Intervening into Social Reality: The Materiality of Performance in the Performance of the Material

by

Samuel J. Morreale
Class of 2019

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Theater and the Science in Society Program

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2019
# Mapping Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prologue</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Social as the Real</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reality as Socially Perceived</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening Doors to the Significance of the Object</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abject Object Gendering</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleanliness is close to Racelessness is close to Human-ness</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potty Break (for Space)</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Human as an “It”</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh, the Incompossibility!</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Fabulism of Performance</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabulist, Darling, Fabulist: Black Fabulism in the Theater</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mess</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

To my advisor, Megan Glick: There are no words to express my gratitude for all of the patience, generosity, and care you have given me. You have a groundedness about you that brings me clarity in my most hazy moments. Thank you for understanding the ways that the personal and scholarly are caught up in one another. Thank you for the space you have given to me. Just…thank you.

For my mother: You’ve always been there. You’ve always been messy. I carry your love with me in all that I do. I breathe the intentional and unintentional lessons you have taught me. When I am most insecure in my ability, you reinforce my capacities and leave just enough room to know that failure is okay too. I love you, and you don’t understand.

Katherine Brewer-Ball: Wow. You gave me the bug. Thank you for offering me these tools and methodologies. Thank you for expanding my bibliography. I owe my ability to engage critically in the discourse of a text to you. I’m invested in our becoming.

Cláudia Tatinge-Nascimento: Thank you for making me see the value of practice, of impact, and of the material world. Thank you for making me angry at this institution, even if my anger then has morphed into something more new and personal now.

To my Professors: Whether it be in the Center for Humanities, at your lectures, in your classrooms, or abroad - thank you for your teachings. Whether good, bad, or in-between they have brought me where I am today. Thank you for the ways you have carried my weight.

To theater artists, whether it be at Penumbra, Mixed Blood, Second Stage, Shades, Broadway, or otherwise: Thank you for showing me the transformative power of theater.

To my friends, current and past: To you I owe the most. Thank you for carrying me through Wesleyan. Thanks for putting up with my obsession with space. Thank you for encouraging me to embrace the messy bits. You make me a better person, and I hope I offer you the same. I’m not going to list you all, because honestly if you know you know, and I’m here to stir the pot. You’re thanks will be received in my interactions with you.
**Prologue**

Cutting across disciplinary approaches affords me a method of doing work that apprehends the black artist in a range of media. With the contemporary social and political movements to which my own scholarly labors are indebted, such breadth seeks to work against being disciplined by the academy through a scholarly protocol of divide and conquer.

- Tavia Nyong’o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life*

Bear with me.

I am interested in messes. The foundations of my academic career - my vocabularies, frameworks, methodologies, and knowledges - are rooted in interdisciplinary study. I was not trained to see divides, but to make connections. Science and Technology Studies and Performance Studies may seem like different worlds, and yet each field takes up objects for analyses that serve to reveal mediated movements of power. Though the ends of each field may be different, their means are in discourse. Each field is built from black, feminist, queer, and cultural scholarship; each works in a foundation built on similar vocabularies.

How do we pull both together to work in tandem and cover more ground? Science studies seeks to understand the mediation of social reality by clocking the impact of an object. Its aim is to understand the placement of the subject in a realm that we consider to be objective. By questioning objectivity, science studies questions authenticity and truth by drawing into skepticism the social position of the claim-maker and their potential biases. Performance studies, similarly, is the study of authenticity and truth. It
interrogates the manipulation of the object, and how it might be mobilized to reveal mediation. Performance scholars seek to understand affect: how do the things we experience inform each other? Each field questions how objects come to exist in the world, and how these understandings inform the objects that come after. With these understandings, each field hopes to offer better control in mobilizations of power that offer the movement of reality through recognitions of the real as something which is socially perceived and understood, bringing reality into a space of malleability.

As I mobilize the frameworks that have been offered to me in order to make offerings to you, I think it is important to reveal my own mediated experience. I refuse to pretend that the material impact of my status as a poor, black/brown, queer person in the world - both in singular and intersectional ways - does not inform how I move through it. My existence cannot be extricated from these identities, and thus in all that I do I perform, (re)inform, (re)iterate, and (re)produce them. My hope is to make clear how and where my subject shines through, and what it perpetuates. I am disinterested in becoming a holder of knowledge who performs as an all-powerful being of truth in the world. I open this essay by recognizing that I, in fact, have much to learn. This means that intentionally and unintentionally I will perpetuate ideas that will impact you and others in ways that manifest themself in the world somehow. Let me take this moment then to apologize for the present and future harm that I may induce.
To further reveal my approach, I am invested in the minoritarian, including black feminist thought and philosophies, and liberatory praxis. As such, I am invested in modes of being that offer space to the minoritarian - a figure that I too encompass. This means acknowledging the things I perpetuate in this form, in this academic space and the way that its moves (my moves) to define anything simultaneously liberate and confine. I seek theory to understand my own body’s subjugation in the world and how my subject status informs my movement and the movement of others. I hope to manifest with a level of consciousness that limits the violence I perpetuate, while also making room for the inevitable violence that I produce as I take on the project of unlearning this institution. In all that I do, as an academic or otherwise, I seek to pay avid attention to the material impact of that which I do. I refuse abstraction for the sake of disassociation from the self, but rather write purposefully with attention to the “who” that my claims effect. Holding this space for myself in the work means that you, the reader, can control the extent to which you take my words as “true” by understanding them in relation, in motion, and in conversation. So, I implore you as you read to think about the ways we can think together. Rather than explain away the “contents” of this project, I offer to you a map that will carry us on a journey. I’m aware of how trite this may sound, but hopefully the idea of a trip is just as exciting to you as it is to me.
This essay is my first at-length attempt to visit and dance with the rhyming of my fields, performance and science Studies. More specifically, I will draw on the methodologies of social critique offered in both fields in order to speculate on social mobility. I hope to excavate a tunnel that connects the concepts of each that I see as one and the same, while bracing for the impact that this collapse of knowledge might offer. As my first movement in this academic arena, a space that historically removes me, I hope that my work is read with care, with critique, and with an eye and mind that is interested in forms of institutional undoing. I hope that when you read, you keep yourself in relation to the work and how it acts on you and/as you act on it. I ask for your patience. I ask for your generosity. I ask for your commitment to building bridges where I got lost and for your willingness to get lost with me. I am constantly plagued by my own inability to make the claims of my convictions; I fear that all of the holes in my knowledge will prevent me from making them well. Instead of letting that feeling hold me back, I use this essay as a way to make space for myself to indulge in a world that seeks to destroy my pleasure, build bridges that such a world seems to dislike, and rest in my liveness as a form of knowledge itself.

By the end of this lengthy journey, I hope that you will have seen what I understand to be the humble beginnings of concepts and frameworks that I do not yet have the bibliography to support in their fullest. I am not yet enough of a performance nor science studies scholar to say that the conclusions I
would like to make equal, are, in fact, equal. Better yet, I lack investment in
the general idea of “conclusions,” and instead hope to offer messes that lead
to other messes.

My interest lies in the parallels of rhetoric used by scholars to describe
actor-network theory and an actor’s performance. Actor-network is a
methodology used to understand the mediated movement - or better yet the
*performance* - of objects in the world; in other words, how objects prescribe
particular action to users, reveal information about their designers, and
recapitulate forms of social understanding. If we see this movement as
performance, then it becomes possible to see the correlation to the way that
actors are taught to move on stage by capitalizing on material understandings
of their bodies. This collapse offers speculative possibility for social change
and the types of space-making that I am most invested in. In order to get to
this speculation, I must take the time to parse through the theories and
practices which prove social movement possible.

In order to do this, I first deploy the work of social theorists who bring
performance into the daily space by understanding reality as a fabricated
concept. Once this is accomplished, I move to analyses of objects which have
served to control social reality and its perceptions, performances, and
recapitulations by way of the claims made in actor-network theory. After
revealing this is in fact possible, further proving the artificiality of our social
world, I offer the speculative in-between that brings this understanding closer
to performance studies. I play with other theorists interested in the fabricated world, dedicated to understanding how it is fabricated, and invested in how it might be re-fabricated. This then offers me movement to theories most rooted in performance studies relating to the actor as object. These theories pertain to mobilizations of the material in order to manipulate semiotic meanings understood by the audience. Offering the language of actor-network to these concepts, I suggest that these semiotic understandings in fact graft themselves onto the material form of the actor and follow them into their performed reality, being that the performed reality onstage is in fact representative of performed realities offstage, which are again suggested by those theorists who present reality as a perceived construction.

As I begin this endeavor, I look to define the common understanding of ‘real’ as ‘material.’ With this accomplished, I hope one may be able to better understand reality as more drastically malleable instead of fixed by some sort of ‘natural’ order. I push to distinguish the material in order to further understand its effects on the part of our lives which is social, or our ‘social reality.’ Leaning into the uncomfortable nature of this will allow us (you and me) to recognize the cycle of reality that we (the global populus) are in and how that reality holds and exerts power over us. I see this understanding as a key to social change, as we must understand what we seek to change before it can be fully captured - otherwise we risk reifying and redoing the reality that we are hoping to avoid.

Time for reckoning.
The Social as the Real

What is it that we mean when we refer to objects, people, nature, and intangible concepts as socially constructed? If we are to understand these things as void of the naturally occurring, as coming from humanity and all of its (pre)conceptions, then where does that leave us? Conversations that begin to pinpoint the artificiality of a topic of concern quickly spiral upward into esoteric, all encompassing everything-nothingness that causes existential crises as they become less and less grounded in what is commonly understood to be ‘reality.’ Reality becomes understood as its own type of artificial performance with a set of rules and codes that keep it intact. I would argue that to understand these rules and codes of performance and their relationship to the construction of the ‘real’ offers social mobility. To understand the parts that make the whole means having a grasp of how to wield the parts. Instead of running away from a conversation, why don’t we do what it is that academia loves to do and unpack the conversation. Let us interrogate the performances of the material in order to understand the material performance that we currently put forth in the world. With this, perhaps we might open the possibility to put forth performances with more intentional and material affect.

Once we are able to understand reality, we begin to understand how objects are placed into and unto it, and how those objects inform how people
understand and perceive social space. Since the beings creating objects have been grafted with signifiers such as race, gender, sexuality, ability, citizenship, class, and language (among other things), then the objects which are created by these beings holding specific intersections of these signifiers must also signify these social categories. In doing so, these objects - just as much as the beings that created them - are perpetuating systems of power and oppression. Here, we begin to see the beginning of a feedback loop being created. Once this constant reinscription is better understood, I offer that the beings which hold the power to signify can be more critical and careful about which systems inform the creation of the objects put in the world, and therefore better control how those systems will be perceived and perpetuated by other beings in the social space.

**Reality as Socially Perceived**

Let’s begin by finding a common definition of reality. Reality, as I see it, is something that is perceived by the *individual* based on the perceptions of *collective* groups of people. This means that each person’s perception of reality is unique according to their social position, and yet collaboratively constructed by a collective conscious to which they are actively constantly contributing. If every single person’s understanding of reality is unique however, then there is no singular definition and therefore no singular foundation from which to build. Furthermore, this means that each individual
person who puts action or object into the world is creating a reality based on the one they perceive. Though this is messy, it is this kind of messiness I feel we must stay in and interrogate.

How then do we go about understanding the way that reality sits with artifice? In his writing, Jean Baudrillard argues that there is no longer a ‘real,’ but merely new representations of what is believed to be the real. These representations are what he calls simulacra.¹ To bring his audience to this understanding, he references Borges’ tale, which I repurpose here in summary. The tale follows cartographers who create a detailed map of a province scaled to the size of the province itself. It should be evident that a map of this size becomes useless, as it no longer signifies that which is material, but is a duplication of the material itself. The map which is meant to be an abstraction of reality becomes, in essence, reality itself when it simulates space exactly. In Baudrillard’s words:

> Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory - PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA - it is the map that engenders the territory…²

For clarity, Baudrillard says that the objects we put into the world are no longer real as they once were when the first came to being in the ontological sense. Instead, they are now simulations of real things; they hold a material

---

² Ibid, 409.
space informed by a material that used to be. Present objects are reproductions of a reproduction of a reality that was. As he points out, this is the signified preceding the sign. The previous sign, meant to signify one thing, produces a sign that signifies a whole new thing, and so on and so forth. This is knowledge production. Baudrillard continues to explain the impact of these claims, offering:

[The] age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials - worse: with their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs, a material more malleable than meaning in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalences, to all binary oppositions, to all combinatorial algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real.3

There is clear fear in the all encompassing nature of artifice which Baudrillard recognizes. As he moves on in his writing, he describes how different signs have created materiality, particularly in media and technology. He does not confront this fear of the entanglement of artifice and reality, however, nor does he attempt to interrogate how an understanding of reality as so malleable can offer us more flexibility and freedom in social space than is thought possible.

To understand this perception of ‘reality as simulated’ from another perspective, I turn to Clive Dilnot, a scholar of design. In “Reasons to Be Cheerful 1, 2, 3, … (Or Why the Artificial May Yet Save Us),” Dilnot historicizes the etymology of “artifice,” offering his audience the understanding of “the emergence of a new historical condition, one in which

3 Ibid.
the artificial constitutes world and forms the horizon and medium and the prime determining condition of how we are.”⁴ In other words, he offers a deeper insight into the world which Baudrillard verbosely describes, and pushes further by offering a comprehensive scope of his claims’ impact.

