

DISORIENTING OBJECT ORIENTED ONTOLOGY: QUEER LANDSCAPES AND  
ECOLOGICAL BODIES IN RICHARD SIKEN AND HARRYETTE MULLEN

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MA Thesis

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# DEDICATION

For Grace Ezra

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Professor Maxwell for her continual patience in this project and expert guidance along the way. It was her poetry class that first introduced me to Harryette Mullen

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## ABSTRACT

### DISORIENTING OBJECT ORIENTED ONTOLOGY: QUEER LANDSCAPES AND ECOLOGICAL BODIES IN RICHARD SIKEN AND HARRYETTE MULLEN

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This thesis focuses on a recent development within the study of metaphysics, known as object oriented ontology (OOO), and works out questions of being alongside contemporary poetry. Recognizing the post anthropocentric purchase afforded by OOO's claim that everything is an object and that these objects are impossible to correlate with, this thesis will look at the use of objects in Richard Siken's *War of the Foxes* and Harryette Mullen's *Recyclopedia*. Drawing heavily from Sara Ahmed's queer theory of disoriented objects and Timothy Morton's ecological insights, this thesis will argue that despite OOO's advancement, there are critical gaps to fill in understanding what it means to be. Specifically, in close readings of Siken and Mullen, it becomes clear that their use of objects is disruptive and opens up new pathways for OOO to be more attuned to queer aspects of being, deeply ecological, and sensitive to the history of "objecthood" as a category for non-white human beings. Finally, this thesis will demonstrate what an ontological reading of texts looks like in the spirit of disorientation.

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## INTRODUCTION

Often maligned throughout the 20th century as a dying inquiry<sup>1</sup>, ontological study is finding new life in contemporary theory. Being able to discuss what it means to *be* has long troubled philosophers and critical theorists. As an essential building block to all other inquiries, it is important to get right, especially when starting to think about states of being in relationship with identity and ecology. Early attempts at describing states of being danced around definitions and offered shifting perspectives, but during the onset of the scientific revolution, metaphysics started to be replaced by the natural sciences. However, philosophers started picking up the age-old question with new vigor in recent decades.

In many ways, this reinvigorated investigation is motivated by an attempt to navigate the “post-humanities” and reposition ourselves away from the anthropocentrism that has wrought damage upon the world. Several authors are at work in this field with varying degrees of interest; despite their differences, they share a penchant for the material and a desire to work out a theory of being that includes non-human objects. Bruno Latour’s contribution to the 2004 special edition publication of “Thing Theory” acts as a sort of lightning rod, urging critics to restore their attention and faith in the real objects of the world. Latour’s essay, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matter of Fact to Matter of Concern,” reads like a direct response to the anxieties of Bush’s early America. He starts by addressing the proto “death of the humanities” question, “why has critique run out of steam?” (151). Latour’s diagnosis

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<sup>1</sup> Just a quick survey of the logical positivists and system theorists will reveal deep skepticism of ontological investigation from the modern era into the information age.

cites “war” as the primary answer to his query. He goes on to list the multiple “warfronts” of the day: cultural, against the poor, on terrorism, with science, and so on. These wars are responsible for the exhaustion of our critical faculties, and academia has been inflexible and sluggish in its response to the multifaceted crisis. The most earnest response to the burnout and ineffective critical eye turns its attention away from iconoclasm and ideology and instead returns to a form of “realism” (161). The realism Latour evokes is necessary to salvage the humanities. In realism, a response would start to trudge in the direction of “things” and “objects,” not the “matters of fact” that are sucked into the wars and their various technologies (162). Instead, the “matters of concern should be explained, deployed, and prodded by the critic to uncover the state of being in our most basic relationship— the relationship to things and objects” (171).

Once again, questions of “being” of “objects” and “things” are back on the table for serious inquiry. One can read this renewed interest as a reactionary stance, counterbalancing the language and power theorists from an earlier era and the monopoly physics has had over describing states of being (Harman 3). Graham Harman, a philosopher at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, deserves particular credit for the upturned cart of this contemporary philosophy. It was his dissertation on Heidegger that birthed the term “object-oriented philosophy” (later transposed by Levi Bryant into “object-oriented ontology”) (Tool-Being 1 & Onto-Cartography IX). Now art critics, literary theorists, architects, pop singers, and actors are being drawn into the Zeitgeist of OOO<sup>2</sup>. Harman’s project exchanges the human,

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<sup>2</sup> OOO has managed to truly transcend the academic corridors manifesting in Mark Foster Gage’s architecture, Icelandic singer and actress Björk’s collaborative book with Timothy Morton, and British actor Benedict Cumberbatch’s appearances at OOO lectures.

philosophy's traditional subject, for a vast array of objects. Harman writes that in OOO, "all objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real, or fictional," Harman claims that "this insight is the first principle of OOO" (*A New Theory of Everything* 9). He bases this claim on the fact that all objects are inaccessible from a corollary relationship and share the same basic metaphysical structure of essence and appearance. He also builds his argument on a desire to reject anthropocentrism in the face of human-induced ecological collapse. Still, we might wade cautiously into this "new theory of everything" because throwing out subjects as an ontological category may have unintended consequences ( 2). In particular, critical analysis of art objects may yield new and amended interpretive angles from OOO whilst maintaining a focus on the metaphysical. Here, examining how emotion is leveraged in objects within art objects provides a strange *mise en abyme* to challenge the missing subject in OOO. Rather than diluting objects to their "withheld" qualities or correlating them to thoughts, objects *within* art objects allow a new ontology to emerge. This ontological position is defined by a suspension of essence which allows the appearances of objects to be in tension with the essence of sentient objects. In this way, a disorienting effect occurs and what emerges is a teleological argument for the haecceity of objects. Although OOO theorists are skeptical of teleology, there may be a way forward when considering the disruptive qualities of art objects. ("An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," Morton 219).

