Articulating Matter:
New Materialisms in Contemporary American Fiction

by

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for Allen

though you’ve left this world, you will always persist in the many things you left behind
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And finally, thanks to my dad, for showing me the wonders of ashtrays, marbles, books, urinals, and the innumerable other objects large and small that will never fail to bring me joy. And thank you, mom, for knowing when to throw them away.
It’s the fact of
this room: what’s there
to say within the day’s shape.

Sky divides to frame
a version of
a world.

Where we are:
where we’re not.

Sun, a clipped syllable
drawn over
what weather’s
disfigured.

Ice on the field
recedes. Something—

silver cellophane trash—
flares in the monochrome.

A kind of dream language
attenuates our per-
ception. How

the landscape lists

into chain-link,
parking lot, objects
barely held to their names.

Joseph Massey, “January Sheaf”
INTRODUCTION
Making Sense of the Material

Last summer, I found myself on an expedition to a century-old industrial landfill in southern Brooklyn they call Dead Horse Bay. After two hour-long bus rides that wound down through the Crown Heights, East Flatbush, Flatlands, and Marine Park neighborhoods, my companion and I stepped off at a grassy road-side clearing home to little more than a bus stop sign. A sparse trail cut into the marshy, bush-filled landscape, leading us to a sandy berm perched above the bay’s bent, crescent beach. Once a dumping ground for horse carcasses rendered by nearby glue factories, Dead Horse Bay was converted into a repository for general industrial waste in the mid-twentieth century. It didn’t take long, however, for the landfill to burst open, spilling trash onto the beach and into the bay. The shore is covered in half-submerged things, material objects able to weather a half-century of salty tides and sandy erosion. Jars, bottles, shoes, pipes, ceramic tiles, glass shards, and metal scraps inundate the marshy landscape, many of them remnants of homes leveled by Robert Moses during his mid-century modernizing tear through the neighborhoods of New York City. The detritus is everywhere; in certain spots, it’s difficult to find sand to step on.

The force of the material world was overwhelming. Meandering through the rubble of artifacts, I found it impossible not to imagine the kitchen cabinets in which these objects once sat, the people who walked daily on tiles now scattered across the bay’s sand. Jars and plates begged to be delved into, to be imagined in the fullness of
the lives they once populated. Despite being submerged for a half-century within an abandoned dump, these objects shimmered with life. In this place, the indelible force of nature, too, was made starkly evident, the ocean, rain, sands, and other earthly materialities having worked to loosen the bay’s shores, allowing these discarded possessions to emerge into sight. The strange and shifting beauty of Dead Horse Bay was swiftly imprinted into my memory by the many unstable things at work in that small bend of the beach.

In my thesis, I set out to dwell a little longer on those enduring materialities as I tarry over novelistic representations of the world of things. I consider depictions of natural and manufactured materialities in three works of contemporary American fiction, novels published between 1988 and 2009. I examine Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*, and Leanne Shapton’s *Important Artifacts* for their varied investment in and attention to the material world. Though thoroughly distinct and radically different, each of these novels is deeply concerned with the active agency of matter conventionally deemed inert and passive. In these works, material objects and possessions hew and shape the subjectivities of their owners and users; natural forces powerfully affect and alter human life. Such lively things, however, become strangely unrepresentable, their active vitality resisting the language that holds them to the page. In the face of a vibrant material world, the language of words emerges starkly unable to relate the force of things lively and affecting. The novels I examine work to make sense of this problem of representation through formal experimentation, shifting and adapting the novelistic
form to better relate the liveliness of things and to become more adequate to the activity of matter. My analysis is driven by the insights of the new materialisms, a loosely defined, recent and emerging trend throughout a vast array of critical and theoretical disciplines that endeavors to dwell on and make sense of the material world.

This “material turn” in academic scholarship has precipitated an abundance of work theorizing matter. Despite the catch-all term that attempts to unify recent materially-invested work, the new materialisms have been importantly plural, theorizing matter in vastly different ways. Bill Brown’s literary “thing theory,” Object-oriented ontology’s philosophical work, Jane Bennett and William Connolly’s political theories, Karen Barad’s work in physics and science studies, and the feminist materialisms of Susan Hekman and Vicki Kirby, among others, theorize the material world in enormously varied fashions. Object-oriented ontology imagines materialities as distant and aloof, essentially unknowable by humans who attempt to theorize them. Bennett’s “vibrant materialism,” on the other hand, suggests that various materialities exist in continuous relation with one another, building systems of things in which matter is forcefully agential and powerfully constitutive. Barad’s work seeks to reformulate conceptions of agency using the insights of quantum physics in order to make sense of this active material power, and other new materialist feminisms work to understand the human body as a deeply material, not only social and cultural, assemblage. Although the terms “material turn” and “new materialism” work to helpfully make sense of this far-reaching phenomenon in recent scholarship, theorists
included in this “turn” often write against one another, their varied theories of the material deeply at odds.

Largely a reaction to the so-called “linguistic,” “social,” and “cultural” turns that preceded this movement toward the material, the various new materialisms have defined themselves largely in opposition to the socially- and culturally-driven work of the postmodern era. Stacy Alaimo, an editor of the seminal *Material Feminisms* collection, writes that “what has been most notably excluded by the ‘primacy of the cultural’ and the turn toward the linguistic and the discursive is the ‘stuff’ of matter.” The work of the material turn has largely stemmed from the feeling that physical materialities have been largely disregarded by scholarship of the latter half of the twentieth-century. As Karen Barad famously asserts, “there is an important sense in which the only thing that does not seem to matter anymore is matter.” However helpful and emancipatory culturally- and linguistically-oriented work has been, new materialist theory “challenges some of the key assumptions of social constructivism, particularly insofar as it insists that the agency, meaning, and value of nature all derive from cultural, social, or ideological inscription or construction.” This reaction has been, at times, swift. Graham Harman, a key theorist of object-oriented ontology, goes so far as to call the mutually-determining system theories against which he writes “Imperialism,” claiming that such work “has held the moral high ground in

philosophy for too long.” Unfortunately, such forcefully reactionary scholarship has often mischaracterized and grossly simplified the theoretical turns against which it has reacted, crafting a menacing straw man to decry. In their feminist new materialist work, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman take a more nuanced approach, urging us “to build on rather than abandon the lessons learned from the linguistic turn” in order to craft “a deconstruction of the material/discursive dichotomy that retains both elements without privileging either.” Despite the pitfalls that permeate any forceful and deliberate turn away from past scholarship, work in the new materialisms has proved extremely insightful in its push to theorize matter as “an agentic force that interacts with and changes the other elements in the mix, including the human.” This turn towards the material world has importantly urged us to consider the agency of things, to look more closely at the meaning-making power of nonhuman forces.

The best of this materially-invested work has found itself more, not less, interested in the workings of language and the ways in which words interact with and relate to physical materialities. Though I find object-oriented ontology and Jane Bennett’s vibrant materialism useful inasmuch as they forcefully prod at our basic presumptions about the passivity of the inert, both methods largely ignore the workings of language; their single-minded emphasis on the material world enacts a reactionary inversion of the very favoring of the immaterial which they heartily critique. More fruitful and profound has been new materialist work that engages with

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6 Ibid., 7.
language in an attempt to make sense of the complex, co-constitutive relationship between word and world. In her essay “Constructing the Ballast,” Susan Hekman argues for the need to remain attentive to the power of language while theorizing the material:

What we need is a conception that does not presuppose a gap between language and reality that must be bridged, that does not define the two as opposites. 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. Language interacts with other elements in this construction; there is more to the process than we originally thought. What we need is not a theory that ignores language as modernism did, but rather a more complex theory that incorporates language, materiality, and technology into that equation.7

In order to theorize the material as it emerges through the text of the novel, I find most useful the new materialist work that refuses to lose sight of the force of language. In my readings of the novelistic material, I gravitate towards the work of Karen Barad, N. Katherine Hayles, and Donna Haraway, theorists who attend to the complex, interwoven workings of both immaterial language and physical materialities. In doing so, I aim to consider the novelistic materialities in question as representations occurring always within language, within the word of the book.

In my first chapter, I examine Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine* (1988), a novel brimming with explosively magnified objects and material possessions. I argue that the novel’s close attention to the object world renders inert materialities lively and forceful, destabilizing the boundary between animate people and inanimate things. But as objects become increasingly vibrant, fluid, and indistinct from human experience, Howie, the book’s narrator, finds himself unable to put into words the

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fullness of their material reality. His copious lists of things perpetually fall short in their ability to represent the interdependent, intertwined material world. While digressive footnotes emerge able to reflect and enact the multifarious connections between things, the novel suggests a schism between material reality and the representational capacities of language.

In chapter two, I turn to Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), an encyclopedic narrative of indigenous American life and resistance throughout the continent’s 500 years under European colonial rule. I argue that the sickened world Silko depicts, an America on the brink of environmental and political collapse, has resulted from the violent objectification of both natural material forces and disenfranchised human lives. The novel, however, offers an alternative vision of human and nonhuman material reality, a deeply indigenous way-of-seeing that attends to the powerful agencies and distinct particularities of all things. I argue that *Almanac of the Dead* suggests a powerful reworking of our understanding of linguistic representation that remains deeply anchored to the material world while allowing for possibilities of radical political and societal change.

In my third chapter, I consider a more recent depiction of material objects in Leanne Shapton’s *Important Artifacts* (2009). Shapton’s novel takes the form of an auction catalog, its pages comprised of photographic representations and lot descriptions of the material possessions amassed over the course of a three-year love affair. I argue that these things are by no means passive reflections of the lives of their owners, but rather constitute and construct the very love that they depict. The novel’s innovative form, its inclusion of both visual and textual representations of
objects, works to actively produce meaning through entanglements of language and matter. Using Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism, I argue that the representational methods of *Important Artifacts* enact reworked understandings of the way in which meaning emerges *materially*.

These are novels that, in their content and form, suggest radically altered ways of representing the reality of our material world. My readings argue that such keen attention to the vast power and specificities of our world’s materialities challenges dominant notions of how that world is to be textually represented, making room for innovative modes of capturing the complicated stuff of material reality.
CHAPTER ONE
Enumerating the Vitality of Things: Bursting Beyond the List in Nicholson Baker’s *The Mezzanine*

Everything ‘dead’ trembles. Not only the stars, moon, wood, and flowers of which the poets sing, but also a cigarette butt lying in an ashtray, a patient white trouser button looking up from a puddle in the street…everything shows me its face, its innermost being, its secret soul.

– Wassily Kandinsky¹

Nicholson Baker’s novel *The Mezzanine* (1988) is the story of a single escalator ride from the ground floor of a corporate office building up to the mezzanine-level offices above. In the eyes of Howie, the book’s narrator and central character, his after-lunch escalator ride dilates expansively as he reflects on his morning, his routines, his job, his childhood, and, perhaps most prominently, the material objects that litter his daily life. A thirty-odd second trip upstairs stretches and magnifies into infinite digression; one thought leads continuously to the next, dilating mere seconds into a dense and unending web of memory and reflection. The expansive focus that generates Baker’s novel is at work, too, in miniature form, explosively magnifying one object after another. To Howie, elevators, staplers, carpets, straws, and paper sacks are all worth extended examination into every particular of their material existence. Over the course of this chapter, I will show the ways in which these magnified, expansive objects present a world destabilized by the powerful force of the inanimate. In *The Mezzanine*’s pages, divisions between human

and thing blur: objects hew, machines shimmer with human emotion, body parts operate like mechanical components, thoughts and objects mingle and blend. As Howie sinks into his meandering digression on the intricacies of the material world, human and object become less and less distinguishable from one another. The world of *The Mezzanine* is one that questions and complicates such a division, presenting instead a reality in which subject and object are ecstatically and powerfully similar. However, the active vitality of materiality renders impossible Howie’s attempts to represent the world of things in his myriad lists and cataloged enumerations; the complex, entangled materialities of the human body and of the object world resist his persistent efforts to reductively and taxonomically represent them. Howie’s dreams of measured, objective memories and of precisely listed representations of material reality are complicated and undermined by the very active power of materiality that he finds so deeply fascinating. I argue that the vitality and entangledness of *The Mezzanine*’s material world renders Howie’s list form unable to represent the extensive fullness of reality.