Dilnot aptly points out that there seems to be a collective finger on the pulse of reality in modernity. He credits this collective emotion and perception to the mutual understanding that our reality is finite. He references the impact of global warming particularly, noting that humans will be unable to survive in the near future due to our mammalian inability to confront rising temperatures. Without humans around, there is no reality, as the concept itself is only defined by our consciousness. It is this understanding that pushes Dilnot to historicize social understanding of reality, as he seeks to understand how the human might still become in the face of possible (inevitable?) extinction. He marks perceptions of the real in what he refers to as ‘crude’ diagrams, though I find them illuminating helpful to understand the framework put forth. Dilnot describes each diagram in detail, but for the sake of my argument I will paint the briefest of pictures from the first to the last and connect each to Baudrillard’s points more saliently.

The Place of Artifice and the Artificial in Human History

1800

Fig. 1. Artifice and the artificial in the space of stuff making up to c. 1800.

1800 - 2000

Fig. 2. The explosion of artifice in industrialization c. 1800-2000.

2000

Fig. 3. The artificial as world 2000.
In the first diagram, “artifice is central but limited,” Dilnot states. He reveals that without artifice, “there is not human becoming” but do to the time period in which humanity was “under the conditions of hand labor,” the ability to affect nature was limited and minute. Here, we see that it is nature that makes up reality. Humanity, we see in the figure, is bound by and is a part of nature. All of this is understood in the era of inquisition to be controlled by beings of higher power. Continuing to the second figure, we see artifice expand, and as it does so does humanity. This is the mark of the Industrial Revolution. It is at this moment that we see humanity gain a hold of nature, and therefore humanity becomes the higher beings previously thought to control all as it gains great ability to affect. Finally, we reach present day in the last figure. In Dilnot’s descriptive explanation of the diagram:

Artifice encompasses: it constitutes world. Today, it is gradually becoming apparent to us that from around 1945, the world entered into a sixty- or seventy-year transition in which industrialization became global, and what we can call the incomplete artificial world of the early twentieth century was transmuted into the condition we are now beginning to experience in which the artificial, and not nature, is the horizon, medium, and determining condition of the world…

In other words, we have reached the point in which nature has become a simulacra. Humans in our becoming have had such effect that we now produce what is ‘natural.’ Nothing goes untouched by the human, and therefore everything has the possibility for contestation.

---

5 Ibid, 188-189.
6 Ibid, 187.
Cultural anthropologist Sherry Ortner identifies this collapse of the natural into humanity's cultural reproduction in essay, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” recognizing the cultural reproduction of the cultural by means of manipulating the artificial divide between nature and culture. She defines the constructed distinction as follows:

[The] categories of “nature” and “culture” are of course conceptual categories - one can find no boundary out in the actual world between the two states or realms of being… I would maintain that the universality of ritual betokens an assertion in all human cultures of the specifically human ability to act upon and regulate, rather than passively move with and be moved by, the givens of natural existence.

Her emphasis here is on the politics of movement and association between that which is natural versus cultural inside of the constructed bifurcation. Allocations to the category of “nature” versus “culture” and “artificiality” versus “reality” are not without value and meaning. Placement in these hegemonic divides controls movement. Ortner identifies that culture, “at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature.”

And how does culture exert this power? In her words, “that sense of distinctiveness and superiority [of culture] rests precisely on the ability to transform - to “socialize” and “culturalize” nature.”

Dilnot describes the implications of such understandings as he makes clear how the artificial manifests the real. In doing so, he does not make room...
for a binary to be created between what is considered ‘real’ and ‘artifice,’
which in Ortner’s vocabulary might be understood as ‘nature’ and ‘culture’
respectively. Instead, he offers a similar understanding of Baudrillard’s
simulacra in which their is a recapitulative relationship between the two
hegemonies. He explains himself using the example of a genetically modified
tomato:

A genetically modified tomato is neither purely natural nor purely
artificial. It belongs rather to the extended reals of living things that are,
as we ourselves are, a hybrid between these conditions… we are now
condemned to the artificial as the essential horizon and medium of our
becoming.\footnote{Dilnot, \textit{Reasons to Be Cheerful}, 190.}

The reason for our condemnation is that there is no way for us to undo what
has been done. We have effected so much of nature that what became
nature now reproduces itself - this tomato being a prime example. But what
other things do we reproduce? How else have we influenced this space we
consider reality? What other combinations of the natural have we defiled?
And what understandings do those combinations of the natural reproduce
themselves? All of these are questions Dilnot is interested in, though he
provides no answer. He is only curios in the political space that this
understanding of reality might offer, as am I. Unlike Dilnot however, I seek not
to sit in the condemnation of artifice, but to understand how it may offer
liberation by means of new becomings.
In order to explore the possibilities of humanities becoming, I first explore the way in which we have become. By this I mean to explain both Dilnot and Baudrillard's claims that reality as nature is no longer, but rather reality is simulation. I offer this explanation through object analysis of artifacts inhabiting our world which have manifested materially from our perceptions of reality, and simultaneously reinform those perceptions. To get here, I’d like to introduce the workings of Latour to this text to understand how objects act - or better yet perform - for and unto us.

Opening Doors to The Significance of the Object

In this section I will do a critical analysis of several objects which have been created with particular perceptions of racialization, gendering, class status, sexualization, or other human constructed conditions. Through this I hope to make clear the prescription of these experiences, and the malleability of the social by revealing the malleability and movement of the objects in social reality. The objects I take to task vary widely, but each has a particularly oppressive history that continue to constitutes those in their wake today which I hope offers generative discourse for the trajectory of my claims.

Before I begin to explain each object in significance, I open with Bruno Latour's reading of objects as actor. His insight is vital to understand the reason for this critical analysis; every object has a way of doing something in the world, therefore informing human movement and human action. This
doing might be described as a performative, to borrow from J.L. Austin’s use of the word.12 I want to describe this doing as performance for a multitude of reasons, among which are its ability to draw attention to the artifice of the object movement and also for the theoretical moves it will allow me to make in forthcoming sections.

In order to figure out how objects perform action, one must take a skeptical approach. Latour describes this reading of object in the material as identifying “the hidden and despised social masses who make up our morality.”13 What he means here is that each object reveals something about the human condition and our social reality, so to better understand the material is to better understand social reality. Each object has the opportunity to reveal human condition because it is human in its ontology; the human is what brought it to being. If this is so, then each item is similarly informed by systems of power and value which inform the human existence. In plain terms, this means that the material can inform the ways in which we value race, gender, sexuality, and class among other social constructions. Furthermore, Latour claims that every item in the world - the material - informs humans how it is to be used, and what the human is supposed to gain from its use. This means that the material just as much as our subject given peers teach us systems of value. Though Latour does not focus on the way

that object perpetuates these systems, he does explain how the object acts on us and performs for us. For his analysis Latour turns to the door - an oft forgotten invention as it is proliferous in mundanity today.

Latour begins his description of the door with some humour. “Walls are a nice invention,” he says, “but if there were no holes in them there would be no way to get in or out.” A very astute observation, but nevertheless one that reveals the greater complexity of the door and its material purpose. Latour continues on his anecdotal journey: “The problem is that if you make holes in the walls, anything and anyone can get in and out… so architects invented this hybrid: a wall hole, often called a door…” As he continues, Latour’s next steps are to reveal the mediation of the door itself. He notes that someone made the choice to create the wall hole object with a specific shape and purpose. The coded systems used to create the door then acts on the user to inform them how they ought to move, navigate, and inhabit the space in and around it. Latour describes the work of the door in its hinges specifically: “We have delegated (or translated or displaced or shifted down) to the hinge the work of reversibly solving the wall-hole dilemma… I do not have to do this work nor even think about it; it was delegated by the carpenter to a character, the hinge, which I will call a nonhuman.”¹⁴ In conclusion: the door is a powerful and informing force, playing a role in the performance of reality just as much as any other actor.

¹⁴ Ibid, 228-229.
The insight that an object offers us into the human condition is revealed through what Latour calls its *prescription*. He says, “Prescription is the moral and ethical dimension of mechanisms.”\(^{15}\) Latour begs the question, “How can the prescriptions encoded in the mechanism be brought out into the world?” to which he answers, “By replacing them by strings of sentences (often in the imperative) that are uttered (silently and continuously) by the mechanisms for the benefit of those who are mechanized: do this, do that, behave this way, don’t do that way, you may do so, be allowed to go there.”\(^{16}\) Each word string has its own performative, to again call upon Austin.\(^{17}\) The question to ask now is from whom these values come. Latour identifies the value coming from the objects creator: “The non-humans take over the selective attitudes of those who engineered them.”\(^{18}\) Here is revealed the simulacra of our performed society. Reality is consistently done over through “selective attitudes” held by creators. This of course gets complex once we begin to unpack who is given access to create and engineer objects taken up in mass by the populus. Whose values are being prescribed to the world? How do these values become others’ realities? What is the material’s role in passing on these values?

As regards the door, Latour explains the way that it prescribes action to its passerbys. First, he introduces the ‘spring’ as a nonhuman which

\(^{15}\) Ibid, 232.
\(^{16}\) Ibid, 232.
\(^{17}\) Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.
\(^{18}\) Latour, *Where Are the Missing Masses?*
replaces the porter to close the door behind those who open it. However, in
design, the spring is only meant to shut the door; it lacks grace. In Latour’s
words, “They simply slam the door shut. The interesting thing with such
impolite doors is this: if they slam shut so violently, it means that you, the
visitor, have to be very quick in passing through and that you should not be at
someone else’s heels, otherwise your nose will get shorter and bloody.”¹⁹ This
isn’t necessarily a problem, to be clear, and Latour seems disinterested in
interrogating the specific “who” that does and does not benefit from this
prescription. Though he does not define the users socially, he does explain
that those who pass through and use the door regularly will learn how they
must interact with the door, and again this is because of the prescription the
door offers the user: “walk through, don’t linger, rush, close me,” are just
some imperatives demanded. But what of those who do not use the door
regularly? Latour does not leave them out. He says, “Visitors, unaware of the
local cultural condition, will crowd through the door and get bloody noses.”²⁰
Of course, now that we have doors with hydraulic systems, this type of
discrimination is far less likely. It wasn’t until we created doors that both
opened and closed on their own that doors became physically accessible to
all types of differently abled persons. It is arguable that the only discrimination
currently served by the door is in who it intends to keep on either side of the
wall which it opens.

¹⁹ Ibid, 232.
²⁰ Ibid.
This discrimination in the prescription of the material interests me. Where Latour avoids interrogating such, I am interested in who exactly the visitors of this building are? Who are the people whose heels and noses become bloody? What is their social position, how does it inform how they move in this performed reality, and how does this status become clear through that which the door prescribes? In order to understand the way that the material discriminates and reifies our social realities, I offer an analysis of objects, through intersectional means, which have been taken up en masse after their purposefully creation and production to actively perpetuate and enforce racism, misogyny, classism, and other systems of oppression.

When Time Began

I begin first by interrogating beginnings in the literal temporal sense. In *Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism*, E.P. Thompson tracks the history of the clock and its effect on the laborer under capitalism. He is interested in the way the perception of time shifts with the creation and commercialization of the object, questioning:

[How] far, and in what ways, did this shift in time-sense affect labour discipline, and how far did it influence the inward apprehension of time of working people? If the transition to the mature industrial society entailed a severe restructuring of working habits - new disciplines, new incentives, and a new human nature upon which these incentives could bite effectively - how far is this related to change in the inward notion of time?

---

22 Ibid, 57.
Before industrialization, Thompson notes that people measured time not in the rigid numbers we use today, but in descriptive recounting of events which gave someone a temporal sense of that which they needed to relate to in order to imagine a moment. The focus on time as event in early societies is called “task-orientation.” This makes sense for the way that labor was employed, as it was more about survival and community than it was about commodification and commercialization. Tasks could be carried out for the individual and on individual notions of time. Thompson notes three qualities of the task oriented society, two of which are useful for my purpose: first, “the peasant or labourer appears to attend upon what is an observed necessity,” and second that, “a community in which task-orientation is common appears to show least demarcation between ‘work’ and ‘life.’” Again, what he is pointing out is that society at this moment defined work differently. Work was the labor necessary for one to survive - getting sustenance, building shelter - rather than live. As he notes, to work was to live; there was no understood difference between these states of being. His focus on the labourer and peasant here begins to reveal his understanding of where class status and perceptions of temporality intersect.