Before embarking on a journey to the disoriented object, we might first ground ourselves in the theory of OOO. The base of contemporary object-centered metaphysics is found in Harman's first publication, *Tool-Being*. With tact and precision,

Harman provides a re-analysis of Heidegger's dueling modes of being, *Zuhandenheit* (handiness) and *Vorhandenheit* (on-handness). He picks up on Heidegger's examples of the functional tool, examining how the unbroken tool is an object "withdrawn" by its extension to the wielder (*Zuhandenheit*). Further, Harman lays out how the "broken tool" (*Vorhandenheit*), without its functional utility, is rendered brittle, present, and substantive. Harman's key insight is to drop *out* the notion of utility and bring *forth* a Heideggerian analysis to all objects (17-31). In OOO, all objects are rendered both withdrawn from themselves *and* as conspicuously present in themselves. This reading of Heidegger collapses the dual pragmatic substances in Heideggerian philosophy to form a monist ontology where all objects are of the same kind yet are perceptible through these tendencies to be '*handy*' and '*unreadiness-to-hand*.' Harman does not keep these terms but builds further, developing out a rough sketch which later developed into the broad term of "speculative realism."

Harman's terminology relies on a "quadruple" formation of both objects and qualities and real and sensual distinctions. Thus, the starting place of OOO constitutes all objects with the two dispositions: real objects *withheld* from experience and sensual objects that exist *within* experience. Likewise, a similar program applies to qualities: real qualities that we cannot access and sensual qualities that only emerge in our experience. The point of OOO is to affirm the "reality" of objects based on their withheld nature. Objects escape being compartmentalized down to their subatomic structure, and they are imperceptive to one another. Objects do not "physically" encounter other objects because their withdrawal hides their reality. Like a smokescreen, the sensual experience of an object's meaning only enables finite events of experience. The *real*

qualities and the *real* object are obscured from the perceiver and, crucially, from themselves. In this way, Harman and his OOO disciples reject the process metaphysics of Whitehead, Deleuze, and Latour. They reject direct interaction, thus blocking theories of assemblage and flux. For fellow OOO theorist Timothy Morton, objects merely “translate” one another. Morton’s use implies that objects exist *before* their relations and *because* of their withholding (206). Object interactions never have access to one another.

Contrary to Latour’s actor network theory or the New Materialist positions of Stacey Alaimo, and Susan J. Hekman, OOO’s theory of objects doesn’t split the entity into component parts or systems but rather maintains its flat, encompassing ontological status. This is an important point to tighten down before embarking on a larger journey into the vastness of ecologically and queer informed literary projects, as the Latour’s theoretical model is often presented as a compelling counter measure to Harman’s own model. Harman’s book *Immaterialism* works at answering the good faith question of Latour’s positions and is interested in the differences of his burgeoning theory with those of Actor-Network theory (ANT) and New Materialism. He provides a helpful overview of the various contemporary positions within object studies and lays out two principal critiques of the formerly mentioned ANT and New Materialism. In response to Latour, he claims that ANT is unable to account for non-acting objects and that this ontological model is unable to delineate the significance of various objects, their properties, or expressions (1-7). Regarding New Materialism, he asserts that their project *over* defines objects, and instead of routine their model within the object itself, the object becomes contingent on its entities and relationships to other objects. Throughout these

discourses, Harman employs his own “immaterialism” as a methodology to examine the Dutch East Indian Co. (stylized VOC in print). This methodology allows Harman to flesh out a new point of his OOO that addresses some of the qualms presented by the other ontologies he has been in dialogue with. The most important addition to OOO in this monograph is Harman’s notion of “Symbiosis.” Symbiosis is a way to account for interaction and change in an object’s life; it gives rise to the significance of objects, as some interactions can be demarcated as “symbiotic,” and lesser interactions remain flat (42-51). In tracing the ontological history of the VOC, he demonstrates the symbiotic changes in the larger corporation’s life while also demonstrating that changes in the fleet, the governance, the products, and so forth, are all not separate instances of the object but rather within the object of the VOC unto itself. Ultimately, he provides some helpful axiomatic statements to consider when approaching objects from an “immaterialist” vantage point. Most of which can be summarized by his attention to the static object over the object in action. In this book Harman imagines a way for flat objects to exist in their approach and rub with other objects yet rather than systematize objects, Harman instead tries to honor their ontological independence placing them in nested objects of greater complexity, much in the same way as architects construct buildings.

In Morton's description “undermining” reduces objects down to their smallest parts and “overmining” claims that objects are blank and only made real by interaction and describes a line of avoidance objection that says objects are not substantial, but merely their appearance (208-210). With these parameters, the only way forward is to get *weird*. In altering the philosophical core of ontology we might seek out new

possibilities in the literary world as well in which our eye can train toward distinct moments of overmining or undermining that are problematic for process theories.

Alongside the developments made in contemporary philosophy, literary critics have found similar purchases in reading objects within texts. The Heideggerian Bill Brown spearheaded the emergence of what he terms “thing theory.” Thing theory was first codified in 2001 with Brown’s titular essay and later expanded upon in a special edition of *Critical Inquiry* published in 2004. The parallels with OOO are striking, both in each theory’s timeline and their philosophical lineage. Take, for example, Brown’s starting place for analyzing objects. He writes, “We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy” (4). This reading mirrors Harman’s observation from *Tool-being*. However, amidst their similarities, there is a slight divergence in addressing the essence of “objects.” Harman’s reading of Heidegger posits that the quadruple mesh of qualities represents objects both at hand and broken, while Brown wants to show objects’ ambiguous and elusive underbellies. Brown evokes the “thing” as the ontological center of objects. From this vantage, he argues that theory frequently impoverishes objects and unjustifiably privileges the subject in academic discourse. This reticence about anthropocentric thought is also the leading edge of Harman’s speculative realism and subsequent OOO.

Brown’s first move in disentangling “thingness” from the subject/object binary has to do with his rejection of correlationism. Things, for Brown, cannot be relegated to the properties of thoughts because they *avoid* the direct access of human-oriented perception. Much like Harman’s reading of Heidegger, Brown’s “things” can be said to

“withhold” themselves from the gazing eye of other “things,” especially *human-things*. This leaves a literary theory more primed at getting outside of raw symbolism or haughty signifiers, and rather leads into a new ontological realm where art is no longer a mental projection of sense perception but a mirror of how objects see us as fellow objects. In reading the midcentury sculptures of Claes Oldenburg, Brown claims that “[objects] are tired of our longing. They are tired of us” (15). The interpretive power of this analysis is to reshuffle the position of objects in the foreground. In this new ontological position, objects can lament, anger, and tire *without* correlation to human perception.