As Howie draws up to the escalator that will, over the course of *The Mezzanine*, pull him through an explosive and densely connected series of thoughts, memories, and recollections, he notices, upon moving a paper CVS bag from one hand to the other, “a little paper-rattling sound” emanating from the crinkly object.\(^2\) The noise grabs Howie’s attention, but as he glances down at the bag, he finds himself unable to recall what’s inside, “his recollection snagged on the stapled receipt”

(4) that prevents the bag from gaping open. The paper bag at once captures Howie’s focus and denies access to his prying mind. Although by the chapter’s end, Howie does strike upon the memory of what the bag contains (a leap of thought that takes a mere second in “real time”), his meandering exploration of paper sacks and plastic straws and porno mags is guided by the thin, paper thing curled up in his left hand. This inanimate bag “signal[s]” (4), it “mark[s]” (6), it “trigger[s]” (8) comparative memories, and even “build[s]” what Howie calls “cell walls” (8) in the cramped joints of his fingers. Its presence is peculiarly active; this bag does things. Despite Howie’s possession and ownership of the CVS bag, the thing itself seems to exert upon its user a surprising amount of power. It is the bag’s paper crinkling that jumpstarts Howie’s rumination on his lunch break, and it is the bag’s closure, its firmly stapled opening, that prevents Howie from immediately finding the thought he first intends to reach. This everyday, insignificant paper object acts as the driving force of *The Mezzanine*’s opening pages, enacting connections between ideas, mediating interactions between individuals, and ultimately possessing Howie as much as it is possessed by him.

Howie’s bag, stapled shut by “the chrome handigrip-style stapler…chained to the counter” (118), has been sealed by the store’s cashiers to prevent customers from shoplifting while on their way out of CVS. This staple’s purpose is clear and precise: to make it difficult for shoppers to sneak unpaid-for items into the paper sacks they’ve just been given. But when Howie’s stapled receipt “snag[s]” his attempt at recollection, the staple is doing something decidedly outside of its duty as a staple. No longer does the staple serve its given purpose of theft-prevention, instead acting in a fashion tangential to its intended use. Like an errant fishhook or unnoticed nail, this
staple *snags*, a verb that conjures images of flesh pricked and blood drawn. This miniscule object exerts itself in an almost violent fashion; it becomes suddenly sharp and active, no longer an object of passive concealment but rather a *thing* enacting a powerful disturbance.

In the prologue to his book *The Things Things Say*, Jonathan Lamb explains “the differences between objects that serve human purposes and things that don’t.” While objects interest us due to “their contribution to the circulation of information, goods, and money,” things “have no value in the market that they reckon.”3 The object’s purpose is one of use and function, an identity designated by the item’s user. The thing, on the other hand, acts outside of its intended function, generating a purpose absent of any imposed usefulness. Howie’s bag is initially stapled in order to facilitate the standard, expected exchange of goods that occurs in CVS; but when that staple snares Howie’s attempt at recalling the bag’s contents, it becomes something new, something untethered to the forces that fastened it to the bag. In that moment in which it “snags,” the staple creates itself anew. The object, here, takes on an active power, asserting its newfound, purposeless staple-ness on Howie’s prying memory. It does not merely exist; it *acts*.

Howie’s eventual trip to CVS is precipitated by the unexpected snapping of his shoelace a few hours earlier, a moment he describes as a “curve of incredulousness and resignation” (13). The sudden and unforeseen disruption of this “physical routine” reminds Howie of a series of similar events, moments in which things function in opposition to his expectations:

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(a) reaching a top step but thinking there is another step there, and stamping
down on the landing;
(b) pulling on the red thread that is supposed to butterfly a Band-Aid and
having it wrest free from the wrapper without tearing it;
(c) drawing a piece of Scotch tape from the roll that resides half sunk in its
black, weighted Duesenberg of a dispenser, hearing the slightly
descending whisper of adhesive-coated plastic detaching itself from the
back of the tape to come…, and then, just as you are intending to break
the piece off over the metal serration, reaching the innermost end of the
roll, so that the segment you have been pulling wafts unexpectedly free.

In all of these instances, an object from which Howie expects a precise and reliable
use falters. In a moment, Howie’s presumed dominion over the objects he uses is
denied; their startling capriciousness, their thingness, breaks through to the surface. In
his essay on “Thing Theory,” Bill Brown designates just this disruptive, dysfunctional
failure as the mark of “thingness,” that palpable instant in which objects “stop
working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get
filthy.”4 By failing to function according to our expectations, these objects exert
power upon us, obstructing our desires and diverting our intentions. Rather than being
simply used, these things force us to interact with them in altered and unintended
ways.

The forcefulness of things is made evident in these moments in which their
usefulness breaks down; but even when objects continue to function in accordance
with their intended use, their material design exerts a hewing force that shapes the
actions of the user. Waxing on about the “small innovations” that have subtly altered
the ways in which straws are unwrapped and used, Howie strikes upon the ubiquitous
sugar-packet, an object to which the “new development” of its packet-ness has

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packet manufacturer could have known that people would take to flapping the packet back and forth to centrifuge its contents to the bottom, so that they could handily tear the top off?” The both novel and practical innovation of “pre-portioned packaging” has unexpectedly “given rise to ballet,” the ritual “fluttering” of “flapping sugar-packets in the early morning” (95). A purely functional design alteration has unintentionally and unexpectedly constructed the way in which humans interact with their sugar-packets, resulting in a little gesticulative dance that Howie finds absolutely pleasurable. Although the designers of the paper packet are perhaps indirectly responsible for this now-habitual interaction, the shaking maneuver was most certainly an incidental result of the packaging innovation. The object’s unique shape has forced users to adapt their manner of use to its physical form; it’s design has been shaped by the desire for a particular method of convenient and sanitary use, yet this design, in turn, has re-shaped that very method of using. Form derives from function, but in the case of Howie’s obsessively examined sugar-packet, function is conversely altered by the thing’s material form. The sugar-packet pushes back, altering us with its powerful thingness. It isn’t just the valueless, broken objects that, per Lamb and Brown’s distinctions, become things once severed from their human producers. If you just look close enough, any object is an active and forceful thing, even a sugar-packet in perfect working order.

In the moment in which the staple snags, the Band-Aid thread wrests free, and the sugar-packet dances, each of these objects exerts a disruptive and forceful agency upon its user, a refusal to be merely used. These things take part in a fantastically leveled relationship between person and thing, a give-and-take interaction in which
each molds the other. Such moments evidence a complication of the expected roles of human subject and material object, demonstrating the forceful power of things usually resigned to inanimate positions at the whim of the all-powerful human. In these everyday object-interactions, *The Mezzanine* presents a world destabilized by the thing’s power to shape and influence the human.

While the objects of Howie’s life emerge as vital, forceful subjects, the components that comprise his own human body are described as, well, just that: gear-like, components, objectified parts. In his associative digressions that wind from one thing to another, human body parts are described in the same terms as the inanimate materials he magnifies and examines; active joints, cells, and nerves take on the same qualities of inorganic objects. In Howie’s estimation of things, his own bodily subject is yet another thing to be isolated, observed, and noted. Any boundary between vital human substance and the matter of objects seems to fade as things both animate and inanimate shimmer all the same. Ruminating on the construction and materiality of the plastic elbow drinking straw, Howie describes the bend-resistant “pleated neck” as acting “very similar to the tiny seizeups your finger joints will undergo if you hold them in the same position for a little while.” In a footnote, he continues to digress into what he calls “the finger-joint effect,” that creaky sensation one feels when unclenching a fist of fingers. The human limb, here, is described no differently than the drinking straw or slosh cap described earlier; the finger-joint is examined in isolation, separation, objectification. Recalling his childhood interest in this unclenching-finger feeling, Howie distances the sensation from his own experience, his own finger; it is “the finger-joint effect” (emphasis mine), not his. He always
believed that “when you softly crunched over those temporary barriers you were leveling actual ‘cell walls’ that the joint had built” (5); the “I”, here, is notably absent, replaced instead by a vague and impersonal “you.” The language of Howie’s narration distances these finger-joints and cell-walls from his own body, depicting instead an isolated anatomical component severed for studied examination. These finger joints and cell-walls appear detached, disconnected from Howie’s own person. Like the similarly-examined staple, this joint is an active material thing, “[building]” the cell-walls that are then “crunched over” in the act of unclenching; like the staple, too, these body parts remain distant, detached, and wholly observable. The human body, here, is just one in a series of many material things worth examining.

In one of Howie’s many lists, he enumerates the so-called “major advances” of his life, most of which concern object-based realizations that have transformed his daily habits:

1. shoe-tying
2. pulling up on Xs
3. steadying hand against sneaker when tying
4. brushing tongue as well as teeth
5. putting on deodorant after I was fully dressed
6. discovering that sweeping was fun
7. ordering a rubber stamp with my address on it to make bill-paying more efficient
8. deciding that brain cells ought to die (16)

All but the last of these insights concern objects whose altered daily use has increased the efficiency or effectiveness of Howie’s daily life. In all of these instances, an object (be it a sneaker, toothbrush, broom, or stamp) is powerfully able to alter the most basic moments of Howie’s routine experiences. The eighth point, however, stands out; grouped in with all these manufactured household items are the living
cells of Howie’s own brain, matter from which springs his very consciousness. Yet
the fact that this matter is of the mind doesn’t seem to differentiate it from that of the
list’s material goods; to Howie, these brain cells are, like deodorant, but another
tool—a powerful and vibrant one, but a tool nonetheless. In this list, the matters of
subject and object seem to meet in the middle; while shoes and stamps take on a
lively power that shapes and transforms Howie’s life, his brain matter is presented in
the same terms: as forceful, dynamic matter.

Howie’s final realization that “brain cells ought to die” is brought on by a bit
of reassurance from his mother, whom he describes as having “always been interested
in materialist analogies for cognition.” She tells Howie that while “your individual
brain cells are dying,…the ones that stay grow more and more connections and those
connections keep branching out over the years, and that’s the progress you have to
keep in mind” (22). The gradual disappearance of his brain cells is made tolerable and
even sensible with his materialist mother’s description of the bridges between cells
that remain and fortify: “It’s the number of links that are important,” she tells him,
“not the raw number of cells” (22-23). This description of the things between cells as
being “links,” substantial materials in themselves, gives Howie a great amount of
comfort. That empty, undescribed brain space between cells becomes, upon his
mother’s explanation, a web of solidly visible things; indistinct, vacant space
materializes into matter. And like the active materialities that populate Howie’s
external live, these internal connections “grow,” they “[branch] out,” surfacing in
physical form. His own internal mechanisms burst with action, extending and moving
within his mental apparatus.
Howie’s recognition of the more or less equalized power of human and nonhuman materialities is reminiscent of the vital vision of things cultivated by Jane Bennett in her book *Vibrant Matter*. Bennett explores the “liveliness intrinsic to the materiality of the thing formerly known as an object,”5 shining light on the ways in which things have “a positive, productive power of their own.”6 Things, here, have “thing-power;” they push, they pull, they make, they *do*. Bennett sees things everywhere, even in the often reified human body. “Human kind is itself a kind of thing-power,” she writes:

> At one level this claim is uncontroversial: it is easy to acknowledge that humans are composed of various material parts (the minerality of our bones, or the metal of our blood, or the electricity of our neurons). But it is more challenging to conceive of these materials as lively and self-organizing, rather than as passive or mechanical means under the direction of something non-material, that is, an active soul or mind.”7

Both human subject and material object, here, become *something else altogether*, something that cannot be adequately described as either subject or object—similar *thingness* pervades it all. The human actant Bennett describes is not a mere composition of mechanical parts, but a constituent just as dynamic and *thing-y* as the active materials existing and mingling with the human body. Bennett does “not claim that there are no differences between humans and bones, only that there is no necessity to describe these differences in a way that places humans at the ontological center or hierarchical apex” of reality.8 Despite being deeply concerned with the power had by things, Bennett’s webby assemblage attends to the admittedly peculiar role of the human. Quoting Jean-François Lyotard, Bennett suggests that “humanity

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6 Ibid., 1.
7 Ibid., 10.
8 Ibid., 11.
can be distinguished…as a particularly rich and complex collection of materials:

‘Humankind is taken for a complex material system; consciousness, for an effect of language; and language for a highly complex material system.’”<sup>9</sup> Bennett “rejects the matter/life binary,” but she doesn’t deny human life its undoubtedly weird sort of liveliness.<sup>10</sup> The human, here, isn’t an exceptional subject; rather, it is an extension of the very earthly materialities that compose the food we eat and the ground we walk upon. Although the human is, without a doubt, “particularly rich and complex,” a rather incredible congealing of materials and experiences that has yielded language and human consciousness, the human being is, nonetheless, not inherently differentiable from the similarly vivacious things that populate our reality. We humans, in Bennett’s estimation, exist on a continuum with the matter of our world—we are, perhaps, far to one end, but on the continuum nonetheless.