The moment in which this task-oriented view of time changes is defined by Thompson as the moment when time became an economic matter. This occurred when contractual employment came into reality. Though

---

23 Ibid, 60.
24 Ibid, 60.
being paid for one’s time seems like a very simple relationship, it had significant effects on the way one perceives reality. “Those who are employed,” Thompson states, “experience a distinction between their employer’s time and their ‘own’ time... time is now currency: it is not passed but spent.”\textsuperscript{25} It is due to this shift in the sense of time that the clock become widely distributed, though not at first. First, the clock was manufactured by artisan clockmakers, and the materials for production were costly. Most clocks were found in common communal spaces, such as the church, and though this history is disputed it seems that the only people with access to the pocket watch were those who could afford it - the upper class. Thompson justifies this statement by analyzing documents which recorded the cost of the watch:

No labourer whose budget was recorded... could have meditated such prices, and only the best paid urban artisan. Recorded time (one suspects) belonged in the mid-century [of the 1700’s] still to the gentry, the masters, the farmers and the tradesman; and perhaps the intricacy of design and the preference for precious metal, were in deliberate accentuation of their symbolism for status.\textsuperscript{26}

So it seems that for some period, time was a privilege only metaphorically afforded to those who could materially afford it. In this sense, as Thompson states, the watch became a symbol of status and of class. In who it was and was not accessible to, the watch became an object coded as a sign of status, prescribing to all of those who came into its contact the power which class status offers. We see further the classed history of the clock as a tool for

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 61.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 67.
capital when capitalism solidifies its hold during the industrial revolution. It is at this moment that the watch becomes widely distributed, and its connection to the demand for “greater synchronization of labour” brought on by industry is clear; in order to produce commodities more efficiently, workers needed to be on the same pages as to when labor was to be done.27 As Thompson puts it, “The small instrument which regulated the new rhythms of industrial life was at the same time one of the more urgent of the new needs which industrial capitalism called forth to energize its advance.”28

What Thompson is describing is the way that the creators of the watch offered a new method of social control, even if this was indirect and outside of their intention. The ability to have a mass understood quantification of time allowed those with class power to regulate how this time was to be spent leisurely or laboriously. Before the mass production of the watch, the material object was seen as one of class status. After its mass production, it continued its ontological pursuits by regulating who was meant to be where at what moment. This offered those with class status to, as Thompson makes clear, advance their own economic growth. This conception of time is still present in the contemporary moment, as we continue to schedule ourselves around the work day and contribute to a commodification of our time. In the end, time has become money for both the employer and employee.

27 Ibid, 69.
28 Ibid, 69.
Abject Object Gendering

Outside of its ability to inform class, the material the material can also prescribe gender and sexuality. In order explain how this occurs, I turn to an object whose manifestation was grounded in the systems of control and power offered through gender roles. Rachel Maines maps the history of this object, and in doing so reveals the mediation of its being through its original purpose to promote the oppression of cis women. The object in question? Ladies, gentlemen, and all those in between and above - I present to you, the vibrator.

As a technology like any other, the vibrator was created and designed by engineers in order to fulfill a specific purpose. In the case of the vibrator, this purpose was to entice the female to orgasm. For clarity of my intentions, I perpetuate this language for the sake of historicity alone. This was how the woman - who I strive to hold as having as much autonomy as any man - was referred to by the men seeking to control her. Rather than understand the subjective position held by women, men sought to and continue to seek their domination through objectification. As Maines makes clear, the creation of the masturbatory technology comes from androcentric views of sex and sexuality,

---

so in historicizing it is important to understand the rhetoric used in creation, and how that rhetoric is viewed today.30

The vibrator was created to offer ailment for a disease which is no longer diagnosable today. This disease, hysteria, “displayed a symptomatology consistent with the normal functioning of female sexuality, for which relief, not surprisingly, was obtained through orgasm, either through intercourse in the marriage bed or by means of massage on the physician’s table.”31 In other words, the normal desire for sex by a female became something of concern under the male medical gaze, and the ‘symptoms’ manifested as understandable irritability due to lack of physical satisfaction was thought to be an ailment rather than normal response. In Maines’ historization, she credits the vibrator’s discriminatory prescriptive modes based in three themes:

[A]ndrocentric definitions of sexuality and the construction of ideal female sexuality to fit them; the reduction of female sexual behavior outside the androcentric standard to disease paradigms requiring treatment; and the means by which physicians legitimated and justified the clinical production of orgasm in women as a treatment for these disorders.32

What interests me is the way that this one object wrought with misogyny was brought into the world by men simply as a tool of power and control over women, and in such had the power to inform those under the object’s influence of patriarchal control. The societal training for men to produce

30 Ibid.
31 Ibid, 2.
32 Ibid.
toxically masculine behavior pushed individuals among their cohort to create an object that would continue to aid their prejudice against women.

As Maines points out, the first condition under which the vibrator manifested was a socio-sexual reality which defined sex by androcentric terms alone. She lays out two events which both “popular and medically (and for the matter legally),” must occur in order for sex to be “regarded as the real thing,” and therefore serves to police the movement of bodies: “penetration, and male orgasm.”\textsuperscript{33} Men then (and frankly most men now) believed the sexual world to revolve around them, and seek only sexual realities that reify their socio-sexual stature, even at the expense of other people’s realities.

What of women and their pleasure? Maines explains:

\begin{quote}
[M]ore than half of all women, possibly more than 70 percent, do not regularly reach orgasm by means of penetration alone... This majority of women have traditionally been defined as abnormal or ‘frigid,’ somehow derelict in their duty to reinforce the androcentric model of satisfactory sex.\textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

Not only were women subject to the sexual objectification of the male, but they themselves were also objectified to serve the social purpose of dehumanizing other women who could not (again, for very fair reasons) reach orgasm through penetrative sex. Shockingly, we find in Maines’ narrative that this rhetoric continued in the medical field until the 70s; medical authorities assured men in heterosexual relationships that “a woman who did not reach

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 5.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
orgasm during heterosexual coitus was flawed or suffering from some physical or psychological impairment."³⁶

This move to medicalize female sexuality is what constitutes Maines’ second point as regards the conception of the vibrator. She marks a clear moment in which the medical authority takes up the physical state of womanhood and pathologized what we see today as very normal behavior. The diagnosis of hysteria was based on a collection of symptoms each of which Maines notes “are those of chronic arousal: anxiety, sleeplessness, irritability, nervousness, erotic fantasy, sensation of heaviness in the abdomen, lower pelvic edema, and vaginal lubrication.”³⁶ One thing that Maines brings our attention to is the way that these very normal behaviors not only caused the misdiagnosis and mistreatment of many healthy women (by the definitions of the time), but also caused the misdiagnosis of women with possible mental or physical disorders “whose symptoms overlapped significantly with the hysterical disease paradigm.”³⁷ All of this violence and pain due to the male inability to own up for the lack of care in pleasuring women. This lack of regard for the treatment of women’s sexuality and pleasure reverberates today.

It is with this mindset and understanding of social reality that the material manifestation of the tool known today as the vibrator was created. Maines shares:

³⁵ Ibid, 6.
³⁶ Ibid, 8.
³⁷ Ibid.
The electromechanical vibrator, invented in the 1880s by a British physician, represented the last of a long series of solutions to a problem that had plagued medical practitioners since antiquity: effective therapeutic massage that neither fatigues the therapist nor demanded skills that were difficult and time-consuming to acquire.\textsuperscript{38}

It was a technology that was meant to aid the physician and cure the patient, both in very different positions of power as regards their gender. Interestingly, the device not only offered relief to those diagnosed with the constructed disease, but as Maines notes it “resolved the dissonance of reality with the androcentric sexual model.”\textsuperscript{39} The dissonance that she is referring to is the realization that with this understanding of female desire as pathological, dissonance was created between the desire for a chaste and loyal woman who only offers pleasure to her husband, and the woman diagnosed as needing pleasure and being prescribed and offered solutions outside of the marital bed. Rather than a doctor needing to \textit{do the deed} manually, they now had a mechanical object, which in this moment seemed to relieve them of their moral ineptitudes.

The vibrator offers an interesting case study of the way that technology as object has a way of teaching us about the social reality of a time, and how it constructs and reconstructs that reality. Not only do we understand the clear misogyny of society in the vibrators creation, but we can also mark consistent attempts to pathologize certain subjects in the social realm - particularly those who hold a social position without power. Sexual arousal is entirely natural

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 11.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.
(though reasons for arousal may not be), but through pathologization of this very natural reaction those in power were able to benefit. Though with Maines help I have laid out the way that men benefit from the vibrators connection to and reification of a gender hierarchy, Maines quickly points out that the object also serves the system monetarily. Like most medicalized conditions, much of the creation of hysteria and the vibrator is wrapped up in consumer capitalism. In Maines’ quick reference to this, she notes that women created a perfect market as they were patients that “neither recovered nor died of their condition but continued to require regular treatment.”40 To explicitly finish the thought, this means more money for those who monetarily benefit from ‘treating’ and ‘fixing people.’

Just like the watch, the vibrator has moved past its original discriminatory prescriptions through mass production. Similarly, this does not exempt it from consumerism, but it has given a power back to the bodies its use was intended to demean and control. Maines explains the moment that the object was democratized as the moment it “began to appear in erotic films in the 1920s, [as] the illusion of a clinical process distinct from sexuality and orgasm could not be sustained.”41 In other words, it became very clear that the vibrator in ‘curing’ an ailment was also providing sexual pleasure - something that was (and is) considered to be very unladylike to desire and seek out.

40 Ibid, 4.
41 Ibid, 10.
Thankfully for those interested in sexual liberation, the vibrator didn’t disappear from the material after it lacked use in the medical field. In Maines’ historization “the vibrator reemerged in the 1960s… it had been democratized to consumers to such an extent that by the seventies it was openly marketed as a sex aid. It’s efficacy in producing orgasm in women became an explicit selling point in the consumer market.” In this we see potential for an object to hold prescriptive elements in one temporal moment based on the understanding of social reality, and then change as perceptions of reality change. Arguably, the vibrator in its material form today encourages sexual liberation among womxn. How might we understand and analyze the ways that this revolution of the vibrator shows potential for social growth? How does its semiotic malleability become relevant for that of other material?

Cleanliness is close to Racelessness is close to Human-ness

At this point, we have thought through two objects which prescribe, inform, and perform particularly classed and gendered experiences of the world. Note my use of the word ‘particularly’ here in an effort to hold space for the intersectional movements of these objects. The objects previously taken to task do much more than inform only race and class. We live in a complicated social world with complex signifiers often entangled in intersectional ways. However, for the sake of furthering this discussion and

42 Ibid, 20.
offering continued grounded examples, I would like to submit to you one other object found in the everyday: soap. Soap is an object with an explicitly raced manifestation which I will clarify through mobilizations of the historization presented to us in Anne McClintock’s chapter “Soft Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising” from her book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest.*

This chapter marks a moment in history when society becomes obsessed with what it means to be clean, and this rhetoric of cleanliness pervades many spheres of contemporaneous life.

McClintock begins by pointing out the movement of soap as a commodity into the mainstream market. An object which most encounter on a daily basis in the present day United States was not as proliferous once upon a time - that time being anything before the early nineteenth century. McClintock specifies:

> At the beginning of the nineteenth century, soap was a scarce and humdrum item and washing was a cursory activity at best. A few decades later, the manufacture of soap had burgeoned into an imperial commerce; Victorian cleaning rituales were peddled globally as the God-given sign of Britain’s evolutionary superiority...

In this one statement, much like the clock, we begin to see a class distinction created by the use of the object. Unlike the moves made in Thompson’s account of the clock to connect its use directly with class singularly, here we

---


44 Ibid, 207.
see McClintock move to connect the use of soap not only with class but more importantly with biological superiority. McClintock notes that to clean oneself was seen as some sort of evolutionary advantage, hinting at social darwinist logics attempting to biologically essentialize what is complicated human experience. At the moment that soap became a common item it was connected with the progression of civilization. To be clean was to be “civilized” - a word used historically to diminish the experiences of Others through the creation of value based dichotomies. Britain’s status as a collective of “evolutionarily superior” people was consistently reified through the commercialization and commodification of soap globally. Digging deeper into McClintock’s words, she is noting that the Western desire for cleanliness and its connection to a civilized status was enough to allow the object to be widely taken up by countries around the world looking to maintain distance from “savage” status.

Before diving into further racist aspects of the object, McClintock continues to suss out and historicize the imperial project of soaps distribution by relating it to the upsurge of domesticity further codifying the object:

The emergent middle class values-monogamy ("clean" sex, which has value), industrial capital ("clean" money, which has value), Christianity ("being washed in the blood of the lamb"), class control ("cleansing the great unwashed") and the imperial civilizing mission ("washing and clothing the savage")-could all be marvelously embodied in a single household commodity.45

This one item found today in the everyday American household is riddled with a history of the white, wealthy, cisgendered, heteronormative, patriarchal institution which we inhabit. Therefore - as previously argued - this object informs those realities in its continued use. The fetishization of cleanliness pervades, and this only becomes more complex when considering the role of race in soap’s coming of age narrative. In fact, McClintock marks domestic commodities such as soap as objects which offered the first forms of systemic racism in the archive:

No preexisting form of organized racism had ever before been able to reach so large and so differentiated a mass of the populace. Thus, as domestic commodities were mass marketed through their appeal to imperial jingoism, commodity jingoism itself helped reinvent and maintain British national unity in the face of deepening imperial competition and colonial resistance.46

The mass production and market of these household commodities offered people many objects on which to latch their identities. Subjectivity poured into the material from the human object and furthered the ability to distinguish lived experiences from one another by recognizing prevalent population use of the commodities. What McClintock is pointing to is the perfect temporal nexus of imperial prowess and colonial defence lining up for these commodity objects to take on hyper-significance in re-organizing and re-categorizing human identity. McClintock credits the creation of the objects’ signifiers not to their creators, but to the creators of the advertisements which accompanied

46 Ibid, 209.
them. According to McClintock, advertising became vital to the colonial project:

Advertisers billed themselves as "empire builders" and flattered themselves with ‘the responsibility of the historic imperial mission.’... Soap was credited not only with bringing moral and economic salvation to Britain’s "great unwashed" but also with magically embodying the spiritual ingredient of the imperial mission itself.\(^{47}\)

That imperial mission of course being to assert power over Others outside of the empire and all those defined as having the ability to inhabit it.