However, in a strange turn, Brown’s attempt to get out of the way of objects results in their further personification. The “object tired of us” is no less a subject-oriented sense perception than saying, “Oldenburg’s sculptures show how we are tired of objects.” At first glance, the reversal seems to hold, but what makes the “tired sculpture” “tired” if not for Brown’s own conjecture? It seems then that this skepticism of correlation is difficult to explicate because each attempt will create an ouroboros of subject-oriented meaning. Although this analysis seems to destabilize the ontological assumptions of “thing theory,” it might in turn rework it into a new, more congruent framework. It is not my intention to shift the focus back from objects to subjects; however, there is a gap in what can be accessed in the art world by reducing objects down to their untenable properties and by building up a new ontological focus from an art-centric vantage point.

My aim is to leverage the insights of Brown and Harman to develop a different ontological analysis of art objects that can honor both objects in and unto themselves



and the effect that objects produce when they are situated in art contexts. My theoretical framework suspends objects so that they are no longer inflexibly withheld but rather bluntly realized in their capacity to morph into the being of other objects. In this way, my philosophical position is teleological insofar as art objects can represent their capacity after the transposition has occurred. Though there is skepticism about teleological arguments in OOO, I contest that this approach will provide a way back into the object's ontological state *without* conjecturing about the object a priori. Additionally, this view does not necessitate the human subject, but it does require a distinction between objects that possess sentience and objects that are incapable of feeling or perceiving. Though establishing this gap may draw the ire of OOO theorists, I believe it is a valuable line to draw. While we might indulge ourselves in imagining the paper clip happy at having fulfilled its task or the tumbleweed glum for having been swept from Vegas to Reno, these objects do not seem to possess the same *qualia* as sentient objects: humans, primates, chipmunks, etc. Drawing this distinction does not delegitimize non-sentient objects; rather, it avoids the personifying of them, or the placing of the mind's subjective interpretation overtop the object.

There may be a way out of this blockage, in which we return to sidestep Heidegger and go further back to Husserl. Could one make sense of Gertrude Stein's "A rose is a rose is a rose" in Heideggerian terms and, by extension, Harman and Brown's object analysis? Perhaps an object-oriented approach would decipher that the repeated object reveals a different property each time it is uttered and then slinks back to a withheld state. Or perhaps they might read the sequence as a law of identity, collapsing the object into co-equal beings withheld but emergent in itself. Or we might take Stein's own

account into our reading, “As memory took it over, the thing lost its identity. I think in that line the rose is red for the first time in English poetry for a hundred years” (Greenfield 128). The interpretive projects of OOO are well informed and can even provide explication for their ontological framework, but OOO cannot get at the swaths of emotion, memory, sensation, and sentiment loaded onto Stein’s sentence. It appears that constituting the rose as a “thing” or an “object” wholly towards itself loses a critical beat in listening to how the poet leverages the object.

It will be helpful to borrow some of Edmund Husserl’s terminology to better grasp the ways objects encounter, interpret, and incorporate the inaccessible points of other objects. After the phenomenologist (in our case, the phenomenologist is not restricted to the philosopher but any sentient object) has performed epoché, they move into a second reduction that Husserl deems “the eidetic reduction.” The eidetic reduction examines the essence, or the *eidōs*, of a phenomenological idea (idea in this sense refers merely to the perceived conscious experience the object has with the life world). The eidetic reduction continues to employ another tool, imaginary variation, in which the noema is perceived in a variety of ways in order to arrive at an intuition (1-12). Essentially, this process aims at determining what the underlying phenomena of the object is even when certain attributes change. The most famous example of this technique is found in Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in which the meditator contemplates a piece of wax. The wax, the meditator correctly observes, can exist in a variety of shapes and forms; yet there is an underlying phenomenological property that can be intuitively taxonomized as “wax” (68-69). Here, the process of imaginary

variation provides a tool to determine the underlying features of the noema and thus can allow the phenomenologist to arrive at the eidos.

When applied to literary analysis, this Husserlian insight allows us to examine the art object as a multi-faceted entity inflecting, transposing, and taking in the surrounding inputs to see how its utility is divulged in the context of a narrative. Take the case of Tim O'Brien's *The Things they Carried*, in which the narrator reveals that Cross's letters "were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack" (1). The logic of this sentence indicates an "imaging" of the subject in his unrequited situation which leads to a kind of shame. If these were in fact, "love letters," would they be proudly displayed at the top of the rucksack rather than nested in plastic beneath the "necessary" things? The examination here might challenge the dissociation of things and the *appearance-essence* that Harman et al. try to draw out. If the 'thingness' of the letters were predicated on their inaccessible withheld essence, then their appearance, or in this case, placement, would make no difference. It seems, rather, for O'Brien, that the important idea behind the letters is their capacity for imagining ["hoping"]. The suspended perception (humming with emotion) supplements the counterfactual "what if they were love letters" and causes their location in the rucksack. The eidetic reduction allows us to see that causality (in its ability to insinuate essence *from appearance*) makes the thing a *particular thing*, not by *thinking* it out but by *feeling* the thing. "Hoping," then, it seems, is interlocked with the thingness of [love] letters (O'Brien 1).

In its most basic conception, the history of western metaphysics has consistently bifurcated all substances down into subjects and objects. This fracturing or *severing* as

Morton puts it, of this holism has pervaded human interaction and our relationship with all other beings (28). What we need now is an ontological consideration that will accomplish a few things which, throughout history, have run it into the ground before. First, our study of objects should consider entities from a post anthropocentric viewpoint, getting the human correlate out of the perceivers' seat. Yet, there also must still be a recognition of the distinct geological imprint left by Homo sapiens on other life forms and objects. This means giving credence to all objects, be it a paper clip, a puppy dog, Styrofoam, the Great Barrier Reef, et cetera. Second, this ontology must recognize the history of white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormative ideologies, which often limit the notion of subject to a select and powerful few. And lastly, a new way of thinking about the states of being must be attested within the context of mass extinction.