Howie’s own examinations of bodily and inorganic materialities persistently reveal a vibrant materialism that pervades the world depicted by *The Mezzanine*. Howie’s list of “major advances” suggests a continuity between the active things that inundate his daily office life and the biological materials that compose *him*. It is notable, however, that Howie classifies this realization regarding the materiality of his mind as a “major advance,” a modicum of knowledge that he attains by moving one step closer to the reality of his life. For Howie, this process of amassing knowledge is a linear experience in which he moves ever forward, advancing one realization at a time towards something increasingly clear and known. Like the solidifying knowledge about his brain’s materiality, Howie’s “major advances” work

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<sup>9</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 11.
<sup>10</sup> Ibid., xviii.
to simplify and clarify the world around him, rendering obvious that which seemed indistinct. Like his mother’s materialist analogy, this linear, step-wise conception of knowledge works to reduce Howie’s human experience to a series of discrete and numbered leaps of wisdom. To Howie, this world of experience seems entirely reducible: minds become a series of cells and connections, insight becomes a series of eight particularly worthy moments. Both Howie’s method of knowledge and his moments of insight themselves reflect an obsessively reductive understanding of the world, one that imagines moving ever nearer toward a very solid and graspable reality.

Yet while Howie’s lists work to reduce his material experiences to a discrete and important few, *The Mezzanine*’s persistent digressions and copious footnotes threaten the delineated stability of the lists’ distinct components. “Major advance” number two, for instance, requires an extensive digression about shoe-tying that both precedes and follows the list itself for pages of detailed explanation about the importance and beauty of “pulling up on [the] Xs” (16) of sneaker laces. This meandering, expanding detour digresses further into a footnote detailing the significant differences between “sneaker knots” and “dress knots” that, by its end, compares “the impression of the chrome eyelets in red rows down the sides of your foot” imprinted by wet sneakers to “the portholes in a Jules Verne submarine” (17-18). The satisfyingly precise and reductive list simply cannot contain the myriad of addenda and references that burst persistently forth in the form of footnotes and digressions. When, later in the novel, Howie reflects on the copious footnotes filling a history book he picked up and browsed at a library one weekend, he notes (in a footnote of his own, no less) that these typographically sanctioned digressions
demonstrate “a movement away from the gradus, or upward escalation, of the argument” (122). These tunneling webs exist in tense opposition to the forward-moving order of the list, demonstrating a connective expansiveness that persistently escapes the bounds of enumeration. Footnotes, Howie claims, “are reassurances that the pursuit of truth doesn’t have clear outer boundaries:”

it doesn’t end with the book; restatement and self-disagreement and the enveloping sea of referenced authorities all continue. Footnotes are the finer-suckered surfaces that allow tentacular paragraphs to hold fast to the wider reality of the library. (123)

Footnotes, then, demonstrate the referential, continuous relatedness of books; their utter dependence on one another materializes in note-form below the margins. The continuous addenda that cannot be contained within the numbered, delineated list explodes into this digressive, footnote form.

This expansive connectivity is by no means, however, limited to the library. In Howie’s near-constant material observations, reminders of sentimental reminiscences and emotional memories never fail to seep in. His memories of intense fascination with the mechanical power of things are densely interwoven with emotional and personal significance. Distinctions between the outer world of things and the inner world of sentiment appear loose and blurred as each seems to continually seep into the other. Reflecting on the gratifying, extended escalator ride that comprises much of The Mezzanine, Howie explains that his “pleasure in riding the escalator that afternoon was partly a pleasure of indistinct memories and associations,” a mix of his and his father’s “world of mechanical enthusiasms” and “memories also of my mother taking my sister and me to department stores and teaching us to approach the escalator with care” (36). In his process of recollection, Howie tends to mix the
emotional and the mechanical, the introspective and the external, into a single, interconnected mush of simultaneously observational and sentimental memory. Recollections of his protective, loving mother necessarily follow the detail-oriented, mechanistic musings Howie finds himself so drawn to. The emotional qualities of the subject and the mechanical qualities of the object are heavily intertwined, inseparable from one another in Howie’s faculty of memory.

Yet Howie finds this nostalgic component of thought to be totally undesirable. Because Howie’s memories of escalators are “composed of up to seventy or eighty percent” of what he calls “kid-memories”—that nostalgic, emotionally-laden kind of remembering—Howie feels “increasingly uncomfortable with including [the escalator] in descriptions of the things he loves” (37). In Howie’s opinion, the sentimental component of these recollections is so poisonous to the objective reality of the escalator that it discounts the object’s worth altogether. The machine’s stand-alone beauty appears sullied by the maternal image of his affectionate mother. Howie dreams of a time when he will have “amassed enough miscellaneous new mature thoughts to outweigh and outvote all of those childish ones” (58). In middle age, he believes, the clear and precise thoughts of adulthood will finally suppress the pesky emotions of murky childhood. Those sentimental, childish memories, Howie claims, are nowhere near as worthy as the mature and empirical observations of well-reasoned adult thought. Howie prefers imagining the inner mechanisms and active beauty of the material world in isolation, insulated from the pesky nostalgia of emotional memory. The lasting connections between material objects and sentimental
experiences work, in Howie’s estimation, only to obscure what he believes to be the isolated, objective truth of the thing itself.

In their object-oriented ontology (OOO), Graham Harman, Timothy Morton, and Levi Bryant emphasize the relationless isolation of things, a belief held, too, by The Mezzanine’s Howie. OOO’s collective refrain posits a “deeply non-relational conception of the realities of things” in which objects remain “quite apart from any relations with or effects upon other entities in the world.”11 These “weird entit[ies] withdrawn from access”12 exist “necessarily independent of all their relations.”13 OOO’s object is a “black box, a black hole,” isolated from the very world in which it exists.14 Despite their overwhelming insistence upon the isolation of things, OOO admits that even these essentially withdrawn objects come into relation with other things, other systems, other entities. Harman writes that “objects are autonomous from all the features and relations that typify them, but on the other hand they are not completely autonomous.”15 Any relationality remains vague, indistinct, and absolutely secondary to an essential isolation, a “molten core” of withdrawn-ness at the object’s center.16 The claim that “objects have an essence that is profoundly withdrawn” is the central refrain of OOO, their philosophical raison d’être.17

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Howie appears intent on a not dissimilar isolation of things from their many emotional associations and physical connections. In childhood, he developed a trick of imagination that allowed him to isolate bits and pieces of his visual world against an uncontaminated, clean white background: “anything,” he believed, “no matter how rough, rusted, dirty, or otherwise discredited it was, looked good if you set it down on a stretch of white cloth.” Howie favors this isolation trick as a way to allow “some detail…to take on its true nature as an object of attention” (38). Like a museum’s display case, Howie’s “clean mental background” allows the eye to notice the complex and worthy beauty of the thing alone in hermetic isolation. This trick was something Howie used to practice as a kid, but as it seeps into his thoughts while examining a bit of dump-truck rust as an adult, the trick strikes him “as interesting and useful right now.” Howie describes the sense of nostalgia that he feels as “misleading,” turning something he takes “seriously as an adult into something soupier, less precise, more falsely exotic” (39). Even Howie’s isolation trick seems inseparable from the very emotional sentiments it works to isolate objects from; nostalgia even seeps into the tool with which Howie attempts to dam up nostalgia.

Howie is convinced that any sentimental feelings that permeate his material ruminations somehow taint and mystify his pure thought processes; he yearns for memories and thoughts severed from emotional connection and sentimental context. In his essay “The Elevator Principle,” Ross Chambers compares The Mezzanine’s meandering, connective seepage of memory to that of Proust’s Marcel in A la recherche du temps perdu, yet he makes an important distinction: while both narrators are interested in the triviality of memory’s triggers, Howie reveals “a certain
mistrust of the obscurer workings of what Proust criticism calls ‘involuntary memory.’”¹⁸ That is, Howie would be made doubtlessly uncomfortable by the rich, nostalgic reminiscence summoned by Marcel’s madeleine. He prefers, instead, what Howie himself describes as “intellective memory,” an interest in the mechanisms of the material that remains severed from the emotional, affect-laden baggage that comes with the process of remembrance. Describing the smell of a just-opened Band-Aid box, Howie admits to having misgivings about this scent’s ability to “shoot you directly back to when you were four” (108):

…I don’t trust this olfactory memory trick anymore, because it seems to be a hardware bug in the neural workings of the sense of smell, a low-level sort of tie-in, underneath the subtler strata of language and experience, between smell, vision and self-love, which has been mistakenly exalted by some writers as something realer and purer and more sacredly significant than intellective memory, like the bubbles of swamp methane that awed provincials once took for UFOs. (109)

While Proust’s Marcel is content to revel in the emotional quality of triggered memories, Howie yearns for something unsullied by the warpage of sentiment—something more intellectual, more real, more objective. He even explains the connection between scent and sentiment as a “hardware bug,” a purely material neural reaction that is the result of some sort of accident of mental processing. What appears in Proust as the densely subjective and almost spiritual mystery of memory is, for Howie, a reducible phenomenon, something explained entirely by the mechanics of neurology. Unlike Marcel’s quest for what Chambers describes as “the rediscovery of an essential self in the dispersed multiplicity of the subject,” Howie is in search of

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something crucially different: an essential materiality in the singularity of the object.\textsuperscript{19}

Howie’s inward gaze, an examination of his own memory, yearns to be an outward one, a mechanical vision that comprehends his human faculties in material terms. His interest lies in that which can be intellectually and cleanly processed, something like neurology, as opposed to the indefinite, webby intermingling of sentiment and experience. The memories that interest Howie are those that reveal an intellectual, objective truth about his world, memories that find the reality of swamp methane in the murky mystery of supposed UFOs. The nostalgic reminiscence of childhood sentiment is, to Howie, little different from the mystifying claims that obscure empirical truth.

Yet in spite of Howie’s best efforts to block out any nostalgic kid-memories, they seep uninvited into his consciousness. “No matter how hard I try to keep sentimental distortions from creeping in,” he says, “they creep in anyway” (41). Try as he may, Howie is unable to resist the sentiments that “creep” and “pour” and “pull” (45-46), exerting rather energetic action upon his act of recollection. Nostalgic thoughts \textit{force} their way in, oozing into any and every crevasse of memory. These “violas of lost emotion” (41) seem, in fact, inseparable from the prodding observational thoughts that provoke them. Howie’s meditation on the particularities of the elevator’s triangular step design is inseparable from a memory of his mom retying his shoes before allowing him to step onto any “system of vertical transport” (64). The two modes of thinking, objective and sentimental, just aren’t as separable as Howie so desperately desires; the two categories of memory seem to be made of the same \textit{stuff}, two sides of a singular memory-coin. His materialist mechanical

\textsuperscript{19} Ross Chambers, “Meditation and the Escalator Principle,” 793.
examinations and maudlin sentimental recollections remain absolutely inseparable. In spite of Howie’s best efforts at objective isolation, his much-loved material things remain densely connected within a web of memory and personal experience; the contextual relationality of objects appears inseparable from and integral to the thing itself.