She points to one advertiser in particular who sparked this imperial advertising project with great success, Thomas Barrett. He is one of the advertisers credited as one of the creators of advertising as we know it today. More aptly put in McClintock’s words, Barratt “won himself lasting fame, in the familiar iconography of male birthing, as the ‘father of advertising.’”\(^{48}\) Barratt ran the \textit{Pears} soap company, and his most famous commercial ploy was to link the \textit{Pears} brand with a famously well known painting by artist Sir John Everett Millais. McClintock historicizes:

Barratt bought Sir John Everett Millais’ painting “Bubbles” (originally entitled “A Child’s World”) and inserted into the painting a bar of soap stamped with the totemic word \textit{Pears}. At a stroke, he transformed the artwork of the best-known painter in Britain into a mass produced commodity association in the public mind with Pears. At the same time, by mass reproducing the painting as a poster ad, Barratt took art from the elite realm of private property to the mass realm of commodity spectacle.\(^{49}\)

\(^{47}\) Ibid, 211.
\(^{48}\) Ibid, 212.
\(^{49}\) Ibid, 212.
Barratt boosted the status of soap by associating it with a piece of high art. Following the framework I have offered, this means that soap is now coded with the aesthetic purpose of art, and - to some extent - the art is signified with all that soap represents. The objects come into relation. Pulling it to a relevant full circle, McClintock notes how the performative operates here through Barratt’s use of spectacle. She defines this particular functionality by noting “Advertising’s chief contribution to the culture of modernity,” which was “the discovery that by manipulating the semiotic space around the commodity, the unconscious as a public space could also be manipulated.” The power of advertising was the recognition and then manipulation of the non-real space which we inhabit.

It may seem that the context I am drawing from inside of McClintock’s work is tangential to the explicitly racialized, but to think this would be untrue. What McClintock is pointing out is that this history of race and racism is caught up by both the imperial and colonial project of the Western world. I follow McClintock’s lead in narrativizing her work, bringing up the explicit racialization after the background has been offered and understood. For the ease of the reader and the ease of argument, I include to the right the image to which McClintock refers. In regards to the image, McClintock shares that this is “A typical Pears’ advertisement...” She describes the scene in detail:

In this particular ad, a black boy sits in the bath, gazing wide-eyed into the water as if into a foreign element. A white boy, clothed in a white apron - the familiar fetish of domestic purity - bends benevolently over

---

50 Ibid, 213.
51 Ibid, 214.
his “lesser” brother, bestowing upon him the precious talisman of racial progress.\textsuperscript{52}

At this point, it is clear that the ‘precious talisman’ which she is referring to is the bar soap wielded in the hand of the white boy. In case it was unclear to the audience (both the audience of that time, and the one of this moment) what the purpose of the soap was, the black boy’s body is shown before and after being dipped into the water filled bath topped with soap bubbles. Before his quick dip in the bath the boy’s skin is unblemished. Once removed from the baptismal he is shown to have the body of a white boy with his face left untouched by the “clean” water. What this does is associate blackness with a lack of cleanliness, forcing dark skinned persons to inhabit dirty space in the mind of social consciousness. McClintock describes further the insidious consumption of black subjectivity through narrativization of the happening in the image:

In the second frame of the ad, the black child is out of the bath and the white boy shows him his startled visage in the mirror. The black boy’s body has become magically white, but his face - for Victorians the seat of rational individuality and self consciousness - remains stubbornly black… the black child witnesses his predetermined destiny

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 214.
of imperial metamorphosis but remains a passive racial hybrid, part black, part white, brought to the brink of civilization…

The only part of the black child left untouched by the imperial object is his face - the one part of the body which is thought to hold what it means to be “human.” In essence, this furthers a narrative that black people are uncivilized, and though the white man may allow Others into his world, his power must always be upheld through the diminishment of those he deems less valuable. As well as this is the reality that no matter how assimilated an Other may become, they will always be demarcated as Other.

Again, like those that came before, we see in this object the shaping of societal values through the placement of signifiers onto object. These objects then become tools of power, passing along value and judgment based on what it has come to represent. It signifies to its user the understanding of social structure which has been placed onto it. Furthermore, we are seeing how the system of signifiers such as race, class, gender, etc. have been abused and manipulated by those who hold the positions of highest value inside of said system.

I would be remiss if I didn’t once more hold you, the reader, and myself accountable to the way that these ontological histories of each object have come with us into the present moment. Though each object I have described may not have the exact semiosis as it did when it was created, it does not

---

53 Ibid, 214.
mean it has escaped its episteme. To use soap as an example, the racist
trope of black person as unclean is still prevalent. Many soap companies
have published advertisements much like the one produced by Barratt. Let’s
take the 2017 Dove commercial campaign on social media as just one
example. In a short gif (still image below), a black woman reaches down to
remove her brown shirt. After this removal, what is revealed is a white woman
in a white shirt underneath. Here, the echoing of the Pear’s campaign
reverberates, wherein cleanliness is linked to racial identity and skin color.
The democratization of object does not erase its past, but it does offer the
potential for it to prescribe differently to the present and future moment.

54 Maggie Astor, “Dove Drops an Ad Accused of Racism,” The New York Times, October 8,
Potty Break (for Space)

At this point, there should be a clear understanding as to how an object in a singular mode acts unto and performs for its user. Now, let us think about the performance of an ensemble of objects. Objects do not exist in untouched space, but converse amongst each other and act in solidarity according to a shared discourse. This discourse is created through the placement of objects in relation to one another, and the way that they are placed in relation to one another may be referred to as the creation of a space. These spaces
therefore take on a similar role to the object; referring back to Latour, the space becomes the actant and prescriber much like the object. In order to clarify this, I’ll take respite in the spatial analysis of the restroom offered by Harvey Molotch, Laura Noren, and company in “Toilet: Public Restrooms and the Politics of Sharing.”

In the introduction, Molotch sets up the this anthology of the toilet by recognizing the social control which the space of the restroom - both public and private - exerts onto users. This set up follows similar methodologies which I have offered in this paper as regards the object and its analysis. Molotch offers to readers a vocabulary to understand that the design of space, i.e. a collection of objects, is informed by the subject who created it and therefore exerts the designer’s will to some extent. Here, space, just as much as objects offers users rules of inhabitants and relationality. Molotch’s setup sits in a state of paranoia; he presents a barrage of queries that the typical toilet user must ask. For example, “How far away is the facility? Is it clean and clean in a sense that matters to me? Do I have access to it by right? By money? By force?” and so on. The point of this onslaught is to lead the audience to an understanding of the bathroom as a space packed with social codes of expected performances and imperatives. Each question assumes the behavior of the user, and how the way they move through the

social world is controlled by what lies on the other side of the question. After further global contextualization, Molotch shares explicitly that “we have in the toilet an instrument and institution that both reflects how people and societies operate and also reinforces the existing pattern.”\(^{57}\) In order to avoid the redundancy in the framework I have laid out, I will highlight some of the primary points that Molotch makes about the toilet as a space which bolsters the greater claim of the teaching of social performance through interactions with materiality.

Molotch begins with what is arguably the most evident social performance prescribed by the loo. He states, “In rich places or poor, and more than anywhere else in public life, toilets inscribe and reinforce gender difference.”\(^{58}\) This is of course due to the strong architectural separations between where people with penises and those without ought to eliminate their waste. “…[M]en and women,” he writes, “can be physically near (utterly adjacent, in fact), so long as there is sight separation, for example, by a thin wall between stalls marked for men and for women.”\(^{59}\) We see in architectural choices both the cultural and state desire to separate humans by gender as well as the reinscription of gender by the separation of space. Molotch points out many different cultural performances which we are taught based on the gender segregation of the bathroom. Though he notes the separation of gender and several bathroom performances associated with and reified by

\(^{57}\) Ibid, 4.
\(^{58}\) Ibid, 5.
\(^{59}\) Ibid, 8.
the separation, Molotch does not locate the performance in the objects that make up the space. In effort to ground his claims in my own framework, I offer some object analysis of the space that relate to the social performances he makes reference to.

First, I offer the reinscription of gender associated with the material presence of the urinal. Molotch paints the picture of male performance in the bathroom by offering the negative of women’s performance. The takeaway that he offers is that the women’s bathroom is a social space meant for pampering and socializing while the men’s bathroom is only meant for waste excretion. The urinal creates the physical performance and gesture of men needing to stand in order to pee, rather than sitting. This movement - both excretion and transit - requires men to spend less time in the restroom. This act of gendering is not the only social performance the object offers, however. Standing to pee, and therefore touching less surface area of the bathroom, has been associated with a higher degree of cleanliness. Referring back to the claims McClintock makes of soap, we know that cleanliness is a concept which is routed in imperial racism. How does this prescribe meaning to those who sit to pee? Is there some sort of inherent uncleanliness which this necessary act always holds? Of course, the answer to this is no. Nonetheless, this is part of the meaning we mark this space with, and the meaning which it prescribes back. The urinal’s presence also dictates who

---

60 Ibid, 6-7.
can be deemed “man” by asking those looking to urinate in a ‘male’
designated restroom to have the ability to stand while peeing. The presence
of the penis as an apparatus makes this a simple task, but in reference to
queer approaches to biology one can understand that not every person who
has a penis is necessarily a man, and not every man has a penis.61 Further
than this, a “man” with the physical inability to stand while urinating is thus
emasculated in their use of the restroom. (My reading of this is not
necessarily a negative one.)

Another object in the space which creates and reifies social
performance is a trash receptacle meant only for menstrual products.
“Besides different body ‘plumbing’ that affects, in particular, the discharge of
urine,” Molotch writes, “women menstruating… need special trash receptacles
for their sanitary napkins and tampons.”62 I offer a criticism of the use ‘need’
here, as the need for a separate receptacle and process to take care of a
common bodily excretion is an entirely constructed one. However, the
creation of an object to promote this separate process is still worth
interrogation. The presence of these receptacles teaches many lessons, the
first of which is that menstruation is somehow less clean than any other form
of waste. This can be chalked up to the fact that an entirely separate waste
bin has been created in order to keep used menstrual products from

contaminating other forms of waste. Again, I harken McClintock’s claims of the racist history behind the word ‘clean,’ but leave the work of interrogating that argument here up to the audience. The second function and performance mandated by the object’s presence, similar to the urinal, is the policing of gender through dictation of who is allowed to menstruate. These receptacles are only found in bathrooms marked to include women, leaving out those whose bodies carry out the menstrual cycle but do not identify with what it means to be female. Moreso, as Molotch points out, biology is far more complex than “male” and “female.” “Where do the transgender people go? Or people whose biology renders them intersex?” he asks. Both of these questions deserve interrogation.

Continuing to complicate the restroom space further, Molotch notes other inadequacies in the space-as-object - some which I have already alluded to - which further reinforce who is allowed to occupy it:

Bodies differ not just by gender (and its own variations) but also by age, circumstance, and accidents of fate - imposing various degrees of ability and disability made evident through the public toilet. We were all children once, a life stage of special needs, with respect not only to supervision and care but also to size and proportion - being able to climb onto the toilet seat, hold oneself on without falling in, and reach for the soap, faucet, or paper towels.

The emphasis here is on all that the bathroom as a space, a collection of objects in discourse, that tells us what we are and are not allowed to do.

According to Molotch, the public restroom performs inaccessibility by making

---

63 Ibid, 7.
64 Ibid.
it physically unusable to those without proper proportion and strength. How
then does “proper proportion” and “strength” get defined? And by whom?
Who was given the right to keep children, the elderly, and those with different
abilities from finding refuge in the public restroom? Let us not forget that
these design choices, regardless of intentionally, are nonetheless informed by
contemporary cultural perceptions. There is much to learn from interrogating
the mediation of a space as nothing is apolitical. The semiotic relationships
we are taught to create with phenomenal object are governed in the most
political sense.

Molotch has much to say about this governance as he continues
setting up his colleagues analyses of the toilet. “The personal is political,” he
strongly begins in his next section:

Much of governance is about sorting, such as where you have to live to
vote or how old you must be…Legislating, by physical arrangement or
legal authority, arises from this need to enforce the specifics of who will
be with whom, where and when. The restroom then becomes a tool for
figuring out just how society functions - what it values, how it separates
people from one another, and the kinds of trade-offs that come to be made.65

The claims Molotch makes about the political power of a space rhyme with
that of Latour’s claims of the object.66 Each and every material object or
collection thereof can be analyzed and reverse engineered in order to
understand the values of the social system of power in control. In
understanding the role of the object or space as object, how it performs and

65 Ibid, 8.
66 Shoutout to Katherine Brewer Ball.
acts onto its users, and therefore encourages performances on the part of the user, we are able to better understand the value systems which we often subscribe to without a second glance.

**The Human as an “It”**

In different words, what Molotch, McClintock, Maines, Latour, and others are offering is an understanding that the object, in the singular or multiple sense, offers us less insight about the object itself, but rather the object which created it - the human. I refer purposefully to the human as “object” here as I am interested in the claims that can be made when the human is placed at the same material level of the non-human, less in effect to dehumanize and devalue the human, but rather to offer more value to the non-human. When I refer to the non-human, I refer to all that is outside of humanity - objects, animals, and even some categories of the human. What happens when we emphasize the materiality of “the human”? This approach is also my way of recognizing that, again based on the frameworks offered here, that some humans are considered less human than others.