Because the states of being we have grappled with thus far exist in less quantifiable, less contained starting places, we would be in better shape looking toward the arts for guidance for ontological nuance. While empirical measurements and mathematical constructs will get a grip on predictive events, literature can reveal phenomena outside of the microscope and provide complicating disruptions that do not easily map onto hardline observation.

Picking up from the most recent developments in ontology, my project will attempt to get closer to the parameters laid out above. I will offer an engagement with the post-anthropocentric that considers the validity of non-human entities while retaining the liberatory politics of queer theory and embedded ecological awareness. Using poetry as a locus of inquiry, I will demonstrate a development in the understanding of ontology that might be able to reach beyond the flat, withdrawn objects left in the charge

toward new materialism. Recognizing how this pursuit can often falter into an apolitical exercise, I will be decidedly crossing into matters of identity and ecological scales. Using insights from contemporary poetry, I aim to lay out a close reading that can disrupt ontological relationships and detail effective strategies for twisting the access points for surrounding states for being.

To spend sufficient time marshaling my arguments with substantial textual evidence I am limiting my primary texts to two poetry collections from the last few decades. The first book that I will be discussing is Richard Siken's sophomore collection, *War of the Foxes*. This text is engaged with rhetorically structuring an argument through use of the ekphrastic, fables, and contemplations of mathematics (Nelson and Siken). The distinctions between these themes and formal differences allow for a multi-level approach to critically evaluating the collection as a whole. Furthermore, the contents of these poems continually invest themselves with questions of landscape, the ontology of objects, and how queer life is situated within. Additionally, the metaphors and symbology in Siken's work oftentimes parallel the language used by object-oriented philosophers and the broader swath of new materialists. However, his poetry moves beyond the enactment of theory and instead offers twists to the logic at hand in the way the humanities approach objects. It is in these moments that I will find the most generative textual engagement and what I am arguing more broadly for us to consider in its scope and application across a revitalized humanity. In generating this work, I hope to echo Siken's closing line of the first poem in *War of the Foxes* by asking: "to supply the world with what?" and looking at how Siken posits a series of landscapes to provoke these questions. My investigation will also look at the role of non-human

objects in Siken's poetry and will ask questions about how landscape can become queered and to what ends.

The second texts that I will be writing about are the three books in Harryette Mullen's *Recyclopedia*, the 2006 reprinting of three collections from the 1990s: *Trimmings*, *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T*, and *Muse & Drudge*. This collection brings several thematic and aesthetic dimensions together and allows the reader to dip into a substantial selection of Mullen's output. Mullen's poetry offers a similar commitment to the investigation of objects as well as the larger ecosystem. The formal qualities of Mullen's work include rhyme scheme, double entendre, slippage, metagrams, and more. The poems in her collections are rooted in the Black experience and the feminist tradition which can further distinguish the complications made to the flat ontology of objects. Bringing these two authors together will hopefully produce meaningful crosstalk between identities, stylistic differences, and a shared concern for objects within the broader ecosystem.

## ON RICHARD SIKEN'S *WAR OF THE FOXES*

Siken's sophomore collection, *War of the Foxes*, cracks open fissures of probing questions from its very first poem, "The Way The Light Reflects," in which the speaker asks, "so what's there to be faithful to?" in response to paint's limitations in capturing light. Opting to establish a meta-structure of painting throughout the collection, Siken questions the legitimacy of this project immediately by showing the faltering object of art not depicting "reality." In this way, Siken offers a lens to examine the mediating force of objects across landscapes and within intimate spaces. "*I'm faithful to you, darling. I say it to the paint,*" he writes (3). I wish to examine the ways in which Siken's poetry is enmeshed with ontological questions that recursively dictate the collection's form and interpretive purchase. From the outset of his 20-line poem, Siken evokes notions of the separated-unseparated body with its "fallacy of the local body" (3). He begins to prod the considerable gap between appearance and essence ("they see the field but not the varnish"), and he identifies the necessarily contingent relationship between a landscape and its occupants: "The bird floats in the unfinished sky with nothing to hold it" (3). In these early statements, Siken signals to the reader a complex undertaking, a "war," if you will, of material consideration. The plea in "The Way The Light Reflects" unlocks the rest of the collection and will be the focus of this essay. The poem ends, "*To supply the world with what?*" (3). This question unlocks the ontological investigation of this essay as it represents Siken's probe into how one deals with objects and their constituted forms across landscapes. It matters for Siken what we supply the world with and as critics we ought to take his investigation seriously because it offers disruptive strategies to contemporary metaphysical assumptions.

The “what” Siken posits throughout his collection is never straightforward, but he clues the reader into a variety of topics for which further and persistent investigation will help to build a framework of understanding. In a literal sense, the “what” is seemingly answered in the following two poems, both of which he begins with “Landscape.” The inner logic of the poems might dictate a reading in which the painter-poet Siken supplies the world with his “landscapes.” Yet while reading the subsequent two landscape poems, the quick “supply” is violated and subverted by a deliberately “blurred” landscape, a landscape in which the speaker implores, “Let’s kill some” (4), and later advises, “When you have nothing to say, set something on fire” (5). The troubling imperatives complicate the landscape as a vestige to supply the world with; rather, it is the landscape supplied and populated by the treacherous occupants, which the speaker and reader are brought along for in the first person “Let’s.” Such complications emerge in each of these poems and will be further examined in the following sections.