This inseparable interrelatedness of the material and the emotional complicates Howie’s tendency to list and enumerate his material experiences. In his meandering memories, not only do recollections of material things remain anchored to their contexts; things themselves remain imperfectly distinct from one another as memories of earplugs and of tongue-brushing, for instance, overlap and interpenetrate. The interconnectivity and evident relationality of object-experiences stymies Howie’s desire to taxonomize his interactions with the material world. Toward the end of *The Mezzanine*, Howie attempts to concoct a chart that enumerates the periodicity of his “every recurrent thought,” the “relative frequency of his thoughts over time” (127). Ever interested in the content of his meandering thoughts, Howie decides to list them all out—to separate and distinguish one from another, to make evident a clarifying pattern within the life of his mind. His chart looks something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject of Thought</th>
<th>Number of Times Thought Occurred per Year (in descending order)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L.</td>
<td>580.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>400.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brushing tongue</td>
<td>150.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earplugs</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill-paying</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panasonic three-wheeled vacuum cleaner, greatness of</td>
<td>45.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunlight makes you cheerful</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
And so on—until it stops. This act of stopping, the need for any list to, at some point, end, brings Howie’s project of enumeration to a close. He notes that this catalog “was not the enlightening process of abstraction” he expected: “thoughts were too fluid, too difficult to name, and once named to classify” (128). Linear inventory and classification just can’t adequately describe the interwoven tangle of Howie’s world of thoughts; they remain too weirdly immaterial, too effusive and entwined. His desire to tease things apart, to parse out the isolated specificities of material experiences, proves untenable in the face of the fluidity of memory. Rebekah Sheldon writes that “the list form itself highlights the separability of the objects it houses,” yet the very existence of Howie’s list appears deeply at odds with the co-constitutive, interrelated content itself.²⁰ The separability Sheldon writes of appears ever elusive, constantly threatened by the relations among things held so delicately at bay; it all remains too complex to reduce, too entangled to isolate.

Despite Howie’s incessant desire for a comprehensible, mechanical, list-able world, the messy relatedness of it all floods ceaselessly back in, challenging and complicating his object-oriented worldview. While The Mezzanine’s extensive and characteristic use of footnotes works to textually reflect the interrelatedness of things both material and abstract, the novel’s dominant representational form, the list, remains essentially inadequate to the non-linear complexities of the world.

CHAPTER TWO

“This Big Rock Is Like It Is”: Representation and Objectification in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Almanac of the Dead*

What counts as an object is precisely what world history turns out to be about.

– Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges”

In Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Almanac of the Dead* (1991), we glimpse a world sickened, a continent on the brink of disaster after 500 years of the sustained objectification of disenfranchised, neglected peoples and disregarded, exploited natural materialities. Silko’s thick, sprawling novel traces and critiques the European colonization of the American continent that has defined the past half-millennium of American history. Though the book’s plot is anchored in late twentieth-century Tucson, Arizona, its web-like structure reaches both spatially and temporally into vastly far-flung places and moments of indigenous experience; this story spans from Alaska to Argentina, 1492 to 1992 in its intricately woven compendium of native struggle against Euro-American forces of domination. The novel begins and ends with Sterling, an exiled Laguna Pueblo Indian who mistakenly washes up in Tucson and gets wrapped up in the spiritual and criminal work of two aging Yaqui Indian twin sisters, Lecha, a drug-addicted television psychic at work unraveling and translating an age-old tribal document, and Zeta, a smuggler operating a far-reaching

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drug-running business across North and South America. Through the twins’ criminal and spiritual activities, we are thrown into a sprawling underworld of interconnected illegal arms trade, conspiratorial political suppression, and indigenous resistance that links Lecha and Zeta to an Argentine smut dealer, a bestiality-obsessed, corrupt Tucson judge, a New Jersey mafia-supported luxury real-estate developer, a Cuban communist agitator, and twin Mexican revolutionaries, among others. Over the course of the novel, various disenfranchised, dispossessed communities begin to organize with increasing force and momentum against the dominant, oppressive Euro-American state. *Almanac of the Dead* concludes with the final entanglement of its many storylines at Tucson’s International Holistic Healer’s Convention, where militant homeless Vietnam veterans, a Black nationalist prison resistance agitator, a Maya revolutionary leader, a Hopi indigenous rights advocate, and an Eskimo vision-seer all converge at an event ironically dominated by white hawkers of new-age wares and hippie healing methods. Though the story ends before united, land-reclaiming indigenous forces make their way beyond Mexico’s northern border, Silko’s novel gestures toward the possibility of a world healed by insurrection of the dispossessed.

In this chapter, I argue that *Almanac of the Dead*’s sickened America has resulted from the objectification of both nonhuman material forces and subjugated, disenfranchised humans. This rejection of the vitality of humans and nonhumans alike emerges, to some degree, out of a particularly Euro-American system of linguistic representation that renders certain people and things both static and uniform. This process of objectification, I suggest, is two-pronged, erasing agency and scrubbing
difference. Representation through language powerfully establishes ways of seeing and being that presume the lifelessness of the material world and the uniformity of indigenous populations. Euro-American representational conventions appear unable to fully comprehend the vibrant intricacies of disenfranchised people and things alike. However, these objectified materialities and subjugated populations forcefully emerge to assert their vital power in an effort to reclaim the American continent. The indigenous naming and storytelling practices at work in *Almanac of the Dead* offer an alternative to the static and essentially *reflective* Euro-American understanding of the representational capabilities of language. Silko’s novel remains attentive to the mutually constitutive and world-making powers of physical materiality and immaterial language, allowing for a reality open to possibilities of environmental and societal change.

The transnational Pan-American world of *Almanac of the Dead* is one bursting with powerful material agents, natural forces that remain emphatically and perilously beyond the control of humanity. Over and over again, we are reminded of age-old indigenous stories and prophecies foretelling “that Mother Earth would punish those who defiled and despoiled her. Fierce, hot winds would drive away the rain clouds; irrigation wells would go dry; all the plants and animals would disappear.” And in the moment in which Silko’s novel takes place, this prophecy feels more like a diagnosis of reality than a vaguely menacing oracle; after 500 years of toxic, destructive European subjugation, this prophesied moment of natural

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2 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 632. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.
retribution seems imminent as the realities of global climate change encroach upon modern American life. In an impassioned speech near the novel’s close, Wilson Weasel Tail, the Lakota lawyer-turned-poet/activist whose address is a highlight of the International Holistic Healer’s Convention, calls upon “the inestimable power of the earth and all the forces of the universe” (723) as he describes the present environmental moment:

The buffalo are returning. They roam off federal land in Montana and Wyoming. Fences can’t hold them. Irrigation water for the Great Plains is disappearing, and so are the farmers, and their plows. Farmers’ children retreat to the cities. Year by year the range of the buffalo grows a mile or two larger. (725)

With increasing regularity, Earth’s powerful and unruly nonhuman forces make their place beyond the reach of human control all the more palpable, their potential to disturb humanity all the more vivid. Improbably and incomprehensibly, wild buffalo herds are repopulating; water is receding from human control and use, forcing human retreat as it, too, withdraws. Despite the potentially massive effect leveled upon humanity by these changing inorganic and mammalian materials, both buffalo and water appear just beyond human control, affecting without being, in turn, affected.

These returning, retreating things bring to mind the “weird [entities] withdrawn from access, yet somehow manifest” described by Timothy Morton and promoted by his object-oriented ontology compatriots. According to OOO, objects are powerfully elusive, marking and affecting situations without being altogether altered or comprehended. Silko’s materializing buffalo and evaporating water

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4 While I opt for the word thing in order to describe the active agency of nonhuman materials, OOO rejects the need for any such distinction; for these theorists, the very fact of objecthood denotes a certain physical and affective power.
sources are, indeed, deeply “withdrawn” from human life, altering human space and experience without being, in turn, controlled or regulated by human forces. The buffalo Weasel Tail describes are in the process of repopulating and reclaiming human-centric spaces; because of their rapidly growing herds, fenced-in livestock ranges are transformed into free and open plains. The (quite literally) withdrawn water sources, too, demonstrate the elusive quality Morton describes, retracting from human life while simultaneously forcing mass flight. This watery material is at once terribly distant and powerfully near, its withdrawal triggering massive response from affected humans despite the water itself being so palpably absent. However, the very withdrawn-ness of the water and buffalo have been caused and precipitated by the ecological exploitation of 500 years of European colonial rule in the Americas. Irrigation water has receded precisely because of the abusive effect of human overuse. Its newly withdrawn state has come about because water resources are not isolable from human life, but rather remain open to change and influence by human and inhuman forces alike. In spite of the distant, inaccessible qualities of such forceful material actors, they remain nonetheless on a continuum with the human world, part of a web of interconnectivity that Jane Bennett labels an *assemblage*. Though Silko’s water and buffalo are currently positioned beyond human control, their respective retraction and emergence have occurred because of excessive, centuries-long human influence on the natural world. The material ability of water and buffalo to provoke a mass “retreat to the cities,” too, evidences a certain entanglement with the human world, a not-merely-withdrawn relationship to humanity. Agency, here, must no doubt be understood “as a confederation of human and nonhuman elements,” as
Bennett writes. Even the forceful distance of the nonhuman forces in Silko’s novel evidences the deep entanglement of human society and the material world.

This magnification of the powerful, nonhuman forces of nature effectively decenters and destabilizes the position of the human subject. Indeed, in *Insistence of the Material*, Christopher Breu argues that Silko’s “vision emphasizes the agency of material forces in a way that Euro-American instrumental approaches to nature do not.” As shown in Silko’s *Almanac*, a political and economic system (like that of post-colonial America) that minimizes the force of the immaterial is, at best, unsustainable and, at worst, catastrophic. The suddenly disastrous ecological present of *Almanac* is the result of 500-some years of neglect for the agency of *things*; at work in Silko’s Americas is a dominant political doctrine that submits the lives of animals, the materiality of mountains, and the properties of water to excessive use and expenditure by human forces. And so, Silko’s novel depicts a *turn*, a moment in which Earth’s materialities begin to reclaim and reassert their vivid, insuppressible power. *Almanac of the Dead* envisions “a different political ecology—one that attends to the political stakes at work in human interactions with matter and the material world.”

Just as the treatment of natural, nonhuman forces as inanimate and fundamentally manipulable has left Silko’s Euro-American world on the brink of environmental collapse, so too has the objectification of certain humans precipitated *Almanac*’s dire and momentous political moment: the forceful reclamation of native life, both human and non-.

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7 Ibid., 179.
human materialities is coupled with a simultaneous objectification and
disenfranchisement of human bodies. Just as non-human forces are submitted to 500
years of ignorance and abuse, certain human subjects are labeled and treated as
material objects, a characteristic of the “declining, but dominant, society in Almanac”
that Ann Folwell Stanford describes as “its ability to tolerate (and maintain) a patent
disregard for human life and, while doing so, to make a sizeable profit.” The most
glaring instance of this commodification of the human body occurs at the hands of
Trigg, a paraplegic real estate developer in the business of illegal organ harvesting.
Trigg’s corporation “Bio-Materials, inc.” deals in “fetal brain material, human
kidneys, hearts and lungs, corneas for eye transplants and human skin for burn
victims” (398), organ stockpiles which Trigg personally supplements by harvesting
the bodies of homeless men lured to their deaths with the promise of money and
sexual gratification. To Trigg, the bodies of the homeless and disenfranchised are no
more than “human refuse” (444), their body parts worth more as materials-for-sale
than as life and limb of a human person.

This treatment of humans as extractable, harvestable products hangs over
much of Almanac of the Dead; other storylines track the underground, Pan-American
trade in videos of abortions, sex-change operations, ritual circumcisions, fetal
dissections, and live torture, the dealings of an international black market that profits
from the manipulation and abuse of human bodies. This far-reaching economy of
bodies devalues the subjectionhood of those already disenfranchised (the homeless, the
poor) through what Breu describes as “the direct investment in and commodification

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8 Ann Folwell Stanford, ““Human Debris”: Border Politics, Body Parts, and the Reclamation of the
of the stuff of life and especially the stuff of the body.” Very little of the near-apocalyptic world of *Almanac* feels warm or living; even the exposed flesh so common in the novel feels, though excessively bloody, remarkably distant and unmoving, just as still as if it had never lived. This sensation is the result of a violent disenfranchisement, directly linked, in Breu’s analysis, to the biopolitics of the neoliberal Euro-American state, that dominant yet declining society of *Almanac*.