Before I continue, I want to clarify how I will go about presenting the human as an object first with a constituted subject. I lean into this framework as I am fascinated by the semiotic privileging of the subject position over the object position, as well as the individualized assumption that everyone desires to “be” a subject. However, arguably, subjectivity has been a tool
used for oppression because those in power see the subject as more powerful than the object. What if this weren’t the assumption, then? How, instead of starting with the assumption that power is in the hands of the subject, might we rewire understandings of power as in the hands of objects? In order to do this, I want to think with Gayatri Spivak and Mel Chen, theorists who have both made nuanced claims about the use of essentialism in their own work.

Beginning with the Spivak, I introduce her concept of “strategic essentialism.” Spivak interrogates this concept in an interview with Elizabeth Grosz. Grosz points to Spivak’s body of work and its discussions of universal oppression, asking quite generally for Spivak to elaborate what it is she presents. Much like my own claim of leaning into what is feared, Spivak questions, “How can the unexamined universalising discourse of a certain sort of feminism become useful for us, since this is the hegemonic space of feminist discourse?” As I read the words Spivak spoke aloud, I am taken with the thickness, nuance, and paradoxically (non)sensical space that she is able to articulate. She continues to set up strategic essentialism in the following: “the question of the abject is very closely tied to the question of being aboriginal, rather than a reinscription of the object, it is a question of the reinscription of the subject.” As I understand, here she is alluding to the

---

68 Ibid, 10.
69 Ibid, 10.
subject status taken from the aboriginal, violently causing transformation from subject to object. The question as she poses it is how do we reinscribe the subject state to the people newly understood as object?

Her suggestion is to confront and reappropriate universalising discourse rather than deem the practice as singularly violent - which ironically is a universalist claim. This irony is also something that she points out; exploring universalist ideas leads one to essentialist ideas, but one can do this without necessarily repeating how this process takes place in bodies of social power. She begins the complicating process, “rather than define myself as specific rather than universal, I should see what in the universalizing discourse could be useful and then go on to see where that discourse meets its limits and its challenge within that field.”\textsuperscript{70} Here, we see how the interrogation of universalism moves one to the limits, or the defined points, which might otherwise be called essential points. She continues with this logic, sharing with Grosz, “I think we have to choose again strategically, not universal discourse but essentialist discourse. I think that since as a deconstructivist - see, I just took a label upon myself - I cannot in fact clean my hands and say, ‘I’m specific.’ In fact I must say I am an essentialist from time to time.”\textsuperscript{71} What Spivak is pointing to here is the universally essentializing power of language. English is constructed in such a way that to claim identity, say as a deconstructivist, you have essentialised your ontology into one

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid, 11.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid, 11.
category. Labels are totalizing. What Spivak desires is to remain in a level of consciousness and presence when using this kind of language so as to avoid the practice of universalism associated with the patriarchal. “Since the moment of essentializing, universalizing, saying yes to the onto-phenomenological question, is irreducible, let us at least situate it at the moment, let us become vigilant about our own practice and use it as much as we can rather than make the totally counter-productive gesture of repudiating it.” My reading of what she is saying here is that to avoid making universalist claims is in and of itself a universalism, and therefore is not doing away with the form. To repudiate universalism is to make a universalist claim; the claim “universalism does not exist” is thus a recapitulating act.

Objectification has other draws as well, especially as regards the semiotic flexibility that it offers. This is how Mel Chen thinks of essentialism. Similar to Spivak, Chen offers a nuanced reading of objectification, holding space for the violent histories which the practice is associated with. In order to share how I am trying to think and work with human-as-object, I turn the Chen’s lecture at Wesleyan University titled “Something about Nothing.”

What I find most fascinating is the space that Chen holds in this lecture as universalizing the experience of the human as object while taking great care to recognize the individual paths of each human-object. This is the level of care and affordance that I too strive for.

---

72 Mel Chen, “Something About Nothing” (lecture, Wesleyan University Center for the Humanities, Middletown, CT, October 8, 2018).
As I begin this section, I jump past the setup of the lecture in order to clarify for the reader how I wish to make space in my writing for Chen’s own desire for objectification, beginning with the following anecdote:

[S]everal years ago in particular circumstances I began to ask people not only to use he or she or they or the mix of these as my pronouns, but also ‘it’ as a way for me to operate not only as an illegible Asian American trans subject within our broken system of pronouns, but also as I am an animal and a thing.73

In recognition of this statement made by Chen, I will wield its (Chen’s) preferred pronoun usage in an effort to enact the reality it wishes. This will require a bit of labor on behalf of the reader to take care of what in each sentence I am referring to as ‘it,’ but I see this as precisely what Chen is working towards - the muddling of understanding and in-betweenness that is afforded by the lack of clarity in language. I share Chen’s desire and interest in this possibility. In the above quotation, Chen alludes to the “broken” structure of language, and the confines labeling offers. Put another way, Chen is offering a critique of the performative aspects of language.74 It explains in further detail the way that performative uses of pronouns have been used oppressively, and highlights the care it wishes to take in accepting the status that ‘it’ as a pronoun affords. Continuing to share the story of its request, Chen says:

I offered this…explaining that I had what I thought was a tolerable combination of risk and privilege and social justice commitment underlying the request. Nobody that I knew of took this proposition up - understandably - given the association of “it-ness” to histories of

73 Ibid.
74 I’m recalling here Austin’s offering of the performativity of language.
In these words Chen makes space for the violent histories and connotations that the use of 'it' has made to the treatment of the human. Histories of objectification and dehumanization are inextricably wrapped in the history of imperialism. Humans have historically gained power over other humans by declaring them to hold object status, removing people from systems of ethics that might encourage them to treat others with the respect thought to be afforded to humanity. However, Chen sees other possibilities in objectification. Turning back to some of Chen’s opening statements, it prefaced this moment of vulnerability in which it shared its own desired with the audience by nodding clearly to the performative power of language:

The relationship between language and what it refers to, constructs, or performs is negotiable and deeply substantiating, and that world making within academic endeavours must be an integral part of this activity, or rather is an integral part…the question to me is how to make that world and what worlds to make, or collaborate in making within institutionally standardized traffics and ontologies.  

With these words framing the rest of the lecture, Chen is sharing its interest in the world making possibilities of recognition of human as materially constituted - as am I. There is a movement from the jump of the lecture to gesture toward the speculative, bringing new weight to the experiences of Chen and its linguistic expertise.

---

75 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
As the lecture continues, Chen works to capture the weight of what it-ness means to itself. In order to do this, they describe more with nuanced specificity the speculative lean which ‘it’ affords:

‘It’ is the constitutional nature of human being as one imbricated, coimbricating, with exogenous chemicals and the affects that emerge…‘it’ is one generous and maybe also dangerous way to register genuine affective intimacies with objects with animals with the us-ness of such objects and animals. When you call me it you affirm these queer and trans and lovely and strange and necessary connections.  

Chen clearly isn’t wishing to make use of this word meant to essentialize in an essentializing way; it is seeking, as Spivak suggests, the parts of ‘it-ness’ that allow for a pleasure purposefully withheld from it as a being excommunicated from the attentions of the archive. In this statement Chen is holding space for the recognition of the human as an object made from, and therefore inextricably linked to, the Earth, while simultaneously aggregating what the Earth is. I nod quickly to the echo here of the framing offered early in this essay by Dilnot and Baudrillard. Every offering made works tirelessly to hold the gross violence associated with the language use in effort to limit its violent impacts. In discussion with the audience at the end of the lecture, Chen shares:

[Any] ‘it’ must keep in mind what swims within it; what histories make it do the work that it does and in trying to think of ‘it’ in this way, I’m precisely not trying to collapse identity - including mine - with all of the its that travel within ‘it,’ but rather my need to the mindfulness of the its that travel next to the its that I can claim. That differential it-ness is key to this whole thing. I think that in some ways it falsifies the everything that an ‘it’ might otherwise claim to have.

---

77 Ibid.
78 Ibid.
So ‘it’ as Chen suggests is both everything and nothing. ‘It’ has both its present temporal space as well as one outside of temporality, made up of multiple histories and realities. Chen is simultaneously excavating space to create the representative ‘it’ while keeping itself out of the universalism by suggested ‘it’ in multiplicity. This paradoxical space is what Tavia Nyong’o calls “incompossible.”⁷⁹

This incompossibility is something captured by Donna Haraway as well. Similarly to Spivak and Chen, Haraway plays with materialist understandings of the human which afford a specific kind of movement, though she simultaneously rests in the danger and violence that such claims can commit. Her bent is more toward the speculative use of this understanding, however. Haraway’s background in science and technology studies pushes her argument towards actor network theory, using language of technology to understand humans under the same mode. I am drawing most distinctly from her essay, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs.”⁸⁰

Her argument in this essay centers on the cyborg, a being commonly understood as a mix between animal (of which the human is included) and technology. She defines the cyborg as inhabiting liminal space, “creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously


natural and crafted."\textsuperscript{81} Keeping with Dilnot’s presentation of artifice, Haraway notes the simultaneous space that the human holds as a member of nature, inhabiting material space, while also crafting the world which it inhabits. “I am making an argument,” she claims, “for the cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings.”\textsuperscript{82} In this statement she collapses the space between human as animal and machine as constructed object. She seeks to understand the human as a representation of a social world and of a material reality, nodding towards possible relations this offers in practice. She moves on to make clear he intentionality in doing so:

\begin{quote}
In the traditions of 'Western' science and politics — the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism; the tradition of progress; the tradition of the appropriation of nature as resource for the production of culture; the tradition of reproduction of the self from the reflections of the other — the relation between organism and machine has been a border war.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{83} Her desire here is to push back against the systems of power which refuse to entertain the mixing and obfuscation of the divide between the nature and machine. In the same spirit, I employ this skepticism as regards the system of powers’ support beams upholding the partition which divides the human and the non-human, not just the human and the animal but the human and the object. Connecting the human and the animal is an easy enough leap,

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid, 2.  
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid, 2.  
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid, 2.
something she points out later in the essay.\textsuperscript{84} What Haraway is now fascinated with is the farthest stretches of this previously stated argument. Her desire is to see if claims collapsing the inbetween of the human and animal might transmute to the human and the machine. As she attempts this, Haraway takes note of the West’s history of desires trending towards violence, exclusion, and othering. If this is the trend, then what makes this pillar of power so adamant about refusing the mixing of “organism and machine?” As she takes to task this potential blending, she does not do so without care. She declaratively states, “This essay is an argument for pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and for responsibility in their construction.”\textsuperscript{85} There is more to be said about her push for pleasure, but this is outside the bound for my thesis’ purpose(s) in this moment.

In explanation and exploration of possible understandings of the human and/as machine, Haraway offers two perspectives: the first rooted mostly in science fiction’s teachings of the cyborg in which the planet becomes machine, controlled by masculinist understandings of movement. The second perspective is simultaneously more hopeful and messy:

From another perspective, a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.\textsuperscript{86}

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 4. “By the late twentieth century in the United States scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached...many people no longer feel the need of such separation; indeed many branches of feminist culture affirm the pleasure of connection of human and other living creatures.”

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 3.

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 8.
Haraway is proposing in this second perspective an understanding of the collapse between human and machine as one which helps to reimagine kinship. In other words, this mobilization allows us to redefine the ties and relations that bind us both to other living things and also the things considered inanimate in the world. If the human is put into the same plane as other materials in the world, our movement would be entirely different. Whether for better or worse is up for debate, but the fact that change will be had is clear. To me, the excitement here is a world with identities in constant flux, identities not fixed by our current understandings, but rather in consistent (re)discovery and (re)definition. In this sense, essentialism - rather than being a totalizing and imperial force - might offer realities more queer and black that sit comfortably in opacity and the unknown/unknowable.

I want to emphasize here that what makes me particularly drawn to this materialist position is due to the “who” that currently inhabits its space. It is those intersectionally understood as bearing the brunt of our oppressive social structure who are most understood as object. What would happen if rather than strive for the misidentified utopia as a common conception of subject, we pushed for the complex heterotopia offered by recognizing the base of human understanding reflective of our material world? Haraway backs this perspective, identifying a claim she makes in the essay that, “women of color” might be understood as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities. There are material
and cultural grids mapping this potential.” In keeping with Haraway, I am not trying to suggest that there is nothing that separates the human from other inanimate things in the world, rather I am interested in what happens to the potential change in social reality when we recognize that claims of the social are understood from the material. Whole realms of speculative possibility open to us. Haraway closes out her essay urging readers that, “Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia.”

Oh, the Incompossibility!

Haraway offers a transition into the speculative realm. Where does this understanding of the human-as-object take us? How does it play into actor-network theory and the claims it makes on the normatively understood objects? What is afforded by collapsing the space between the human and non-human as they are imagined? As I begin my attempt to answer these questions, I turn to others interested in this and other speculative turns, mainly the fabulist theorists Tavia Nyong’o and Saidiya Hartman. As an aside, I absolutely want to lean into the fabulousness of this language, but I more particularly mean to emphasis the mode of speculative thought they practice

87 Ibid, 29.
88 Ibid, 37.
in their scholarship. I want to introduce these scholars as they offer me the
opportunity to focus on queer of color critique and black studies, as well as
the broader field of performance studies. Using these scholars as a bridge
between discourses, I hope to successfully collapse the space between actor
network theory and performance studies.