Before trekking too far into the murky depth of Siken’s “wars” and logics, I want to discuss the ekphrastic form often favored by Siken. Though various perspectives have been given on this distinct type of poetic practice, it is Peter Barry’s essay on “Contemporary Poetry and Ekphrasis” which helpfully codifies a vocabulary for our purposes in discussing the work of Siken. The formal care Barry takes to this particular subgenre of poetic form gives poetry critics a sound language with which to discuss the interaction of poetry and the visual arts. The framework he employs adopts the work of John Hollander and identifies ekphrastic poetry as either “actual” or “notional” (156). The former represents a poem in which a *real* work of art is being depicted within a literary verse, while the latter references an *imagined* artwork to which the poet’s eye



can attune. From this initial split, our focus will follow the “notional” category and key in on the more nuanced subcategory, the notional-conceptual ekphrastic. For Barry, the notional-conceptual ekphrastic is a poem in which there is no real artwork being referenced, but rather the poet *invents* a painting within the frame of his work. Siken’s poems most often qualify for this type of ekphrastic and deserve the “conceptual” descriptor because, unlike notional-fictional poems, the rules of painting are suspended, and the poem’s paintings take on a wholly impossible texture<sup>3</sup>. While there are a few “actual-closed” ekphrasis in Siken’s collection, notably in his poem “Four Proofs,” the majority of his work is built on conceptual painted landscape that the poet details for the reader. The figures of this visual field are painted, re-contoured, painted over and made agents throughout the collection, and it is this aspect of Siken that most forcefully crosses paths with Barry’s formal description.

The ekphrastic categorization of Siken’s poetry, given Barry’s insights, is a curious dance with object agency and conceptual limitations. “Something happened in the paint tonight / and it is worth keeping,” Siken writes (34). The mutability of paint and painting in Siken’s work echoes Barry’s description of the conceptual object as having “‘supra-realist’ characteristics which no real art object could have” (156). I might even go further with Siken’s example cited above and contend that the actual material can pick up these “supra-realist” characteristics, not just the amalgamation of the artwork. There is something in the paint for Siken; this affords a conceptual framework laced with material considerations. Employing this alteration on the known categories of ekphrastic

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<sup>3</sup> For example, when Siken’s landscape starts talking back to the speaker: “*I like dead things*, says the landscape (14).

poetry, Siken draws attention away from the conventional, procedural ekphrastic practice and instead pushes the scope out and into the meta, component parts of his descriptive artwork. Examining how Siken emphasizes the materiality of the conceptual ekphrastic leads to a more sensitive appreciation for the ways in which objects in Siken's poetry are brimming with agential potentiality, meaning that objects mentioned are capable of performing actions, both intimate and violent, in every respect. The reader gets a sense that each deliberate object is placed and loaded with the capacity for movement, not within a broader system, but engendering the capacity in and of itself to act.

In *War of the Foxes*, there is a persistent query about the efficacy of painting as a medium in its entanglement with language through the speaker's poetic practice. On the one hand, there is tremendous capacity for painting to be an activating force for political organization. In "Landscape with Several Small Fires," the actually painted landscape becomes an agent and a destructive one at that. The landscape speaks of gathering armies, tanks, and war (the art of war) within the dialogue of the poem's speaker. Siken demonstrates this threat at first by painting the wounds of the landscape in the particular element of a shoulder, who in another OOO move gains agency through dialogue, "Socket, says the shoulder" (22). However, there is a pivot in the final stanza of the poem that reveals a complicating factor of an initial critique of landscape domination. Siken's speaker instructs the reader to "Keep your paints wet," This move is accompanied by the preceding line in which Siken reminds, "History is painted by the winners" (23). In this reading, one might imagine a rallying cry for meeting the damaging, war-mongering landscape with the realized ability to paint it or unpaint it. In

an ecologically-minded reading, we might take this moment as an optimistic realization, in which the destroyers of the landscape are the ones holding the tools — optimistic in the sense that those with the capacity to destroy also have the capacity to rally against the very destruction embodied by their tools. We might still imagine some distance between the speaker and the actual object of the paint and a further sticky separation between the paint and the landscape.

However, there are further complications to consider in the ways Siken imagines painting as an extension of the poet and as a representation of the world at large. The very first line of *War of the Foxes* casts a proverbial shadow over the rest of the poems. Siken wants the reader to understand that while painting may appear correlational, its distance from material reality never quite gets it right, to the extent that the object under focus is always shifting away from view. There is a skepticism in painting's ability to get at the thing itself: "The paint doesn't move the way the light reflects" (3). This causes a crisis of faith in the speaker as the material composition is unable to suit the demands of the task. However, Siken quickly leverages this point to direct the speaker's faithfulness back to the paint, with the intimately charged *darling*.

Thinking back to Latour's guiding logic, things ought to be recalibrated in our intellectual milieu away from matters of "fact" or "fairy" (his alternative stand-in for the ideological object) and instead reconsider thingness as a "gathering" (168-170). The "gatheringness" of things is borrowed from Heidegger and affords a more generous engagement with the world around us. Siken understands this critical turn quite well in his poetics, claiming in "Still Life with Skulls and Bacon" that "We carve up the world and crown it with numbers - lumens, ounces, decibels" (13). He laments once more in the

closing line, “All these things and what to do with them. We carve up the world all the time” (13). In this passage, Siken is echoing the earlier concerns of Latour, whose “matters of fact” reflect the scientific measurements that “carve” Siken’s poetic world. Even further, Siken’s treatment of objects begins to manifest the sense of “gathering” invoked by the new materialists in line with the Heideggerian reading. When he tells the loose narrative of a detective losing his partner in “The Worm King’s Lullaby,” the images are collected around the scene rather than forcefully constructed into metaphors of lament; he leaves them be, gathers them together, and lets the “park bench. Dark coats and white roses, snow and repetitions of snow” situate around the dead partner—“dead on a bench in a black coat, the snow falling down” (45). In bringing the things together, gathering them up in sequence, and giving them to the reader without pomp or overture, Siken’s ontological appreciation aligns itself with the broader message of Latour.

