—a small-scale, personal reflection of public life" (Upstone 73). Even as she acknowledges that the home becomes "a space where the oppressions of the outside are magnified" (73), Upstone insists that it remains "a potential site of spiritual transformation and resistance, overturning its patriarchal connotations without reducing it to an idealized structure" (74). The assertion by critics of the recuperative potential of literature, and particularly

postcolonial literature, demands that the novel's destructive forces be countered, however obliquely or latently, which leads to a semblance of balance and not, I suspect, balance itself.

[35] As we saw in *The Bray House*, focusing on just one aspect of objects (in that instance, the informative), allows some other aspect (the material) to go free and undermine narrative control.

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