Beginning with Hartman, I want to introduce the vocabulary of the
fabulation,” which has arguably become a foundational concept in the field of
black studies, particularly those interested in dealing with afro-futurist
discourse. To define this term and methodology, Hartman first frames the
fabula using Mieke Bal’s definition, which I replicate here:

A fabula…is ‘a series of logically and chronologically related events
that are caused and experienced by actors. An event is a transition
from one state to another. Actors are agents that perform actions.
(They are not necessarily human.) To act is to cause or experience an
event.

In employing this definition, I want to call attention to the way it mirrors
Latour’s definition of the actor - expanding the label to objects beyond the
human. Once this definition is offered to her readers, Hartman then uncovers
what occurs in making a verb out of the noun:

By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by
re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from
contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of
the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to

90 Ibid, 11.
imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.\textsuperscript{91}

With this new methodology, Hartman is able to take back space in the archive. Once she uncovers the fictions it re-presents in the first place, she can excavate new meaning by reinserting that which is lost, even if the event she inscribes into the archive did not occur as she recounts it. The point is less in about the accuracy of the information, as it is about the affordance of life that it offers to those forgotten or erased by the normative archive. The concept of critical fabulation leaves room for other speculative thinkers to understand the power of the fabula, the power of narrative, and how they might become reinscribed. While Hartman uses the concept in the context of studying history in order to consider the afterlife of a past event during the present moment, how might it also be utilized as a term that looks towards the future?

This is the question of interest to Nyong’o, a scholar deeply influenced by the work of Hartman. In his most recent book, \textit{Afro-Fabulation: The Queer Drama of Black Life}, Nyong’o seeks to mobilize and define the term afro-fabulation, an endeavor he takes on in conversation with Hartman.\textsuperscript{92} In the introduction, Nyong’o reveals his afro-futurist hope and employment of this methodology. He seeks to better understand the way that black, queer, and trans life flourishes in the face of a system created to suppress and erase

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid, 11.
\textsuperscript{92} Tavia Nyong’o, \textit{Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life} (New York: New York University Press, 2019).
\end{footnotesize}
these groups. “How might we begin to make sense of the paradoxical vibrance,” he says, “of a form of life endangered, or even erased, by efforts at documentation and representation.”93 The correlation to Hartman’s work is not difficult to note here. He is asking similarly to Hartman what stories are told in the archive, and which have been banished; how this impacts our current perception of reality, and how might we might restore the stolen power therein.

Nyong’o works tirelessly to avoid defining afro-fabulation in specific terms, but rather aims to define this vocabulary through analogy and employment, maintaining a level of opacity. He offers small gems here and there to give the reader a bit of grounding, but then leaves the labor of clarity unto the reader as an act of fabulation in and of itself. He does this as an act of resistance against the academy, and also as a way to escape the “risk of communicating and rendering overly explicit that which ought more tactically remain camouflaged.”94 In this way, his writing might be described as performative in that it practices what it seeks to elucidate. Early in the introduction, however, he does make clear a tenant of afro-fabulist thinking: “This book’s account of afro-fabulation is thus before anything else a theory of the event.”95 He leaves room in this statement for what afro-fabulation might mean elsewhere, again keeping practice in the writing. He does clarify how the event, better understood as the fabula, becomes qualified with the afro

93 Ibid, 3.
94 Ibid, 5.
95 Ibid.
prefix, noting that afro-fabulation is “a theory and practice of black time and temporality.” Most generally, Nyong’o seeks to clarify fabulation as a concept in order to open future possibilities to his audience. Fabulation as an act “exposes the relation between truth and lying in an other-than-moral sense.” This focus on relationality parallels that of science and technology studies, which as a field seeks to understand and reveal mediated interaction in social spaces. Fabulation with a focus on the relational does the same - it excavates power structures in order to make clear the ways they move through the world. With this movement made clear, Nyong’o opens the opportunity for others to speculate on the control and reappropriation of power made possible in this system. “If one of the most common assertions of performance studies is that performance is everywhere,” Nyong’o shares, “Afro-Fabulations looks to that nondescript character, that quality in media res, and attends especially to those moments and locations where a change in the surround that is blackness seems to come out of nowhere.” The emphasis is on all that sits in the liminal, the in-betweens, the penumbras, the spaces unknown but possibly knowable.

Sitting in and understanding black temporality as described by Nyong’o is a paradox in itself; as he argues, black time is itself atemporal. Harkening back to my earlier discussion of the clock’s impact on public consciousness, black time can be understood and perceived differently than the way time is

96 Ibid, 5.
97 Ibid, 5.
98 Ibid, 5.
now understood in a linear sense. The trouble with this kind of claim is that it can only be understood from definitions of time. Atemporality only exists in conversation with temporality and vice versa. Nyong'o, as shared before, refers to this kind of paradoxical frame as ‘incompossible.’ He grounds this term in the work of novelist Gayl Jones, and his reading of her work *Mosquito*:

> We see that the sanctuary work Jones’s protagonist engages in tethers together worlds that can and cannot be, and is thus a necessary step toward investigating possibilities outside our present terms of order. This is an incompossibility, rather than a contradiction.\(^99\)

Incompossibility is a space between the possible and incompatible; it can be employed to describe contradictory things that nonetheless exist in tandem, rather than contradictory things which discredit, invalidate, and negate their counterparts. At this point, Nyong’o connects his work and hope for fabulation directly with the fabulation as described by Hartman, as well as that employed by Haraway.

> Afro-fabulation…is thus en route toward the “critical fabulation” that black feminist historian Saidiya Hartman has proposed, and gestures to the “speculative fabulation” proposed by feminist science theorist Donna Haraway.\(^100\)

Vital to any understanding of fabulist praxis is that it is not just a fictionalizing of the world; it is a recognition of reality as already constructed of many fictions. Nyong’o explains this as he parses his reason for pulling together theorists from the far reaching disciplines of Hartman and Haraway. He refers to them respectively:

---

\(^99\) Ibid, 6.
\(^100\) Ibid, 6.
Such black feminist and posthumanist acts of speculation are never simply a matter of inventing tall tales from whole cloth. More nearly, they are tactical fictionalizing of a world that is, from the point of view of black social life, already false.¹⁰¹

The fabula created by all of these scholars is not simply plucked from the air. The fabula is critically constructed to provide incompossible space to the fictions presented as social reality. They are constructed out of the recognition that the labels meant to offer humans subjective orientations only actually serve to control the type of subject one is able to become and inhabit.

Nyong’o is cautious of fabulation, however. Similarly to Spivak’s view of essentialism, Nyong’o sees fabulation as something to be used strategically. His mistrust lies particularly in the slippery slide down the path of falsity. As has been stated previously, and something I continue to reiterate throughout this essay, is that though I play in the space of the artificial, the ingenuine, the ‘false,’ I am - in Nyongonian terms - working to balance the incompossible of this false reality and the real/material effects of these falsities. Nyong’o calls attention to this dangerous usage of fabulist methodology, stating the following hypothetical: “If the paradox of fiction threatens to untether both history and memory from the grounds of veridiction, these powers of the false are not so much to be enthusiastically embraced as they are to be critically interrogated.”¹⁰² What I would emphasize here, however, is that Nyong’o is not pushing for a lack of interrogation - he is instead pushing for the production of critical discourses surrounding, as well

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 6.
¹⁰² Ibid, 7.
as attempts at, fabulation. While Nyong’o places value in the tangible possibilities offered by fabulation, he also demonstrates a consciousness of the way this methodology – if named or produced differently – could be abused by systems of power. As such, Nyong’o reveals his interest in pushing the bounds of possibility inside of fabulist frameworks, referencing Haraway’s own dwelling in uncomfortably fragile theories:

What might it mean for black queer and trans aesthetics, then, to “stay with the trouble” of post-humanism, rather than beat a tactical retreat to a standard of humanism and its accompanying fantasies of citizenship and sovereignty, which always served to exclude the refugee, migrant, indigene, and slave?  

What I appreciate here is Nyong’o’s own recognition of the human as a constructed force that may not be a desirable endpoint. In this sense, the human, much like the objects previously described, has similarly received a connoted semiosis which marks its material form, and as such it recapitulates perceptions of what the human is. Thus, the desire to be human cannot currently be stripped from exclusionary practices based on hierarchies of power. He clarifies in the closing of the introduction:

The proposition here, against all liberal universalisms and scientific positivities, is to insist that we do not yet know what a human outside an anti-black world could be, do, or look like. The critical poetics of afro-fabulation are a means of dwelling in the shock of that reality without ever becoming fully of it.

Fabulation and afro-fabulation more specifically, in this sense, allows the flexibility to play with universalizing concepts like essentialism while also

---

103 Ibid, 24.
recognizing the individuation and the nuance of claims, labels, and statements. It offers an ability to use the tools of this power system so wrapped in our language and materiality in ways that repair, repart, and liberate. Again, we see the incompossibility captured in the recognition that the human is only known and archived to us in ways that uphold white supremacy, yet there was a time before the instatement of these hierarchies as we know them, and therefore “humanity” as we know it was once defined differently. This means that there is a reality in which humanity might be differently understood, and afro/fabulation offers us the ability to imagine, and as I will suggest, move toward these realities.

In order to make this move I will lean more heavily on frameworks offered by performance studies, the discourse which Nyong’o is analyzing in his book and which he was largely trained in by José Esteban Muñoz. Nyong’o sees performance, particularly that of the African diaspora, as having the most potential for fabulative effect. He writes, “Black art and performance can aid this process of critical fabulation in a variety of ways…but especially insofar as they bring into co-presence a sense of the incompossible, mingling what was with what might have been,” and, furthermore, dare I add, what could be.\(^{105}\) There is something that Nyong’o is pointing out about the space afforded through the liveness of performance that allows not for a fabulation in the afterlife of event, but a fabulation as intent for future event. This is the

\(^{105}\) Ibid, 7.
mobilization of afro-fabulation that Nyong’o is hoping to accomplish by pulling particularly from Hartman’s definition of fabulation. “How might critical fabulation,” he asks, “be brought to bear on these other contexts?” This is a question I wish to echo in my own work as all of these scholars have influenced me. What does it look like to actively practice fabulation?

**The Fabulism of Performance**

As a field of interdisciplinary thinking, performance studies, similarly to science and technology studies, is interested in what things do in the world. How is a performance taken up? How is its liveness understood and experienced? The investment here is on the fabulative and aesthetic effects, rather than that of epistemology. This mobilization of the field is pointed to specifically by José Esteban Muñoz, a scholar prolific in his claims and teachings of performance studies in conversation with queer of color critique. He writes in his short essay, “Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts,” “Performance studies, as a modality of inquiry, can surpass the play of interpretation and the limits of epistemology and open new ground by focusing on what acts and objects do in a social matric rather than what they might possibly mean.” In this claim, there is an emphasis on the constructed social reality based on the way an object moves through the world. There is an assumed semiotic understanding of the object which

---

106 Ibid, 7.
informs its reception, but the focus is on the afterlife of the object’s performance rather than its epistemological creation. The focus is on reception of the object by its user or audience both in the individual and collective example. Rather than focus on intention, there is a focus on the material reality. Again, echoed here is the desire of the science studies scholar who is interested in the reception and movement of objects in the world. Muñoz also offers in this understanding of performance studies a sense of futurity that is in keeping with the speculative thought put forth by the previously referenced scholars and thinkers.

In order to fully understand the claims I would like to offer regarding the potential movement and reinscription of the human as category through a focus on its material form, I first need to finish my collapse of actor-network theory with theories of performance. In order to do this, I bring into conversation the work of performance theorist Erika Fischer Lichte, who similarly to Latour, creates binary realities based on the signifier and signified in order to explain the space held by the performer onstage. Her claims will not only allow this collapse, but will also clarify the way that theater may offer a fabulative platform to reinscribe the human and create new social realities, as she also emphasizes the way that her incompossible presentation of the performer on stage is received and mobilized by the audience. The way that she does this is by collapsing the performed space of the stage with the performed space of the world-as-stage, bringing her toward the direction of
Dilnot, Otner, and Baudrillard’s claims regarding the constant reproduction
and reinscription of our artificial and simulated world. In essence, what
Fischer-Lichte’s claims offer my argument is the way they might be deployed materially.

First, I point to Fischer-Lichte’s analysis of the body on stage as one constituted by both the material, “real,” off-stage world, and the simulated, “performed,” on-stage world. This understanding is one that she deploys throughout her scholarship, emphasizing the weight of this concept and its effects on the field of performance. Noting the body as the actor’s main tool, Fischer-Lichte says:

The peculiar role of the body as aesthetic material has had a central place in theories of theatre and acting. The emphasis lies in the tension between the phenomenal body of the actor, or their bodily being in-the-world, and their representation of the dramatic character. 108

Similar to Chen, Fischer-Lichte recognizes the nature of the subject status of the body as an interlocutor of the materiality and “object status” of the body. Fischer-Lichte’s perspective in this moment of her writing only serves to objectify the body on stage through an understanding of the of the audience's perception of the materiality of the body on stage, the representational value it holds within social reality, and the conversation that occurs due to the character grafted to this material body.

This physical understanding of the body is what Fischer-Lichte refers to as the phenomenal body. In order to achieve what is canonically

---

considered “good” acting, Fischer-Lichte claims that one must mask their physical form and its social signifiers and meanings with other sets of signs and symbols which manifest in the form of the ‘dramatic character.’ She writes, “The actor was meant to transform his sensual body into a semiotic one which would serve as a material carrier for textual meaning.”