This biomedical and technological objectification of human bodies depicted in the present-day moment of *Almanac* isn’t, however, an isolated emergence without precedent. In his critique of biopolitical production in Silko’s novel, Breu notes the book’s linking of this modern-day use and abuse of human bodies for financial profit with its historic counterpart, the objectification of disenfranchised human bodies in the context of imperialism and slavery in the Americas. “Silko,” Breu writes, “presents imperialism and the forms of slave labor instituted by it as the site of the original emergence of biopolitics,” the precursor of Trigg’s deluded, profit-driven thirst for marketable, harvested biomaterials. This initial biopolitical exploitation is witnessed in the narrative of old Yoeme, the Yaqui grandmother of Lecha and Zeta who recounts again and again the dehumanizing appropriation of Yaqui lands and of the tribe’s indigenous workforce at the hands of Mexican mining corporations and the European-descended aristocracy in charge. At the core of this earlier imperial conquest of American indigeneity is the rendering of native bodies as enslaved tools for the production of wealth; in the case of the Yaqui people, native lives subjugated by the Mexican aristocracy are afforded a position lower even than that of prized,

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10 Ibid., 162.
uprooted cottonwood trees, symbols of blue-blooded power in need of transport from
the banks of a far-off river to the barren foothills of a local mining operation. “The
heat was terrible,” Yoeme recalls:

All water went to the mules or the saplings. The slaves were only allowed to
press their lips to the wet rags around the tree roots. After they were planted at
the mines and even here by the house, there were slaves who did nothing but
carry the water to those trees. (116)

The native slaves, here, are treated as mere biological objects expected to subsist in
the same manner as saplings and pack mules, but only after those more integral tools
of transport have had their drink. “Rather than all beings being afforded respect and
valuation,” Breu writes, “all beings are rendered as objects to be accumulated and
disposed of by those who count as subjects.”¹¹ This tendency to render
disenfranchised humans as usable, throwaway objects remains a constant, integral
current throughout Almanac of the Dead’s depiction of 500 years of European
domination of the American continent. Such violent disregard for the subjecthood of
certain peoples is depicted by Silko as a sustained and central aspect of estranged
European rule, not as a simply antiquated or peculiarly modern condition.

Yet in spite of being rendered as objects worth more dead than alive, the
objectified humans of Almanac emerge to thwart their inhuman denigration and
reclaim their rights as subjects. Like the returning wild buffalo and perilously
receding irrigation water, the long-objectified and discarded peoples of the Americas
come to assert, over the course of Silko’s novel, their power as living, breathing,
forceful entities. In the novel’s final section, the various groups of alienated
indigenous peoples, neglected veterans, and disenfranchised poor meet in anticipation

¹¹ Christopher Breu, Insistence of the Material, 165.
of an impending change: their unified emergence as radical *subjects* capable of fomenting a Pan-American reclamation of indigenous land and personhood. Those who have been historically deemed objects are suddenly and vividly seen to be anything but. This powerful, forceful emergence of both things and people objectified threatens altogether the “simultaneously subjectifying and objectifying logic of imperialism,” making abundantly clear the dangerous inadequacy of any such taxonomical distinction. These transplanted European categorical assumptions appear dangerously unstable, crumbling in the face of erupting, power-wielding people so inadequately explained as mere objects.

In addition to this erasure of the agency of people and things deemed objects, this “objectifying logic of imperialism” works to expunge the particularities of humans and nonhumans alike. Under the book’s dominant Euro-American society, the classification of disenfranchised humans and inanimate materialities as “objects” envisions vibrant things as static and uniform. In *Almanac of the Dead*, such blanket terms appear wholly inadequate to the differences among both people and things; linguistic representations persistently fail to live up to the vast and indescribable idiosyncrasies of the material world that seem fated to escape the bounds of language. The violent deficiency of *Almanac’s* American society in which complex, multifarious human actors and nonhuman forces are reduced to their being either instrumentalized objects or commanding subjects is, in part, a problem of linguistic representation. This tendency to widely and indiscriminately reduce the material world’s varieties and complexities through the categorizing effects of language is repeatedly critiqued throughout the novel, first by Lecha, who claims that she has

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“never seen any person, animal, place, or thing look the same twice” (167). This resolute awareness and respect for the differences among things is most firmly articulated by Calabazas, a Yaqui smuggler and business partner of Zeta, who speaks at length to his employees Root and Mosca about the danger of conflating unlike and disparate things:

Once Root had remarked that he thought one dull gray boulder looked identical to another dull gray boulder a few hundred yards back. Calabazas took his foot off the accelerator, and Mosca had tried to save Root by adding quickly, “Maybe in the dark they look alike.” But that had not prevented Calabazas from giving them one of his sarcastic lectures on blindness. Blindness caused solely by stupidity, a blindness that Root and Mosca would probably always suffer from…. “I get mad when I hear the word identical,” Calabazas had continued. “There is no such thing. Nowhere. At no time. All you have to do is stop and think. Stop and take a look.”…that night Calabazas marched them up and down, up and down the same stretch of arroyo, until Root suddenly realized what the old bastard was saying. “Look at it for what it is. That’s all. This big rock is like it is. Look. Now, come on. Over here. This one is about as big, but not quite. And the rock broke out a chunk like a horse head, but see, this one over here broke out a piece that’s more like a washtub….” (201-202)

The simple, categorical word “rock” works only to obscure the untold differences between rocks: their unique cracks, varying colors, distinct histories, differing locations, etc. The reduction and conflation that comes with using the word “rock” to interchangeably represent different things causes a sort of “blindness,” a way-of-seeing that remains insensitive to distinctions and particularities. This deep, pervasive blindness to the intricacies of our world is no innocent matter; Calabazas makes it clear that “Those who can’t learn to appreciate the world’s differences won’t make it. They’ll die” (203). Such a fate befalls a group of wealthy Mexican and Central American aristocrats who, near the end of the novel, escape illegally into the United States via luxury bus in order to avoid the taxation of their material riches. Stranded
and left for dead by their Indian guides, the group is unable to read the landscape for
signs of water, shelter, or civilization, an ignorance that leads all but one to shrivel
and die in the dry, dusty heat of the Sonoran desert. “Survival [depends] on
differences,” Silko writes, “not just the differences in the terrain that [give] the desert
traveler critical information about traces of water or grass for his animals, but the
sheer varieties of plants and bugs and animals” (202). Reductive, generalizing
linguistic representations establish and enforce practices of seeing and living. Calling
all rocks merely “rocks,” all barren landscapes simply “deserts,” causes individuals to
see blindly and live reductively.

*Almanac of the Dead*’s critique of the blind conflation of linguistic
representation, however, isn’t limited to descriptions of the inanimate material world;
Silko’s novel extends this criticism to the ways in which we name and represent other
humans, too, through language and through photography. Once again, this problem of
representation emerges through Calabazas, who, in his youth, is told by his uncle
Mahawala and other tribal elders the true story of Geronimo—or rather, of the
*Geronimos*. The old Yaquis tell Calabazas that there were, in fact, “at least four
Apache raiders who were called by the name Geronimo, either by the Mexican
soldiers or the gringos,” a mistake caused by the U.S. soldiers’ miscomprehension of
“the war cry Mexican soldiers made as they rode into battle, counting on help from St.
Jerome” (224). Once the warmongering whites start calling multiple Apaches by the
same name, the distinct warriors become compressed into a singular figure in the U.S.
imaginary. This is a blindness that directly results from the practice of naming;
conflation through linguistic representation prevents comprehension of the reality of
differences among four distinct men. Indeed, this blindness to difference is reproduced in photographic representations of the Geronimos, photographs that depict the same Apache face in four discrete images. When the four men meet to discuss their peculiar situation, they compare portraits, each taken in various towns by white newspaper men, and find that the “Apache warrior whose broad, dark face, penetrating eyes, and powerful barrel-chested body…appeared in every photograph” (228) depicted none of them. The conflation in name of the four Geronimos yields a conflation in image, a visual and material blindness that emerges from the prior linguistic certainty of their uniformity. And this confusion isn’t merely a question of interpretation; the images themselves become that of a single man, transformed by the photographers’ assumptions of the sameness of the four Apache. In Mahawala’s telling of the story, he notes that Wide Ledge, one of the four Geronimos, said of photographs that “these traces of other beings and other places preserved on paper became confused even for the white people, who believed they understood these tracks so well.” These smudges and “tracks” which are “supposed to ‘represent’ certain persons, places, or things” (227) are, in fact, qualitatively different from those things that they depict. Yet the white peoples’ certainty of the direct representation proffered by the photograph leads to a visual blindness that ignorantly merges representation and represented. The four Apache become no more than a photographed face, a “wanted” bulletin in the daily newspaper. As Breu writes, “such equivalences have not only ecological consequences (one rock is just like any other rock) but racist social consequences as well (one Apache warrior is just like another one).”¹³ This reductive way-of-representing has worldly consequences; naming

¹³ Christopher Breu, Insistence of the Material, 178.
practices by no means remain isolated in the realm of words, but establish ways of living and acting that fail to account for the complex variation of material reality.

In spite of *Almanac*’s repeated and pointed criticisms of notions of linguistic and pictorial representability, this critique is, importantly, not one of language writ large. Rather, the linguistic practices that emerge as reductionary and dangerously sweeping are specifically Euro-American and colonial; it is the occupying Europeans and those descended from them who conflate rock with rock, Indian with Indian (and initially, of course, Indian with indigenous American). As old Mahawala notes, this problem of linguistic representation is a white problem, for “once the whites had a name for a thing, they seemed unable ever again to recognize the thing itself”:

The elders used to argue that this was one of the most dangerous qualities of the Europeans: Europeans suffered a sort of blindness to the world. To them, a “rock” was just a “rock” wherever they found it, despite the obvious differences in shape, density, color, or the position of the rock relative to all the things around it. The Europeans, whether they spoke Spanish or English, could often be heard complaining in frightened tones that the hills and canyons looked the same to them, and they could not remember if the dark volcanic hills in the distance were the same dark hills they’d marched past hours earlier. To whites all Apache warriors looked alike, and no one realized that for a while, there had been three different Apache warriors called Geronimo who ranged across the Sonoran desert south of Tucson. (224-225)

In such moments, Silko’s novel rigorously questions the representational assumptions of Euro-American language and the accuracy and truth of its representative capacities. Moreover, such conventions work to objectify human beings and justify policies of indiscriminate massacre wrought upon native peoples. As George Tinker writes in his essay “The Stones Shall Cry Out,” “the philosophical and scientific basis for control of nature [by European colonizers] was initially rooted in the acts of naming,” a form
of linguistic claiming that reduces multitudes and asserts ownership. This inattention to the particularities and small truths of the world does, however, open up room for native resistance. Thanks to the ignorant assumptions of white colonizers, Europeans get hopelessly and dangerously lost in hills intimately known and maneuvered by the indigenous Yaqui; because of blind, European inattention, three of the Geronimos are able to range free and escape the vengeful eye of U.S. military forces. Yet although natives benefit to some small extent from the occupiers’ blind imprecision, the naming and representational practices of the dominant European society in Almanac are shown to have done massive and undue harm to the peoples and things of the Americas. Indeed, this European way-of-seeing has, in the years since the stories told to Calabazas by his Yaqui elders, only become more firmly established in the Euro-American world. The ontological distinction between people and things, established and entrenched, in part, by practices of naming, has precipitated a society sickened by its distance from the natural world. In fact, it is white Euro-Americans affected by this deep separation from their world who seek out Lecha for her mystical powers of vision and prophecy:

Affluent, educated white people, upstanding Church members, sought out Lecha in secret. They all had come to her with a deep sense that something had been lost. They all had given the loss different names: the stock market crash, lost lottery tickets, worthless junk bonds or lost loved ones; but Lecha knew the loss was their connection with the earth. They all feared illness and physical change; since life lead to death, consciousness terrified them, and they had sought to control death by becoming killers themselves. (718)

It is the firmly entrenched, 500-year-old European practice of distinguishing man from matter, human from thing, a practice that continues to undergird the lives of

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white people and reverberate into Lecha’s own life, that has sickened the American world to the brink of environmental and social collapse.