For a reader familiar with Harman, it would likely be hard to read Siken’s “Logic” and not be reminded of the founder of OOO. In the poem, Siken studies a hammer, writing:

A clock is a machine. A gear is a tool. There is rarely  
any joy in a frictionless place, so find your inner viscosity.  
The mind says viscosity is resistance to flow. The body  
puts glue on a twig and catches a bird. Glue is a tool,  
unless you are a bird. If you are a bird, then glue is  
an inconvenience. A tool does work. A bird flies away  
from danger and lands where it can. All thinking is

comparison. A bear is a weapon, a bear claw is a pastry.  
A bear trap, if you are a bear, is an inconvenience.  
Logic is boring because it works. Being unreasonable is  
exciting. Machines have knobs you can turn if you  
want to. A hammer is a hammer when it hits the nail.  
A hammer is not a hammer when it is sleeping. I woke  
up tired of being the hammer. There's a dream in the  
space between the hammer and the nail: the dream of  
about-to-be-hit, which is a bad dream, but the nail will  
take the hit if it gets to sleep inside the wood forever.  
I taped a sword to my hand when I was younger. This  
is an argument about goals. (29)

What is striking is Siken's flexibility in using the hammer beyond its initial use. Though the objects start as "tools" their utility is challenged and then morphs into new imagined objects. For Siken, the hammer resists reduction. Instead, one could say he raises it to the status of a subject, which invokes the gentle and organic "sleeping" rather than highlighting an ontological shift in its non-utility. The tool fundamentally "breaks" and is then not what it once was. This happens in its function but not in the name of the object. Additionally, there is a neurotic metaphor at play with the hammer's capacity to "nail" in this element, further confounding the traditional function of an object-hammer. This evaluation seems like a novelty in the philosophical sense; it offers intriguing possibilities whereupon its "withdrawal" becomes something quite literally alive. I am tempted to say that Siken's invention here is a more pressing articulation of Harman's

thesis, even though Harman might object to the personification of the hammer—insofar as his project requires all objects to be reduced down to their object status—whereas Siken seems to almost elevate the hammer to possess qualities associated with something distinctly human. His descriptions of the non-organic nearly cross the threshold in the direction Siken takes us. This example demonstrates the reliance and reverence given to the non-human objects in Siken’s collections and affords an invigorating exercise wherein his poetry expands and works within contemporary networks of material studies.

The compound phrase “about-to-be-hit” again evokes Timothy Morton, and their work on OOO specific literary criticism. In their defense of poetry, Morton highlights the key term “causality” as the central locus of all poetry (212). Few examples resonate more soundly than the dreaming hammer about to strike the nail. The capacity engendered in Siken’s “Logic” is still more complex than the simple nod to capacity; it must be kept in tension with the dream state of the hammer in which the repeated hitting, striking, and use becomes a recurring nightmare, “a bad dream” (212).

Morton’s “defense” draws on Percy Bysshe Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry* to explicate a through-line of object-oriented ontology into literary criticism. They tease out parallels between Shelley’s treatment of Aeolian harps and the ways OOO addresses objects. In Shelley, Morton finds that poetry has a unique ability to get *at*, *in-between*, and *underneath* causality. In fleshing out this poetic defense, Morton also finds space to further clarify the objections to OOO. They pick up on Harman’s two ways of avoiding OOO: “undermining” (reducing objects down to their smallest parts) and “overmining” (saying objects are blank and only made real by interaction) and describes a line of

avoidance objection that says objects are not substantial, but merely their appearance. Martialing defense against these perceived objections, Morton critiques the law of noncontradiction and tries to rehabilitate dialetheism as a counterweight to the claim that in OOO: objects are both themselves and not themselves. Morton's essay also tries to demonstrate that poetry is not the representation of phenomena, but rather claims that a poem is a "nonhuman agent"<sup>4</sup>. This idea is bulwarked with their discussion of "form" as memory. How objects mark time is with their appearance, leading Morton to claim that objects themselves are time *as an aesthetic phenomena*.

Morton's contributions to an OOO theory of poetry serve as a helpful framework in which literary texts may rest. They have bracketed out a space to examine the text, not as an "acted upon" object but as an agent, marking time and translating its contents into something that Shelley claims can "bloom of all things." Morton also reads Heidegger differently from Harman. Morton wants the *Dasien* to be collapsible to all objects, each emitting their own *space-time*. They caution against the shortcut of "middle objects" by which other objects are defined (209). This caution seemingly pushes against the process philosophies of Whitehead and Deleuze and the scientific materialism of DeLanda. I will attempt to find a way in through the "rift" that Morton describes when claiming objects are both substance *and* appearance, and neither substance *nor* appearance. This newly developed anticipatory amendment to OOO's detractors may be more easily dismissed than Morton would like it to be. Perhaps there is a way to equally reject the Law of noncontradiction and still get at the derided

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<sup>4</sup> This also might be thought of as an event, both marking time and place in the materiality of the poem on the page as well as the unique time signatures associated with poetic expression.

“aesthetics all the way down” (213). Or perhaps there is a more nuanced argument in which Morton has hidden their aesthetics: in objects *with no realization* that they have become the objects themselves. It is paramount to consider how Morton views causality as “aesthetic,” which they define as “having to do with appearance” (205). If causality is the aesthetic dimension of poetry and the grander art world, can one imagine a theoretical stance that treats objects as coded and endowed with metonymy, where they override the apparent essence of other objects? It appears that objects within art problematize their own withdrawal by becoming something other than their “handiness” or “unhandiness.” Might it be a more fruitful endeavor to think of objects not as they appear in the poem but—as what they become, when prodded, translated, and/or instigated by other objects?

In the literary analysis I am proposing, the terms of accessing artwork shifts from understanding art objects not as internally charismatic, but as functionally suspended forms in which the free play of an object-observer’s access modes can bracket out meaning, emotion, and aesthetic appreciation. A recall to Husserlian eidetic reduction: demands the conjuring of phenomena into a state where the appearance divulges the thing as sensory perceptible. Though charisma is rejected in this formulation, causality must be retained as the key to unlocking the potential of interpretive framework. Causality is the capacity by which objects become teleologically transposed into other objects.

Indeed, Morton expands this notion further in *Being Ecological* (2018). They write, “Phenomena don’t just happen, then you perceive them. The phenomenon includes the act of having it, hammering it, measuring them, mathematizing it, feeling it”



(76). In some ways, Siken echoes this conceit with his “Mystery of the Pears,” writing, “I painted the pears, what they were like. I waited for the pears to reveal their mystery” (33). The key timestamp “were” feels important in this formulation because, like Morton suggests, time is the marker that situates the potentiality of the “what.” Mere appearance might at first glance be the “pears”— “soft and scarred and blushing yellow”—but then the critical turn happens away from the object, “hung on the wall” and specifics reveal something else in their precision.