Created now is yet another duality of the world - the difference between the semiotic and phenomenal body. Fischer-Lichte continues to explain how this bifurcation is executed in the form of performance stating that, “For the body to be employed in the art of acting at all, it must first be stripped of its corporeality and undergo a process of disembodiment.”

This statement leans into the phenomenal recognitions of the body, as the body without corporeal attachment is simply an object.

Though Fischer-Lichte is purposefully referring to the body as it inhabits the stage-space, her claims become more impactful when interpolated to the stage-space of our performed social reality. Returning to Baudrillard, understanding the social as simulacra allows us to move to understandings of the material and phenomenal understandings of the human-as-object which is then coded with its own semiotics, i.e. race, gender, class, ability, citizenship, sexuality, and so on. This interpolation echoes Latour’s description of object as actor which prescribes and mediates relations in the social world. If this is true, then as with the objects analyzed at

---

109 Ibid, 78.  
110 Ibid, 78.
the beginning of this essay, then there must be malleability in the semiotic understanding we have given to our bodies-as-objects. I will suggest potential possibility for this potentially malleable understanding of the performed reality we inhabit, but first I continue with Fischer-Lichte’s understanding of how this offering of the actor manifests inside of our current social reality (rather than the one I would like to suggest).

In a historicizing approach, Fischer-Lichte shares that, “The artists of the 1960s...consistently acknowledge the doubling of “being a body” and “having a body,” the co-existence of the phenomenal and semiotic body. Use of the body is grounded in the actors’ bodily being-in-the world.”\textsuperscript{111} Here, she is emphasizing the artistic deployment which can occur in lieu of understandings of both the phenomenal and semiotic body. The emphasis before the sixties was to mask the phenomenal body during performance, but what Fischer-Lichte notes here is the transition to mobilize phenomenal understandings of the body in a dramaturgical capacity. She draws attention particularly to the trend of cross-casting with regard to gender presentation, and the the way that the co-presence of the semiotic and phenomenal body offers new understandings based on the audiences’ perceptions of masculinity and femininity.\textsuperscript{112} This occurs due to the phenomenal body’s semiotics dissonance with the semiotics of the dramatic character, but nonetheless, all of this is perceived and mixed in the mind of the audience.

\textsuperscript{111} Ibid, 82.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, 87.
incompossibly. There is an ambivalence that the audience experiences due to this dissonance. "At all events," she writes, "aesthetic perception here takes the form of oscillation. It switches between the actor’s phenomenal and semiotic body, thus transferring the perceiving subject into a state of betwixt and between."\(^{113}\) Continuing to plant my own seeds, I would argue that there is much to be offered in this theorization of liminality, which suggests movement and potential by blurring the boundaries that serve to contain matter.

In order to complete my collapse of actor-network theories and performance studies, I will illuminate one other part of Fischer-Lichte’s work which, mobilized in conversation with both phenomenal and semiotic bodies, makes way for a fabulist deployment of theater as social tool. Other than the co-presence of the phenomenal and semiotic body, theater and performance is particularly invested in the bodily co-presence of the spectator and performer. This creates yet another dualism that has oft served to separate and control categories of identity, however like other dualisms presented this one is easily muddled by questions which take to task the spaces in which performance is understood to occur. What does it mean, for instance, if we consider the simulacra in and as a performative context? In this case, who is audience and who is spectator? Further, how fixed are these positions? Fischer-Lichte alludes to these possibilities, writing that:

\(^{113}\) Ibid, 88-89.
[The] realms of art, social life, and politics cannot be clinically separated in performance. An aesthetics of the performative, founded in performance, must therefore develop concepts and categories that grasp these indistinct transformations and explosive fusions.\textsuperscript{114}

Art as defined by Fischer-Lichte then becomes inextricably linked to our social realities. In recognizing both the phenomenal and semiotic bodies together, we are reading onto the body all semiotic meaning from the text as well as semiotic meaning from “being-in-the-world.” Moving further, this means that when making art, there is a reliance on the audience’s assumed understanding of the social world inhabited by a performer’s material body. This is the beginning of what Fischer-Lichte refers to as the \textit{autopoietic feedback loop}.

The autopoietic feedback loop recognizes the co-constructed understanding and experience of performance and liveness, by both the spectator and the performer. This construction is in constant motion and is entirely dependent on the energies of each person involved within the relationships inside of the collective social order. In order to best capture the loop, I quote Fischer-Lichte at length. She contextualizes this moment by describing the collective reaction of the audience to the actions, events, and liveness which take place on stage, such as laughter, anger, screaming, fear, crying, and melancholy:

Both the other spectators as well as the actors perceive and, in turn, respond to these reactions. The action on stage thus gains or loses intensity; the actors’ voices get louder and unpleasant or, alternatively,

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid, 51.
more seductive; they feel animated to invent gags, to improvise, or get
distracted and miss a cue; they step closer to the lights to address the
audience directly or ask them to calm down, or even to leave the
theatre. The other spectators might react to their fellow spectators’
responses by increasing or decreasing the extent of their participation,
interest, or suspense. Their laughter grows louder, even convulsive, or
is suppressed suddenly. They begin to address, argue, or insult each
other. In short, whatever the actors do elicits a response from the
spectators, which impacts on the entire performance. In this sense,
performances are generated and determined by a self-referential and
ever-changing feedback loop.\textsuperscript{115}

In this sense, performance is always ephemeral as it is entirely dependent on
the group that is experiencing it. Nonetheless, the negotiation of how
performance will be received occurs through the discourse and action
between the spectator and actor. Put another way, it is a negotiation and
coe-conscription between the actor and actant, in Latourian terms.

In a Latourian reading, the autopoietic feedback loop is shown to
reveal much more about the audience then it does the performers, as the
coe-conscription of performance is mediated by dominant ideologies regarding
the material and materiality presented. Speaking about a Coco Fusco
performance, Fischer-Lichte says:

\begin{quote}
[The] performance demonstrated to every participant that the act of
perceiving the other is always a political act that involves projections of
self and other intermingled with a variety of disciplining mechanisms.
This did not just apply to the audience’s perception of the artists… but
extends to the spectators’ view of each other as well as the artists’
perception of the audience.\textsuperscript{116}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid, 38.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid, 56.
Taken to task again here is the relationship not only between the spectator and performer, but the spectator’s own understanding of the performer as both phenomenal and semiotic. Furthermore, the understanding of the dual body is grafted onto those who do not inhabit the stage-space. The focus here, again, is on the fact that the body in a material sense tells us something based on the conversations it is allowed to have with semiotic forms. As Fischer-Lichte writes:

> While it is the semiotic body that creates the illusion in the mind and imagination of the spectator, it is the phenomenal body, i.e. the vital, organic, energetic body whose sensuousness works directly on the phenomenal body of the spectators.\textsuperscript{117}

If this is how the body is understood on stage, and understood to move on stage, how might it then be treated similarly to the previously analyzed objects and the transits they have made through semiotic discourse? How, when we consider the material parts of our body which are associated with race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on, might we understanding the meanings with which we are coded in the performed social reality we inhabit? How might we then use that to our advantage in the performed social realities of the stage space? How might these realities presented on-stage allow for a bleeding between what is performed on stage and what is performed off stage by means of the autopoietic feedback loop? I don’t have the means to fully explain these fabulative possibilities, but instead I offer to you two examples of contemporary work which I understand as playing with this loop, thereby

\textsuperscript{117} Erika Fischer Lichte, \textit{Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre} (New York: Routledge, 2005), 5.
offering potential social change through the movement of semiotics in their material forms.

_Fabulist, Darling, Fabulist: Black Fabulism in the Theater_

As I begin this section, offering to you some grounded and contemporary examples of the work I am interested in, I want to circle back to the messiness of my argument. As the scholars I am thinking with have mentioned, to deal with the human in its material form is a sketchy matter, particularly as the dealings of human-as-object have often been used in order to exert oppressive power over those considered less valuable in the world. I want to recognize that I am aware of that, and express my own concerns over the unknown possibilities that my argument leads towards. I take ownership of those possibilities, but I want to make clear that my effort to objectify the human is strategic in order to extend the possibility of redefining the human. Recalling Nyong’o’s writing, the category of the human is a fraught one, and it is a status that we might question the desire to have. There is potential and freedom in identifying with the non-human.

In an effort to limit the type of violence that I may be perpetuating however, I would like to offer the understanding of humanity as a spectrum from the unhuman to the hyperhuman. I do this to reflect on dehumanizing tactics; dehumanization assumes a stripping of humanity which assumes the presence of a state of humanity that can be stripped. The state of
dehumanization might be understood as unhumanity, as the word “unhuman” also assumes a previous state of human-ness. I will continue using the terms “unhumanize” and “unhuman” as I find the state of being reflected by this term to be one more malleable than the state of being connotated with “dehumanize,” which has its own long history. Rather than keep the divide that this would normally create, i.e. unhuman/human or non-human/human, I would suggest that some humans have in fact been given a hyperhuman status, a status beyond whatever was once considered the “human” in its most natural form. Thus, a spectrum has been created to move people from the unhuman to the hyperhuman, each with varying levels of power to wield in the world.

Grounding this, I turn to the work of Aleshea Harris and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. Both of these contemporary black playwrights have works playing in opposite ends of the spectrum that I am enlisting for the purposes of my analyses. Each artist takes up a type of human subject already placed somewhere on this spectrum and moves them to different positions by offering a series of semiotic mobilizations that graft onto the material form of the actors who, as objects, represent universal versions of their semiotic positions. This grafting has the potential to take root in our social reality by means of the autopoietic feedback loop. This loop is dependent on the relationship between the audience and the performer, not only having a focus on what the audience brings to the table as they watch a performance, but
also, providing an emphasis on what the performers are offering in return. I chose both of these authors for their particularly intersectional approaches to playwriting, which keeps the level of nuance and character depth high enough to avoid totally dehumanizing practices while simultaneously working with the “real” social status of the characters they have decided to write around in order to re-place where those holding this status might sit on the spectrum. In short, I am interested in the fabulative reality presented by these writers and how, by means of the feedback loop, this reality is taken up by our own.

Aleshea Harris’ *Is God Is* is an epic play that asks its audience to imagine a world where one is able to gain full reparation for the trauma done unto them. Playing with genres of blackness, Harris offers the play many different types of opaque understandings and sits in the penumbras similarly to Nyong’o. The opening notes on the setting share that, “This epic takes its cues from the ancient, the modern, the tragic, the Spaghetti Western, hip-hop and Afropunk. This text also includes adventures in typography.” Here, Harris blends temporality and genre (amongst other things). She also plays with the performance of the material representations of her words on the page, offering readers - and potential audiences/performers - the ability to read language as a map and landscape. In brief summary, the play follows the journey of Anaia and Racine, a set of black twin sisters who go on a quest seeking revenge for their lives and for their mother whom they refer to as

---

God. After surviving a horrible arson committed by their father, the play opens with the twins and their mother living in the afterlife of that pain. Their mother, who suffered the most severe burns from the fire, is close to death. On her deathbed, “She” (the name given to the twins’ mother) looks to her daughters and tasks them with their familial revenge. Regarding their father, who is simply and only referred to as ‘Man’ in the show, She/God commands: “Kill his spirit, then the body, like he did me. Make him dead real dead. And bring me back some treasures from it.” We are told She will not be able to rest until the father is gone and her daughters bring back proof of his non-being. “Peace will come when he go…No peace ‘til I know he gone,” She says as She reveals to Her daughters the extent of mutilation experienced by Her material form.

The semiotic body represented by these actresses who are coded as black women based on their material form can be understood as approaching a hyperhuman status. Harris has offered to the black woman - a figure socially perceived and treated to be unhuman - the status of the opposite extreme of our current social reality. Strategically, Harris names the mother of these twin girls “She,” allowing her to represent a ubiquitous figure of femininity, as that pronoun attaches itself to those materially identified with the feminine. Even further, being that the character is written to be black, the nature of Harris’ naming allows the black woman as a figure to become a

---

representative and pillar of womanhood - a state that goes unseen in our performed reality. Continuing along these lines, the two girls refer to their mother, She, as God. This character who has taken in both the world of the play and the world of our play a role of laborer, caretaker, and unhumanity is offered the positionality of the most hyperhuman status of a deity. I suggest here that the grafting of this semiotic form on that of the material form of the actress allows black women to be reimagined along the spectrum away from the unhuman closer to human by hyperbolizing her onstage character as hyperhuman. We might think of this as the ‘Overton Window’ of theater, to play with political theory. The Overton Window captures a space of “normal” or “expected” political rhetoric, and strategies to shift where in the political spectrum the window falls involves making hyperbolic claims far outside of the window, as it will make rhetoric directly adjacent to the window on the side which hyperbole was deployed become “normal.”

Analyzing the script as a piece of literature which transforms semiotic value allows further consideration of the impact of Is God Is - as well as other plays - on social reality. For instance, painting the twins’ father as equivalently ubiquitous to their mother through his naming as the pronoun “He,” gives the audience the opportunity to understand how He becomes representative of all men and the semiotics they hold under patriarchal society to some extent in the play. It also feels apparent to recognize the tropes of violence and anger

---

that the play may be reifying, particularly regarding the position of the black woman. In my reading of the play however, I find that this play rests in validating the anger experienced by the black woman rather than invalidating and unjustifying it.