In her essay *Posthumanist Performativity*, Karen Barad explains this representational mindset, a way-of-seeing that at once posits the ontological distinction between the knowing human and the knowable nonhuman *and* assumes the potential for the prior to directly represent the former, as “a Cartesian by-product—a particularly inconspicuous consequence of the Cartesian division between ‘internal’ and ‘external.’”¹⁵ She cites Joseph Rouse, who writes that this “Cartesian legacy” is “a linguistic variation on Descartes’ insistence that we have a direct and privileged access to the contents of our thoughts that we lack towards the ‘external’ world.”¹⁶ In other words, Descartes’ postulation of the barrier between internal human and external materiality cemented the basic representationalist assumption of the distinct separation between knower and known. This ontological distinction has precipitated the realist mode, which postulates that the human, however distinct from the world’s physical materiality, can *directly represent* the stuff of the world through the form of language. The claim that language is completely representative presumes the basic separation of language and materiality, human and thing. As Vicki Kirby writes, “both Cartesianism and its critique are entirely committed to the difference between nature and culture, presence and absence, matter and form.”¹⁷ This entrenched assumption of difference continues to undergird Euro-American life

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¹⁵ Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity,” 806.
through the present of *Almanac of the Dead*, a moment when such Cartesian logic seems seriously and dangerously untenable.

Calabazas and the other Yaquis present, however, an alternative way of seeing and depicting that *does not* succumb to the same pitfalls as European linguistic representation. In his ruminations on rocks, Calabazas closely attends to the small and imperative differences between things, an attention to distinctions not unlike that emphasized by Jane Bennett in her vital materialism. As opposed to broad-stroke, massive categorical separation, which at once assumes ontological distinctions of different categories and generalizes the likeness of things within a category, the way-of-seeing outlined by Calabazas presumes the vast interconnectedness of varieties of things while simultaneously attending to the intricate, integral differences among them. Yaqui naming practices, too, eschew the reductive work of European naming conventions, understanding that “a person might need a number of names in order to conduct all of his or her earthly business” (227). This indigenous method of linguistic representation avoids the presumption of its ability to directly and completely explain or represent that which it describes; rather, those being named are understood to change and alter, requiring a similarly fluid and ever-incomplete descriptive convention. The words of representation adapt to the shifting reality of the material world. While *Almanac* roundly critiques normalized European representational assumptions, so too does it offer a perhaps more careful, more attentive, and less destructive alternative. As Breu writes, Silko’s “postrevolutionary praxis that transforms the human relationship to things themselves…is based around, though not
fully reducible to, pan-Native understandings of the relationship between language and materiality.”

Indeed, native American and, specifically, Pueblo conceptions of language and storytelling are absolutely central to the way in which *Almanac of the Dead* conceptualizes the relationship between world and word. In an essay called “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” a lecture delivered at the English Institute in 1979, Silko describes and presents an understanding of language based firmly in an oral tradition which emphasizes the creative and generative effects of words. In her talk, Silko tells a series of Laguna Pueblo stories, ranging from the Pueblo Creation story to a more recent tale about a Vietnam veteran returning home and almost immediately wrecking his brand new Volkswagen Beetle. At the start of her lecture, Silko warns the audience that her presentation will not move “from point A to point B to point C,” but will instead meander about and encircle that which it describes.

The structure of Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider’s web—with many little threads radiating from a center, criss-crossing each other. As with the web, the structure will emerge as it is made and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made.

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19 A footnote included in the essay importantly states: “This ‘essay’ is an edited transcript of an oral presentation. The ‘author’ deliberately did not read from a prepared paper so that the audience could experience firsthand one dimension of the oral tradition—non-linear structure. Her remarks were intended to be heard, not read” (Silko, Pueblo Indian Perspective 54). Already, we face a problem of representation: the essay I’m citing is not exactly that which Silko presented to the English Institute in 1979, for it was never meant to be an “essay” per-se. Even in the very form of her “paper,” Silko emphasizes the performative character of the talk, a performance which remains distant from and only partially represented by the page on which it is published.
In lieu of following a pre-existing plan or route, the story’s path is generated in the very act of telling. To some extent, then, the practice of telling is actively implicated in the making of that which it seeks to present. As such, a story is not so much reflective of an event that once took place, culling up the past in order to represent it once more to those listening; rather, meaning is made in the generative storytelling act.

However, this process is not an entirely constructivist one; just as the act of storytelling grants form and meaning to that which is being related, the story itself is, in turn, intimately welded to and created by the world of which it speaks. Silko emphasizes the intimate relationship between story and place that emerges from a culture that has remained rooted for so long to its ancestral land, writing that “the stories cannot be separated from geographical locations, from actual physical places within the land.” These are not, however, stories about the land or about particular landmarks, rocks, and formations; rather, they are “connected with those places,” emerging from and being formed by the “imposing geographical elements” of Laguna.21 The relationship between world and word described here by Silko is one of extreme intimacy, an intermeshing connectivity radically more intricate than a reflective model of linguistic representation. The geographic and material elements related by a story are deeply implicated in that story’s very creation; such mesas and boulders take part in the creation of a Pueblo story, generating that which, in turn, retells and re-enacts their physical reality. The Pueblo perspective of storytelling that Silko describes is one that equally implicates the role of storyteller and that of the actual, physical events in the creation of the story. This linguistic representation of

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21 Leslie Marmon Silko, “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective,” 69.
experience emerges out of the active interaction between storyteller, who generates meaning and form, and material reality, which grants content to the story so inextricably bound to that from which it came. Story, here, does not merely reflect reality; instead, language relates and forms that which has been molded by material experience in the world. A reflective, mirror-like surface is just no good as a metaphor for the practice of Pueblo Indian storytelling.

Neither, in fact, does a reflective metaphor explain the way in which Silko’s own *Almanac of the Dead* presents reality, particularly through its almanac-within-an-almanac. The almanac within is defined by the novel as “a book of tables containing a calendar of months and days” that “predicts or foretells the auspicious days, the ecclesiastical and other anniversaries” (136). As such, this text occupies a position somewhere between storytelling and story making, keeping record of events just as much as it, in turn, predicts their occurrence. Caren Irr describes this peculiar space that the almanac inhabits as a “transitive ground between past and future” that is “both commemorative and prophetic.”22 The almanac depicted by Silko, however, doesn’t merely predict that which it describes; the Yaqui almanac of the dead engenders the very future that it predicts, creating, to some extent, that reality written within. Upon giving the loose, ancient, scattered almanac pages to Lecha, old Yoeme tells her granddaughter the story of its journey up North from the ancestral lands of the almanac’s birth. In order to prevent the almanac from dying along with the last of the tribe’s people suffering from famine and extinction at the hands of the newly-arrived European conquerors, a group of children are chosen to flee North in search

of fellow survivors. For “the almanac was what told them who they were and where they had come from in the stories…. The people knew if even part of their almanac survived, they as a people would return someday” (246). Despite their essential extinction, the tribe knows that the survival of their words, their stories, their histories will ensure the continued existence of their people. So long as the prophecies aren’t erased, neither will be the people those prophecies describe.

Yet in Yoeme’s story of the almanac’s journey, the document’s powerful ability to sustain the existence of its people isn’t merely a beautiful metaphor for the central importance of stories and histories in the tribe’s culture. Rather, the physical almanac is quite literally responsible for saving the lives of the three children tasked with its own survival, rescuing them and, in turn, ensuring the future of their tribe. With the almanac’s pages sewn into the fabric of their garments, the three children flee North, sustaining themselves on very little water and only the occasional handful of seeds or roots they manage to salvage. After days spent without any food at all, the children stumble upon an old, hunchbacked woman settled in an abandoned village with little more than a large cooking pot and a fire with which to cook meager soups. She invites the children to join her and eat the thin, watery bulb and root stew, and so they sit with her, resting and waiting for the food to cook. One of the girls, however, is struck with an impulse to slip one of the almanac’s pages, an ancient parchment of animal skin, into the stew.

The thin, brittle page gradually began to change. Brownish ink rose in clouds. Outlines of the letters smeared and then they floated up and away like flocks of small birds. The surface of the page began to glisten, and brittle, curled edges swelled flat and spread until the top of the stew pot was nearly covered with a section of horse stomach. Well, it was a wonderful stew. They lived on it for days and days, digging up little round bulbs in the soft, white river sand,
and gathering ant eggs and other things the crippled woman directed them to get. (249)

On the brink of starvation, the children are fed by the almanac itself, by its very material composition. In the pot of stew, it begins to take new form; the ink rises “up and away,” letters floating off the page and into the air. The document, a collection of histories and predictions, becomes something else, something wordless. The mammalian materiality, long dormant in the form of parchment, emerges back into being, its organic sustenance now capable not only of foretelling the tribe’s continued existence, but of physically engendering their survival. As old Yoeme says, “it had been the almanac that had saved them” (253). The almanac, it seems, is more than record, a text representing in language the events of the past; the book itself, rather, is actively engaged in producing the future it predicts. The almanac’s language and materiality together do work towards making that future.

Now, the productive capacities of the almanac could be used to show *Almanac of the Dead*’s demonstration of the constructive powers of language, the belief in the word’s capacity to utterly create the world. I think, however, that something more complex and intricate is being shown in Silko’s novel, for it isn’t merely the words of the almanac that create the future they inscribe—the physical stuff of the almanac, too, works to generate a future for the Yaqui tribe, as well as the human actors and material conditions involved in the almanac’s transport. This swarm of material, human, and linguistic actants together generating the world of *Almanac* can be explained by what N. Katherine Hayles calls “constrained constructivism.” In her essay of the same name, Hayles outlines a theory that eschews both realist representationalism and complete constructivism in favor of a way-of-seeing that
rests somewhere in between. There is an understanding of the relationship between materiality and language, she postulates, that remains anchored to an objective world while still attending to the ways in which language shapes and forms the reality it describes. Hayles pushes for an attention to consistency, the understanding that certain ways of representing the world are closer to and more accurately descriptive of its material reality, rather than an insistence on complete congruence between a representation and that which it represents:

Congruence implies one-to-one correspondence. In Euclidian geometry, one can test for congruence by putting one triangle on top of another and seeing whether they match. If the area and shape of one exactly fits those of the other, congruence is achieved; any deviation indicates that they are not congruent. Congruence thus falls within the binary logic of true/false. Consistency, by contrast, cannot adequately be accounted for in a two-valued logic… From this asymmetry emerges a sense of the relation between language and representation that steps outside the reductive dichotomies of the realist/antirealist debate.\textsuperscript{23}

Hayles argues for an understanding of representation defined by maximum consistency with, not total congruence to, the world. For while no linguistic representation of the physical world is completely identical or congruent with that which it represents, an ideal that “implies perception without a perceiver,” some representations are more closely consistent than others with the material being represented.\textsuperscript{24} Like Hayles’ constrained constructivism, Silko’s novel presents a way of understanding and presenting the world that is more closely attentive to material realities than is another mode of representation, namely that of the European colonizers of the Americas. Unlike the Cartesian logic rooted in an unflinching


\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 35.
separation between humans and things, the indigenous way-of-seeing central to Silko’s novel is attentive to the simultaneous interconnectivity of and specific differences among things. As Hayles writes:

There is a correspondence between language and our world, but it is not the mysterious harmony Einstein posited when he said that the mystery of the universe is that it is understandable. Neither is it the self-reflexivity of a world created through language and nothing but language.\textsuperscript{25}

The methods of understanding and representing the world offered by Calabazas, Yoeme, and the almanac itself reach nearer to its reality, yet without proclaiming the absolute power of language; for in spite of \textit{Almanac}’s demonstration of the potential for words to enact and engender the world, the book remains firmly attentive to the intense power wielded by the Earth’s materialities.