Morton’s ontology can be picked back up here:

But a hammer doesn’t just wait around in outer space for someone to grab it. Hammers happen when you grab a metal-and-wooden thing for hammering in a picture hook. In this way a hammer is like a poem. A poem isn’t the squiggles on the page. It’s how I orchestrate those squiggles when I read them (76).

The poem, in Siken’s conception, then becomes an object unto itself with distinct formal markers of time (“were,” “you might like it here”) and place – the pears painted on the canvas and the still life being depicted as a “landmark.” These features indicate a poem that does not exist as a mere projection of Siken’s imagination but rather a poem which becomes its own entity in the process of its writing. The ability to demarcate space and time enable a capacity to act and is well-suited to Morton’s theoretical model of what poems are in the broadest sense of objects. While, there is still a tricky correlate here in the “I orchestrate those squiggles when I read them”, Morton’s aim to show objects in their own agent capacity can “happen”. As we will continue to see, the subject still sticks in some ways to how OOO’s language tries to relate the phenomenon objects and their function for human beings.

It is possible to read this poem as an investigation of the ouroboros brutality of non-human objects, forcefully utilized again and again. Undoubtedly, the hammer carries with it metaphorical significance and one might imagine it as a stand-in for the poet: the queer body repeatedly struck with dispersion and oppressive violence. Because we have established that the hammer can act on its own capacity, and given the qualities presented within its rendering, there is also a level of complicity in the object itself. Further still, we can take Siken's speaker as confessing their own culpability in this cycle, "I woke / up tired of being the hammer." Siken presents a complicating but grounded analysis here in which the hammering begets hammers, in same way that oppressive violence can spiral. Yet, considering the rest of *War of the Foxes*, Siken's concern for the objects that "supply" the world presents further possibilities.

It is prudent to establish both the theoretical crosstalk of queer theory and new materialism, and Siken's own entangled poetic content. Although there has been a perception of disunity between affect theorists and new materialists, Marta Figlerowicz and her colleagues provide a generous approach of an interwoven theoretical model that considers the critical value in both schools of thought. Their essay "Object Emotions" is an expansive bridge in materialist considerations. The central claim is to highlight "that the methodologies of affect theory, history of emotions, and new materialism, are interwoven on conceptual and practical levels" (156). Aiming for a more interdisciplinary critical theory, Figlerowicz and her co-authors track the extant cleavage of emotional inquiry and that of materialism. In drawing the three schools together, they demonstrate that the history of emotions often examines the objects that mediate the

subject's emotional content in such a way that lends itself to a materialist reading. In addition, the agency of communal emotion is argued to exist as a kind of object, divorced from the individual and constituted in the materiality of collective networks. In delineating the materiality of emotion through a historical reading, the essay argues that an "underside" of emotions must be examined and affirmed through "occluded or marginalized forms" (161). A glance underneath the emotional surface reveals affects as a central component to these histories. It is the entanglement of emotions, objects, and affect that produces a multidimensional critical model that does not limit itself to either the flat, subject reduction of OOO or the over-reliance on phenomenology in affect theory.

As we see in Siken's poem "Dots Everywhere," object emotions preoccupy the poet and give rise to the closing line, "Maybe we will wake up to the silence of shoes at the foot of the bed not going anywhere" (34). Using object emotions as a model, we can see how the poet mediates the emotional response to his lover through the material. It is not the gathering of objects or their flat ontological rootedness that gives this poem its necessary ending, rather it is the effect engendered in the non-human that makes the poem touching.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reconfigures the landscape of homosexual and heterosexual binaries and challenges these categorizations in a convincing analysis of staple literary texts. As a queer poet, Siken engages in some of the semantic inflections that Sedgwick identifies. Notably, the aforementioned "Dots Everywhere" injects the material object into his sentimentality. It

is not as simple as affect theory meeting OOO; it is instead, in Siken's work, a queering of material to produce the displacement of the human.

The poet also takes care in his imagined dialogues with his "love," writing all exchanged text in italics. This subtle formal change might reflect the "closetedness" Sedgwick theorizes. Perhaps her most well-known contribution to queer theory, the closet is an overarching metaphor that represents the ways in which gay men shelter their bodies from the oppressive strictures of heteronormativity. Within the blocky text of his longer poem, "Portrait of Fryderyk in Shifting Light," there is a faint and protected "*see me, not through me*" cloistered by the "straight" type around it (23). These breaks in form often happen in Siken's work and reflect the subtle linguistic class created by the slanted invocations and exchanges. Here too, we do not see Siken retreat into the ontological and the post-human; rather, his queer identity is portrayed through the plethora of objects he presents.

Sara Ahmed's work on orientation and the queering of phenomenology is generative here as her perspective layers onto what has been gleaned from a foray into the new materialist landscape. In her essay "Queer Feelings," she delineates how "compulsory heterosexuality shapes bodies by the assumption that a body 'must' orient itself towards some objects and not others, objects that are secured as ideal through the fantasy of difference" (154). Ahmed's point echoes some of the unease presented by Jane Bennett surrounding the hegemonic swatch of OOO theorists. Bennett pressures Harman's use of "objects" by arguing for new terms: "things" or "bodies." This amendment allows Bennett to then further dissolve the subject-object binary OOO theories claim. She challenges OOO on its political framework, asserting that the

preference of “things” / “bodies” as opposed to objects is more attuned to capture the “nonhuman vitalities actively at work around and within us” (231). For new materialism to earnestly engage with marginalized identities, then it must take up Ahmed’s point and account for the way “compulsory heterosexuality shapes which bodies one ‘can’ legitimately approach as would-be lovers and which one cannot” (154).