Analyzing the script as an object also offers another window into its semiotic transformations. As framed in the note earlier, Harris wrote this show to offer a typographic experience through writing. On the following page you will find an image of the script which highlights the moment that She/God is referenced as such and commands the twins to go after their father.\footnote{Aleshea Harris, \textit{Is God Is}, 24.} The way that the words are written to sprawl across the page are meant to communicate feeling in unfamiliar ways that allow a production team the opportunity to explore how they may want to capture the distinctive writing materially. The use of language itself sits a degree or so apart from normative speech, a fact worth mentioning as it helps to set up the fantastical world and space Harris has manifested, where language moves and functions in new ways.

The diminutive size and scattered trickle-down placement of Anaia’s language captures the feeling of smallness that follows her throughout the show. Words and phrases repeat, sometimes sprawled down the page, sometimes back to back, in an effort to manifest that which is said. Whether it be the strength that Racine will not doubt in herself and her twin, or the state
of death which She is determined He should be in. Repetition alone does not emphasis this, but the large size of the text allowing it to take up the space on the page suggest that it should be willed to take space in the material. Some words, like “bitch” in this instance, stretch across the page, lengthening the interaction with the word and the phrase. Each of these typographic choices, as Harris identifies for the reader, offer new modes of play and understanding of language and how it might be embodied and put forth in the world by actors.

ANIAIA

I thought I thought you was dancin' wigglin' on the ground like that I thought it was a dance or somethin'. I see it all the time. I see it. I see you dancin' on the ground with the fire on you like a dress.

SHE

Shh. Quit cryin', Baby. No need to cry.

RACINE

She's sorry, Mama. She just...you know.

SHE

Iss somethin' I need y'all to do but I don't think y'all gon be able to do it if she's steady cryin'.

RACINE

We can do it. We can. We're strong. Ain't we strong, 'Naia?

ANAIA

Yeah.

RACINE

We're strong. We can do anything.

SHE

Good.
I'ma keep this real simple:

Make your daddy dead
dead
dead

And everything around him you can destroy, too
I think he got some bitch

Kill his spirit, then the body
like he did me

Make him dead real dead
In the same vein of theater fabulism, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’ show *Appropriate* shares similar elements of accounting that Harris performs in *Is God Is*.\(^{122}\) In *Is God Is*, Harris plays with the systems of signs grafted onto our material forms which make up our social reality in order to provide a humanizing status to the minoritarian figure of the black woman. Unlike her work, however, Jacobs-Jenkins’ is interested in discovering and repositioning the ontologies of those with majoritarian status, unhumanizing those who have been hyperhumanized, bringing them to a more human status. He performs this repositioning of the majoritarian figure by keeping central to his work the position of the minoritarian, as well as the majoritarian’s subjection of those without power. In *Appropriate*, Jacobs-Jenkins interrogates whiteness through his own black and queer lens. His interrogation offers mobility to both black and white figures, as his definitions and discourses of whiteness can only reify the existence of its counterposition, blackness.\(^{123}\)

As an antithesis to *Is God Is* in many ways, *Appropriate* focuses centrally on the white American family. Jacobs-Jenkins characters are all encompassing, capturing many but likely not all, multiplicities of whiteness within each character. Each of the eight figures in the show are meant to be clearly relatable and identifiable among larger tropes of whiteness and its manifestations. Similarly to *Is God Is*, *Appropriate* asks questions about trauma, including who has a right to experience it, who has the right to ‘own’

---


\(^{123}\) Fred Moten, *Black Op*.\(^{85}\)
and capitalize on it, and how it manifests within the realm of the material. Jacobs-Jenkins takes characters who in our performed social world are understood as hyperhuman - white and well resourced - and then unhumanizes them, holding the figure accountable to the histories it perpetuates and the power that their status affords in our current version of social reality.

The way that Jacobs-Jenkins writes is with a level of double consciousness that recognizes the working social knowledge of his audiences as well as those who will be cast as his characters’ roles. Using this to his advantage, he plays with the material form as it is presented to the audience while leaning into the unconscious choices made by his characters which provide a dissonant discourse to the perception of the audience. He drives the narrative of *Appropriate* with a focus on the material impact of the violence being produced by this white family in such a way that there is little to no possibility to escape the labelling of guilt placed onto these bodies. The audience and the performers, though not the characters, are pushed to recognize the horrors that the family recapitulates in their active avoidance.

To offer more specific contextualization, the production follows a white, middle-class family comprised of three siblings in their forties and fifties, their partners, and their children as they take roost in their family’s old plantation home in Arkansas after the siblings’ father has passed. The show is framed by their father’s after death dealings, as the siblings find it necessary to sell
the estate, which in turn involves sorting through the plethora of items he has hoarded over his lifetime. Early in the production, one of the characters named Rachael finds a photo album on a bookshelf which contains images of mutilated black enslaved persons. When she discovers the album, it is in the hands of her youngest child, to which she responds by declaring over and again the name of God. This object becomes the focus of the entirety of the production as the family questions how it ought to be dealt with, and what it means to them being that it was found in their father’s home.

The best way to interrogate the fabulative potential offered by the text which manifests in the semiotic movement placed on the material is to analyze one of the earlier scenes in the production just after the aftermath of Rachael finding the album. In this scene, Rachael identifies herself and part of her minoritarian status in order to somehow prove to Toni, the eldest sister, that the patriarch of the family was in fact “prejudice.”

In this section of the scene, Jacobs-Jenkins captures the passive racism committed in quite a short distance, and easily replicates many arguments put forth by white persons to escape the benefits they presently gain from past atrocities. Here, Rachael, pads her blows at Ray (their father) by identifying him with a different time and culture, wherein racism was acceptable, and thereby removes his accountability for acts of white supremacy. She also labels Ray’s racism as a “prejudice,” rather than a form

of actively anti-black behavior, allowing his actions to be understood within a framework of moral recidivism. Toni only furthers the degrees of separation between Ray and his racist acts by claiming the good he had accomplished in his lifetime, somehow painting a picture that these things are mutually exclusive, rather than holding space for a reality where he could have done good while also committing racist acts - a type of incompossibility if you will.

Continuing on in the scene, Rachael makes a case for herself. It is at this point, however, that the audience witnesses Rachael's personal desire to hold onto her marginalized status as a Jewish woman so strongly and adamantly that she does not offer care or attention to the minoritarian people whose experiences are being violated at the present moment of the play, and the present moment of our performed reality. This erasure is made clear in the language that she uses, which, again, absolves Toni’s father of his white supremacist attitudes and actions while simultaneously validating her own experiences with him. Toni’s demand for a concrete example also serves as another representation of the way that power functions by invalidating individuals’ experiences through the privileging of material evidence over emotional impact.
As the show goes on, these happenings continue. The family finds other racist paraphernalia, and similarly has no will to deal with their findings. In fact, the only attempt that is made to resolve the presented by the objects is through their potential sale and financial remuneration. However, whenever the family attempts to benefit from the historical trauma that they have participated in, Jacobs-Jenkins reworks the script to keep the family from reaping their reward. Instead, he creates this seemingly perpetual cycle that notes the immobility of their status should they consistently avoid the privilege

125 Ibid, 24-25.
they have been afforded. The semiotics of each character is one that fully represents the complex position of humanity as one which, as Nyong'o puts it, “served to exclude the refugee, migrant, indigene, and slave.”\textsuperscript{126} In grafting this onto the material form of the actors, in this case white persons, it serves to limit the glorified hyperhuman and untouchable status held by the white person in our performed reality, and instead serves to unhumanize them, bringing them closer to the messy status of the human.

Another move made by Jacobs-Jenkins to frame this work is his attention to the role of land and nature in the production. There is always an image, sound, or object that alludes to the life that existed in the space before the white inhabitants, and then moves to make sure that this life is understood as continuing after its inhabitants. To capture this, I turn to the bookend descriptions of the space that Jacobs-Jenkins offers to his readers, and put into effect to by a production team. He opens the show with the following:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Light abandons us and a darkness replaces it.}

\textit{Instantly, a billion cicadas begin trilling in the dense, velvety void — loudly, insistently, without pause — before hopefully, at some point, becoming the void.}

\textit{The insect song fills and sweeps the theatre in pulsing pitch-black waves, over and beyond the stage — washing itself over the walls and the floors, baptizing the aisles and the seats, forcing itself into every inch of space, every nook, every pocket, hiding place, and pore until this incessant chatter is touching you.}

\textit{It is touching you.}

\textit{This goes on and on and on and on and on until the same thought occurs in every head:}

\textit{"Is this it?"}

\textit{"Is this the whole show?"}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{126} Nyong'o, \textit{Afro-Fabulations}, 24.
There is a sense of a tangibly intangible totalizing force captured in these words. There is a focus on nature imagery, the sound of life, and the material effects of the production which brings the audience into the space in a present way. At the end of the production, Jacobs-Jenkins writes a lengthier description of this totalizing force:

The cicadas? They just go on singing — singing loudly, singing incessantly — a long, enormously complicated, deeply-layered, entirely improvised ancient song, which is mostly about the morning, but also about the evening and the day but also the night and the sun but also the moon and about waking up and flying around and what it is like to fly around and about loving each other and hating each other and fucking each other and hurting each other but also about trying to find each other in order to hurt and/or fuck each other but also about falling asleep and then waking up and the quiet and the noise that accompany each day and the sounds of each other’s voices and the occasional music but mostly about the noise and the grass and the sky and the air and the water but also the water in the air and the heat in the air and the dry in the air and the birds in the sky and the birds on the grass and the birds on the branches and always birds — birds always — but also the sap in the branches and the sweetness of the sap in the branches of the trees but also the trees themselves on the grass and the grass on the dirt but also the dirt itself and how they miss the dirt and how they miss their homes in the dirt, the places where they came from, and the feeling of missing the thing you can never go back to and the mystery of the way one moves away from it and through the present and the mystery of the present and the mystery of the movement itself and the leaves on the branches and the birds in the leaves on the branches and the branches on the trees and the trees on the grass and the grass on the dirt and dying.

And we can’t understand a word of it.

Meanwhile, lights immediately come up on the living room, some day — any day. A knocking is heard at the front door. Someone says, “Hello?” Beat. Then more knocking. But no one answers.

Sudden blackout and lights immediately come up on the living room, some day — any day. Just as a part of the floor collapses beneath the sofa and one of the display tables. Everything on the table slides off in a waterfall of breakage.

Sudden blackout and lights immediately come up on the living room, some day — any day. Someone is egging someone on. A rock comes flying through the window and Shatters it.

Sudden blackout and lights immediately come up on the living room, some day — any day. A bookshelf collapses.

Sudden blackout and lights immediately come up on the living room. It’s some day — any day. A rodent of some sort darts across the space quickly. Or maybe racoons are heard fighting over scraps in the kitchen.

Sudden blackout and lights immediately come up on the living room, some day — any day. There is a thunderstorm. Lightning flashes. Wind howls. A tree branch is seen crashing through another window.

Sudden blackout and lights immediately come up on the living room, some day — any day. A part of the ceiling collapses, bringing the dead chandelier down with it, but just before it can crash to the floor, the chandelier is caught by some sort of cord and swings like a pendulum.

Sudden blackout and lights immediately come up on the living room over and over again.

And, every time, it is some day — any day — tomorrow — thirteen years from now — twenty-six years from now. It is the future. It is the present. It is any present. It is the past — any past — now.

Time moving faster, pieces of the abandoned place starting to disappear — chunks of wood, the flooring, banister beams — cobwebs emerging and emerging.

One day, lights immediately come up on a stranger in the middle of the living room, taking notes on a clipboard. He inspects the room with a flashlight, takes a couple of pictures. Just before he leaves, he takes a look around, thinking, “Look at this place.” He leaves.

In the blackout, there is silence.

Here, Jacobs-Jenkins takes the time to recognize how life continues beyond, between, and before the Lafayette family.\footnote{Jacobs-Jenkins. \textit{Appropriate}, 77-78.} He does this by bringing this moment out of time, focusing more on the lives that have touched the space. He recognizes the present moment as one caught up in the future and the past, again offering incompossible understandings of time in the sense Nyong’o also offers.

\textit{The Mess}

When I imagine social possibility and mobility, I see it accomplished in the following manner. Rather than work against the systems of codes we have been offered and make attempts at deconstructing them, I wonder what it is to sit with their troubles, define their goods, and then redefine and reconstruct rather than taking on the labor of making something entirely new. The Theater as a space that allows an audience to see the human in materially understood ways provides us with the opportunity to use the performed reality of that space to understand and re-perform our own social reality.

The fabulative work that I describe being accomplish here through understandings of actor-network theory in conversation with performance studies and the autopoietic feedback loop are nothing new, in the sense that they are all already taking place. The work I have done in this thesis is simply
reveal the mediation of these processes in hopes that we might more
diligently use the theater as a space which allows us to see multiple versions
of the performed reality we currently inhabit, allowing us to get closer to these
versions of reality. I hope that this pushes for greater conversations regarding
the development of new work, as well as recognitions of the way that other
productions throughout the Western canon perpetuate systems of oppression
through their material representations.

Minoritarian characters in the theater are objectified and essentialized
with such frequency in representative worlds that these understandings bleed
into our performed social reality. This means that if we start offering these
subjects a new (un)human status while remaining more diligent and
conscious about the (un)human status given to majoritarian subjects, we
might have a better chance at finding a social equilibrium from which we can
venture into utopia through the redistribution of human labelling.
Works Cited