Though Hayles helpfully offers a method of looking closer at the nuanced relationship between language and materiality, her constrained constructivism imagines a static reality more closed than open. The objective world she remains constrained to is unmoving, unchanging. \textit{Almanac of the Dead}, however, offers an account of the reality-making possibilities of material engagement; like the generative, world-altering almanac depicted within, Silko’s novel demonstrates the potential for human and nonhuman interaction to meaningfully alter the material fabric of the world. Just as mass societal use and abuse of natural materialities has precipitated a sick world on the brink of environmental collapse, so too do human forces emerge, by the novel’s end, poised to reclaim and heal the poisoned American continent. Even the material world we remain inextricably constrained to is, to some degree, in flux, shifting with the sizeable impact of human life. In \textit{Almanac of the Dead}, the need to

\textsuperscript{25}N. Katherine Hayles, “Constrained Constructivism,” 38.
remain closely tethered to the material world is by no means at odds with a desire to make meaningful societal and environmental change; rather, attention to the intricacies of the material world and reality-altering social and political engagement are one in the same in Silko’s novel. Close and attentive care for the Earth’s material resources offers both a method of healing the natural world and a way out from under the domination of colonial Euro-American society. Material reality emerges not as a static constraint, but as an avenue through which to create meaningful social and environmental change. Rather than reflectively represent a static earth, Almanac of the Dead engages diffractively with the material world, offering something vastly more dynamic and open than a mirrored representation of reality. Donna Haraway defines diffraction as a record of “the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference.” As opposed to reflection, “diffraction is an optical metaphor for the effort to make a difference in the world.” Rather than depict an inert reflection of material reality, Silko’s Almanac offers a diffracted, fluid vision of material engagement that allows for radical and consequential change while remaining attune to the stuff of the earth.

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27 Ibid., 16.
CHAPTER 3
The Stuff of Love: Material Meaning-Making in Leanne Shapton’s *Important Artifacts*

When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntary sinking into the history of the object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want matter to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines!

– Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things*

Leanne Shapton’s novel *Important Artifacts and Personal Property From the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry* (2009) poses as something seemingly antithetical to the novelistic form itself: an auction catalog. With its green, textured cover, off-white, high-quality paper pages, prominently displayed auction house name (“Strachan & Quinn Auctioneers”), and conventional lot descriptions, Shapton’s book looks and acts like a functional auction catalog. But while a factual catalog’s purpose is to relate, through images and descriptions, factually reliable information about objects to their potential buyers, Shapton’s fictional version *creates* a story through the material possessions it displays and describes. The story is of the burgeoning and deteriorating love affair between Lenore Doolan, a food writer for the *New York Times*, and Harold Morris, a commercial photographer with artistic aspirations. From the very cover of the book, particularly the irony-laden Valentine’s Day auction date of February 14th, 2009, we immediately know the tale within: a relationship ending in failure, a demise so

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unsalvageable that the things of which this love was composed must be sold off to the highest bidders, scattered among strangers.

The books and clothes, letters and knickknacks foregrounded in Shapton’s book are absolutely integral to the story of which they are a part. The objects that populate the pages of Shapton’s novel do not only offer a distant glimpse at human life mediated through a relationship’s material remnants. Rather, in this chapter, I argue that Hal and Lenore become who they are precisely because of the things to which they are attached; likewise, these material things take on their particular meanings only in relation to the people whose lives they populate. Hal and Lenore’s possessions do not merely represent the couple’s experience of one another; these material things are themselves integral parts of the feelings, sensations, and events of which they are a part, enacting and transforming Hal and Lenore’s love while being, in turn, transformed by their relation to it. Using Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism, I argue that materiality and meaning are absolutely entangled in the story Shapton’s novel tells. The novel’s form, too, in its radically un-novel-like use of both images and descriptions of material possessions, works to actively produce, not just reflectively relate, the story within. In both its fictional content and formal qualities, Important Artifacts demonstrates and enacts the way in which the meaningful reality of our world emerges through material relationships.

Prior to her life with Hal, Lenore seems to have developed a habit of marking and measuring her days through the objects she encounters, particularly the things she eats. Throughout Important Artifacts, we are presented with excerpts from Lenore’s
various notebooks, always a “Smythson of Bond Street Day-to-a-page Diary.” In addition to listing things she has to do on any given day, Lenore is constantly noting down the food she’s eaten. In a March 12, 2003, entry, for example, she writes:

“Coffee with skim / Apple / Grilled cheese / 1 rice cake / ½ slice pineapple upside-down cake / Salmon / Red wine” (19). Lenore is a food critic for the New York Times, so this is presumably a professional tendency. Yet more than being just a reflection of her job, this habit works to mark Lenore’s days through her encounters with food, with the material she consumes. Upon re-reading her agenda entries, Lenore would recall a “sort-of fight over water bottle” within the context of “Skim latte / Sushi / 2 apples / Cheeseburger / Coffee with skim / Chinese food” (19). Of course, this listing habit has the effect of hiding something as potentially volatile and scary as a fight with a loved one within a plethora of insignificant food items, allowing one to elide or minimize the weightiness of the “sort-of” disagreement. Yet the habit also highlights the maximal importance of objects like food in Lenore’s day-to-day habits. In this running record of Lenore’s daily life, experiences are marked and recorded through her encounters with edible materiality.

This foregrounded interest in things continues when, after meeting at a Halloween party on October 31, 2002, Hal and Lenore almost immediately begin exchanging gifts. Just days after their first encounter, Hal sends Lenore “A brightly patterned cotton shirt with unique large sequined appliqué” and “a postcard of a Wolfgang Tillmans photograph” on which a note is written: “Nobody ever buys me

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2 Leanne Shapton, Important Artifacts and Personal Property From the Collection of Lenore Doolan and Harold Morris, Including Books, Street Fashion, and Jewelry (New York: Sarah Crichton Books, 2009), 19. All further references will be given parenthetically in the text.

3 This note is italicized in the text. In Shapton’s novel, italics denote quotation from letters, postcards, and other objects described in Important Artifacts, while auction-lot descriptions remain non-italicized.
clothes” (6). The implication, it seems, is that the night they met, Lenore expressed to Hal that same sentiment, that “nobody ever buys me clothes,” and so his first gesture of affection is to purchase her a shirt, to buy her the very thing she feels she doesn’t often receive. The sequined shirt, then, isn’t merely a gesture *through* which Hal expresses his feelings of interest to Lenore; the gift doesn’t just accompany a note in which Hal tells Lenore how excited he is by their encounter. Rather, the object itself *is* Hal’s message of love. It is the gift itself, the sequined shirt, that is the affection he expresses. As Marshall McLuhan would say, *the medium is the message*.

Lenore’s response is an equally material one, “Eight Scrabble letters in a paper envelope, spelling out ‘THANK YOU’ ” (6). The gratitude she expresses in her Scrabble-piece note is inextricably linked to the materiality of its game-piece letters. In order to decode the message, Hal is forced to arrange the individual letters into a series of meaningful words, and as he writes in an unfinished letter to a friend, “I arranged them to say ‘okay hunt,’ ‘a hunk toy,’ and ‘yank thou’ before I figured it out” (6). A certain playfulness is contained in Lenore’s message that emerges only with its material form. Only as Scrabble pieces does the “thank you” note take on its interactive, silly, and rather mischievous features. A simple card would by no means suffice to convey the lovely, playful message expressed by Lenore’s toy-note. Her message’s feelings and affections are conveyed not only in the gift’s language, but in its material form. From the very start, objects are absolutely integral to the way in which Hal and Lenore communicate their love for one another. Material objects aren’t simply the vehicles for such expressions of affection; rather, the objects themselves are affective, loaded with affectionate meaning in their own right. Shirts
and games don’t just accompany messages of adoration—they are the messages of adoration. Hal and Lenore’s language of love, it seems, is a material one. As Walter Benjamin writes, “We are concerned here with nameless, nonacoustic languages, languages issuing from matter.” In the lives of Hal and Lenore, love, affection, and the darker emotions that follow are expressed in a language of things.

Indeed, the very existence of their relationship appears contingent on the fact of its materiality. Soon into their love affair, Hal departs on a three-week trip to England during which he promises to send Lenore ten postcards. Fifteen days into his travels, Hal receives a package from Lenore to which he responds with a postcard:

> Thank you, oh thank you for your lovely package! I was beginning to think I’d imagined our whole affair, that I was a lunatic sending these cards off into the ether. I have put the little kangaroo on my bedside table, and immediately gobbled the buttermilk. The CD has been on heavy rotation in my rented Peugeot, the lavender shirt fits perfectly, and all of the reading material is wonderful. (10)

Without the material certainty of a reply, Hal is momentarily unconvinced of the reality of his relationship with Lenore. Objective, materialized proof of their love is, to some extent, necessary to subdue his doubts, for it isn’t out in “the ether” that their love exists; it remains wholly within the objects and gifts they exchange. The things collected in *Important Artifacts* are the very stuff of Hal and Lenore’s love, and when, as during Hal’s trip to England, that material begins to evaporate, so too do the feelings and emotions it constitutes.

In her essay “Exhibiting Lost Love: The Relational Realism of Things in Orhan Pamuk’s *The Museum of Innocence* and Leanne Shapton’s *Important Artifacts,*” Zuzanna Jakubowski argues that the constitutive role played by material objects in

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Shapton’s novel suggests a new and different kind of realism concerned with “presentation rather than representation, constitution rather than depiction.” She argues that Shapton’s book relates reality through the “circulation of reference” among objects and their textual descriptions. In lieu of the traditional representational understanding of words depicting meaning-laden material reality, Jakubowski suggests that meaning is related precisely through the moment of meeting between word and thing. In *Important Artifacts*, text does not entirely mediate the material world; rather, both words and objects reference each other, depicting reality in the process of their shared relation. Jakubowski calls this way-of-depicting “relational realism”:

> Reality, according to this model, exists exactly and only in the reference, in the moments of transformation from referent to sign. This means that neither referent nor sign have an exclusive claim to reality and that the opposition of an unattainable real and shadow-like representation is a false one. Reality is not brought about by things as material objects or by things as concepts, but through the circulation of reference between them.

In this relational representation, neither word nor thing is wholly responsible for the reality we experience. Such meaning, rather, is related through language’s reference of materiality, through a meeting of word and world in which neither lays sole claim to the stuff of reality. Jakubowski argues that *Important Artifacts*’ use of both text and material objects to relate the story of Hal and Lenore “[complicates] the simple opposition between a ‘representational’ sign and a ‘presentational’ reality.” The book’s story, the reality it presents us, is crafted through the relations of things; its

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6 Ibid., 131.
7 Ibid., 131.
8 Ibid., 132.
reality “emerges from the rhetoric of the metonymical relation of the things to each other” as objects are ordered and juxtaposed to produce meaning. Only when the book’s objects are contextually ordered with one another and accompanied by descriptive explanations do they come alive, bursting with imaginative life in the romantic exploits of our two fictional lovers. The story of *Important Artifacts* is related through the entangled relations of words and things, an entanglement which, Jakubowski suggests, “destabilize[s] the boundary between fiction and fact, language and reality, representation and what is represented.” Through its visible and vital presentation of objects, *Important Artifacts* blurs the distinctions separating linguistic representation and material reality, as *both* emerge able to relate meaning.

Despite her interest in the presentational work of the object world, Jakubowski, it seems, underdetermines the active role of things in *Important Artifacts*, reducing materiality to narrative signs. Something more profound, I think, is at stake in the material world depicted in Shapton’s novel. Jakubowski writes that *Important Artifacts* is “Narrated by the objects on display,” a claim that drastically simplifies the role played by things in the novel. For these material possessions do not merely relate the story of Hal and Lenore, mediating between human characters and human readers, but rather the book’s objects are deeply constitutive of the story they tell. *Important Artifacts* does more than destabilize the ways in which meaning is related through its narrative use of things. More radically, Shapton’s novel offers a vision of how meaning is in fact *made* when things meet one another. Though Jakubowski is rightly interested in the book’s material-linguistic method of representation, its

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10 Ibid., 143.
11 Ibid., 136.
depiction of the constitutive relationships between people and things suggests a more radical reworking of our understanding of the very reality *Important Artifacts* illustrates. Indeed, despite her interest in a literary realism that dissolves the opposition between reality and representation, Jakubowski remains largely interested in the novel’s way of representing reality, not in the very reality that it represents. At stake in the lives of Hal, Lenore, and their things is the very making of reality, meaning which emerges through relations among things, a reality that in fact the form of the novel seeks to enact.

The meaning held by the material possessions which litter the pages of *Important Artifacts* emerges only with their relation to Hal and Lenore, their shared context within their owners’ love life. The very importance of these objects is fundamentally intertwined with the love and loss of which they are a part. Lots 1142 and 1143, for example, depict two garments, “A green cardigan” and “A McGill University Athletics T-shirt.” Presented with photographs of the items themselves are four other images: one of Hal wearing the cardigan, one of Lenore wearing the cardigan, one of Hal wearing the T-shirt, and one of Lenore wearing the T-shirt. One item description explains that the “cardigan sweater originally [belonged] to [Hal’s friend] Jason Frank”; the other tells us that “The shirt once belonged to Jared Bristow, an ex-boyfriend of Doolan’s from high school” (54-55) (see figures 1 & 2). Each of these garments held particular meanings prior to their shared inclusion in Hal and Lenore’s relationship. The cardigan, a sweater once owned by a best friend, was the material symbol of the long-standing relationship between Hal and Jason. The McGill T-shirt was an artifact of youthful love, the lasting memento of a not-so-lasting
LOT 1142

A green cardigan

A green wool cardigan sweater originally belonging to Jason Frank. Cloth patches on elbows. Label inside reads “Cooper & Row Ltd.” Size M.

$20–35

Included are two photographs. One snapshot of Morris on couch, wearing the green sweater; 4 x 6 in. One snapshot of Doolan in her apartment, wearing the same sweater; 4 x 6 in.
LOT 1143
A McGill University Athletics T-shirt
A gray cotton McGill University Athletics T-shirt, emblazoned with varsity logo. Much wear and fading. Label inside reads “Russell Athletics.” Size XL.
$10–15
Included are two photographs. One snapshot of Doolan with her computer in bed, wearing the T-shirt. One snapshot of Morris on a staircase, wearing the T-shirt. Both 6 x 4 in. The couple referred to the T-shirt as “the sex T-shirt,” as wearing it indicated readiness for sex. The shirt originally belonged to Jared Britow, an ex-boyfriend of Doolan’s from high school.
childhood romance. Though these initial stories by no mean disappear upon the clothes’ inclusion into a new relationship, within the context of Hal and Lenore’s shared lives, the garments take on new and altered meanings. Jason’s old ratty cardigan becomes a garment for reading and lounging, an article entwined in the intimate, shared domestic life of both Hal and Lenore. Lenore’s ex-boyfriend’s old T-shirt, too, takes on new meaning; the item’s description explains that “The couple referred to the T-shirt as ‘the sex T-shirt,’ as wearing it indicated a readiness for sex” (55). An object that once held import as a memento from a former lover is transformed into something new, the materialization and indication of a specific, repeating moment in the couple’s sex life. In the context of Hal and Lenore, the shirt becomes inextricably linked to their particular shared loved affair; its newfound meaning is absolutely contingent upon the object’s relation to the lives of its owners. Like the cardigan and T-shirt, the things of *Important Artifacts* become what they are only through their relations and connections to Lenore Doolan and Hal Morris.

In his essay “Unpacking My Library,” Walter Benjamin writes of this peculiar and intimate relationship between people and the things they own: “…ownership is the most intimate relationship one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.”¹² In his analysis the experience of collecting is a one-way street: man collects objects, and in them, he lives, consumed by their magical and endless mystery. In *Important Artifacts*, however, that relationship between owner and object seems to flow both ways, each living within and through the other. While Hal and Lenore quite literally live in “the sex T-shirt” as they wear it around the house, so too does the shirt become itself through them, emerging with meaning

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and import only through its connection to the two lovers. Both object and owner, it seems, come alive together, creating one another through their shared relation.

Likewise, the various things contained in *Important Artifacts* take on their particular meanings through their own proximities and relations to one another. Only when held together, collected and united, do Hal and Lenore’s artifacts take on the meaning they hold and convey. Isolated, the objects of *Important Artifacts* have comparatively little meaning; or, at least, somewhat different meaning. A blancmange mold, for example, conveys thoughts of cakes, kitchens, and delectable sweets; however, when its image follows the description of a nomination for the National Newspaper awards “for [Doolan’s] *New York Times* story about blancmange,” the mold’s meaning becomes wholly more complex and particular (59-60). Like the chipped, enamel blancmange mold, the vast majority of Hal and Lenore’s things are old, used, antique—they’ve lived other lives within vastly different contexts. Yet here, in the lives of Hal and Lenore, none of those particular pasts or individualized histories seem to matter. It is this new context, surrounded by the objects adored and stories lived by Hal and Lenore, that these clocks and vases, hats and sunglasses come to meaningful life. The importance of these artifacts isn’t designated until they come into contact with one another. Only then, when playbills are scrawled upon, lingerie is worn, and one is laid next to the other, do these objects mean what they so vividly do. Benjamin describes this “enchantment,” this taking-on of meaning, as “the locking of individual items within a magic circle.”13 He uses this concept to make sense of the wondrous ordering of like items within the bounds of a collection (in Benjamin’s own case, books). The “magic circle,” however, seems also to describe the collection of

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13 Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library,” 60.
uniquely differing and vastly unlike objects within the pages of *Important Artifacts*, for it is only in relation to one another that these objects become the enchanted, story-laden things they are. Together, united by their shared context within Hal and Lenore’s relationship, these things take on new meaning, becoming more than mere coffee grinders or toast racks. Their importance, their meaning, is made only when things touch one another.

Such significance, however, hangs delicately and momentarily in the balance, for the meaning made and held by these objects remains absolutely contingent on their proximity to one another and their place within the lives of Hal and Lenore. Reading *Important Artifacts*, it is impossible to forget the impending fate of the catalog’s objects, split up and scattered one by one into the hands and lives of strangers. Soon, the couple’s “1940s cotton baby onesie, price tag still attached,” an object loaded with the dashed hopes of a family that might have been, will again become an antique, an item for sale (89). In fact, with an auction date of “Saturday, 14 February 2009,” that dispersal has long since happened. The very form of *Important Artifacts*—its auction-catalog-ness—insists upon the radical instability of the things it depicts, their constant potential to be made anew in the context of others. Though the painstaking, cataloged documentation of the objects’ histories and circumstances suggests an audience of buyers interested in purchasing things precisely due to their connection to Hal and Lenore, these material possessions will nonetheless take on new meaning and importance in the context of other people. As with a palimpsest, traces of past loves and past lives remain despite being partially written over upon inclusion into new homes, placement on new shelves and mantles.
The meaning of these objects, so contingent upon their relations to people and to other things, is thus in the process of a perpetual remaking. For just as they did in the lives of Hal and Lenore, these things will take on new meanings in relation to different people and different objects; they will continue to shape and be shaped by the lives of others.

This dependence upon ever-changing relations with others to make meaning of things is a microcosmic, intimate iteration of what William Connolly calls “a world of becoming.” In an essay of the same name, Connolly describes our world as one made up of the perpetual “emergence of new formations,” an ever-occurring process of becoming which emerges “through periodic intersections between” various bodies and forces.14 To make sense of this complex process of emergent, contingent meaning, Connolly gives us “connectionism,” a way-of-seeing which “presents a world in the making in a universe that is open to an uncertain degree.”15 Through this “connectionism,” he argues, one can remain attune to the ever-shifting relations upon which experience and meaning are utterly reliant. “I…am a connectionist,” Connolly writes,

exploring loose, incomplete and partial connections in a world of becoming. Without such connections, experience could not be. It would be noise. It is partly because of noise and litter that new things can come into being, ruffling an established set of connections or throwing them into crisis.16

The impending, looming “crisis” of Important Artifacts’ auction date is an insistent reminder of the potential for meaning to be made and experienced anew through the

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15 Ibid., 232.
16 Ibid., 233.
perpetual shifting of relations. It is only within particular relations that the objects of Shapton’s book become meaningful in particular ways.

Karen Barad calls this entangled and deeply material process of meaning-making “agential realism.” In her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad argues for a “relational ontology” in which the meaningful reality of our world is not inherent in things, but emerges through the connections and relations among them.17 “This is not a static relationality,” she writes, “but a doing,” an active process of meaning-making that occurs through shifting relations and ongoing changes.18 Objects, here, are not passive relaters of external meaning, the material narrators of human experience described by Jakubowski; rather, materiality is thoroughly and dynamically engaged in the very making of meaning. The tattered cardigan and “sex T-shirt” shared by Hal and Lenore are active, constitutive parts of the reality experienced by the two lovers. These material possessions don’t merely *tell* a story to which they are privy; they make the story possible, they take part in the story’s coming-about, they *are* the story. Barad’s agential realist philosophy makes apt sense of the material meaning-making process at work in the lives of Hal and Lenore, for as Susan Hekman writes, “Agential realism is not about the representation of an independent reality, but about the real consequences of intra-action”19 with the

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18 Ibid., 135.
19 In her agential realist account, Barad eschews the word “interaction,” favoring instead “intra-action,” a retooling of that word which emphasizes the already-entangledness of the things in relation to one another. While “interaction” presumes that there are separate and distinct agents that precede their interaction, Barad’s neologism recognizes that any distinction emerges only through the process of intra-action. Entanglement, then, is prior; distinction is made evident only after-the-fact.
world.”

“Real consequences” of material engagement are precisely what *Important Artifacts* makes so powerfully evident.

This relational making of meaning, however, doesn’t remain merely a part of *Important Artifacts*’ content; the novel’s very *form*, in fact, crafts narrative meaning through the same agential realist methods. The novel’s reality emerges not from purely linguistic descriptions, but out of the relations among the textual captions and material objects that litter its pages. Reading Shapton’s novel, it is abundantly clear that, as Barad writes, “meaning should not be understood as a property of individual words or groups of words.” She continues: “Meaning is neither intralinguistically conferred nor simply extralinguistically referenced. Meaning is made possible through specific material practices.” Indeed, these claims are made strikingly evident in the formal qualities of *Important Artifacts*, for it is not only the book’s descriptions that make sense of the objects with which they are paired, but both caption and thing *together* that generate meaning felt and understood by the reader. The novel’s final pages, for instance, feature two collections of dried plants. The caption of the first reads, “A group of dried flower petals from various occasions, kept and pressed by Morris”; the other, “A group of four-leaf clovers from various places, kept and pressed by Doolan” (128-129). The parallel, near-identical construction of these phrases hits hard, emphasizing the intense similarity and seeming compatibility of these two individuals who, separately, have the same habit of collecting, drying, and pressing plants between the pages of their many books. The descriptions alone are loaded with sadness for the disappointing demise of a love with

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20 Susan Hekman, “Constructing the Ballast,” 104.
such apparent potential. Yet so much else is contained in the grainy photographs of
the plants themselves. The delicate, flaky petals and mangled, misshapen clovers
convey a sense of loss that escapes the item descriptions, a feeling only magnified by
the photographs’ grainy chiaroscuro. It is only in the unified relation between the
plants’ photographic depictions and their descriptions that the objects’ manifold
meanings emerge. Neither word nor thing simply reflects the other; rather, *Important
Artifacts* forces us to read *differactively*, bouncing between and through texts and
images, objects and words to craft an understanding of the book’s narrative.

In both its content and its form, *Important Artifacts* “shifts the focus from
questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality…to matters of practices,
doings, and actions.”²² The novel is engaged not in a reflective representation of
reality, but in an active production of material meaning.

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CONCLUSION
Enduring Diffractions

My hope is that these novels have show that a renewed attachment to the material need not signal a regressive embrace of the natural, the essential, or the innate of our world. Only in a stable reality would materiality mean unchanging, and the world of which we are a part is anything but. The shifting of everything is unending and utterly pervasive; the most inert of rocks experiences an imperceptible yet relentless erosion, a perpetual phase change. A vision of our world as active and unstable allows us to attend to materiality without rooting ourselves in the permanence of the natural. In her account of diffraction, Donna Haraway describes this powerful metaphor as “a narrative, graphic, psychological, spiritual, and political technology for making consequential meanings.”\footnote{Donna Haraway, \textit{Modest Witness@Second Millennium.FemaleMan© Meets OncoMouseTM: Feminism and Technoscience}, 273.} I find her and Karen Barad’s emphasis on diffraction absolutely key to understanding the power of the theoretical work emerging from this recent turn towards the material. Diffraction makes room for the consequential effects of the human and the thing, the social and the material. Meaningful change occurs as each alters the other, diffracting difference throughout the varied forces of which reality is composed. Though our material world may, per Hayles, impose certain constraints, it need not wholly constrict our efforts to change, alter, and transform the world of which we are a part. After all, the material world transforms itself with or without human engagement. An attachment to the material world we have urges us to do real and meaningful work to alter and adjust our reality.
without making it utterly anew. For we don’t need to newly render a world; we already have a spectacular one.
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