Ahmed also offers further clarification on how objects are integrated and interacted with through the queer body. This opens up further discussions about the ontological status of objecthood, and also provides some of the ground floor from which we see Siken employing queer strategies to disrupt and disorient. Her analysis on the position of objects originates from phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty’s work on sexuality; she reads his “model of sexuality as a form of bodily projection” to demonstrate the extension and exceeding capacity of objects that are reached for by queer sexualities (*Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed, 114). In this analysis, sexuality is entangled with bodily orientation and dictates how space is inhabited. Ahmed extends this analysis out to objects and claims that sexuality has a profound impact on the way discrete objects are reached for, ultimately foregrounding the relationship a queer body has to the world. Ahmed frames this positionality in terms of “facing” with the world. The connection here is clear, “orientations toward sexual objects affect other things that we do, such that different orientations, different ways of directing one’s desires, means inhabiting different worlds” (114). This connection troubles rigid similarities to OOO as following an established logic; orientation towards objects should not radiate this same effect, as ultimately their essences cannot be translated or grasped. The severing of objects and their affective relationships to the human species is often analogous to a black hole in

OOO theories (*Humankind*, Morton, 30). However, if we are to seriously engage with a queer phenomenological perspective one must allow objects to have an affect and not a collapsing and impenetrable void.

Speaking of facing, Siken uses the word “face” or “facing” a total of twenty-four times in *War of the Foxes*. This is not an insignificant number, as it represents a persistent image that is employed almost exclusively in the third person. Most of these occurrences are comments on a painted “he” that the poet is gazing at or entangled with. For instance, Siken collapses the speaker’s face and the painted face in “Portrait of Fryderyk in Shifting Light,” writing “I look away I am still looking. He is inside his body / and I am inside my body and it matters less and less. / Shared face, shared looking” (33). The logic of this passage tracks remarkably with Ahmed’s analysis in which she comments on the binding agent that is orientation. Through an analysis of Husserl, she demonstrated that moving the visual field from object to object captures and brings together these objects’ disparate forms. She notes specifically that “the gaze that turns to an object, brings other objects into view, even if they are only dimly perceived—as well as by how orientations make things near, which affects what can be perceived” (120). The shifting light in Siken’s poem acts as a sort of haze over the figures, one which distorts faces and renders an understanding between painter and figure impossible — “They shift / in the light. You can’t light up all sides at once” (32). However, Siken finds a solution to this ghostly and flickering figure — add more paint. The figure’s resemblance to the painter—and ultimately his realization as he manifested objects—is not complete until there is no light left. “Opaque / in the sense of finally solid, in the sense of /see me, not through me. The selves, glaze on glaze,” (33). In solidifying

the paint, one brushstroke over another Siken's figure is realized. However, this is ultimately a disorienting image, one that Siken likens to his enemy. Although there is a brief moment of intimacy, with the figure and the painter "trembling together," this is quickly done away with when the speaker tries to enlarge the figure's mouth and makes a mess of the painting (33). There is a profound sense of disorientation in this poem with Siken's speaker breaking down, lamenting, "It was too much to bear" (44). Ahmed's conclusion follows a similar tact. She alternately claims that the queer body and its engagement and interaction with space creates pockets of disruption not only within other human beings and their relationships but within the actual status of the objects themselves. As we see this play out in Siken's poem, the speaker's object (the painting) enters this mode of disorientation whereas Ahmed would say: "we fail to sink into the ground, which means that the 'ground' itself is disturbed, which also disturbs what gathers 'on' the ground" (199). In fact, there is no reason why you would not be able to replace the idea of "ground" with "canvas" in thinking through Siken's poem here. As we will further explore, the disorientation of objects predicated by the queer body clears out space, essential ecological space. Ahmed even uses the term "Field" in this formulation, substituting it for ground.

Siken's poetry does not always approach this split from an ontological or phenomenological level, but rather from an epistemological perspective. In "Ghost, Zero, Suitcase, and the Moon," he writes, "the difference between / one bird and many. The similarity of one bird, one / worm, one stone. From finger-counting to sticks, / to symbols, to abstractions" (41). Given Ahmed's insights and the totalizing force of compulsory heterosexuality, this line seems to break down the separation of objects as

a way of making sense of them. There is also a way in which objects become representational forms, existing both in poetic metaphor and on a more fundamental, ontological level, in the way that objects have continually been seated as arbiters of human traction and self identification. Given the counting mechanism that reappears throughout *War of the Foxes* and given Siken's intention to write "math poems"<sup>5</sup>. Reading these poems might draw out a rhetorical argument from this poem that the ways of adding up, separating out and accounting are epistemological tools Siken explores to negate the rigidity and inaccessibility of objects. While this may look on the surface as "carving" up the world", Siken insists his objects are gathered to see their shadowy essences and not their ability to for strict utilization. In these tools Siken challenges methods of thinking and continually contemplates the "ghost of math" (Nelson and Siken). The concept Siken inhabits here is one revealed in "Lovesong of the Square Root of Negative One," where the thing that "does not exist, [ ] solves certain intractable problems" (Nelson and Siken). This paradox of logic is appreciated and developed in Siken's body of work, and this focus can help complicate the flat materialism that exists at first glance. The way Siken uses the epistemology of arithmetic bears a resemblance to how queer theory works out in Ahmed's conception. Her view of pleasure relates here as queer pleasure exists as a *moment* within the fantasy of reproduction that holds together compulsory heterosexual narratives (*Queer Phenomenology* 163). In other words, there must be a "square root of negative zero" in

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<sup>5</sup> Siken speaking with Green Linden Press: "The book was supposed to be longer, and there were supposed to be more math poems, because math is a whole other way we represent the world."



order for queer space to open. Something which does not exist holds everything together.

With the entanglement of queer theory and materialism established, it is now a worthy endeavor to embrace this new model as it emerges within the conceptual landscape of Siken's work. More than any other image or object, it is the landscape that Siken returns to, naming the second and third poems "Landscape With a Blur of Conquerors" and "Landscape with Fruit Rot and Millipede," respectively. Though not explicitly titled "Landscape," the fourth poem also evokes the ecological expanse with its "Trampled Field" in "Birds Hover the Trampled Field." These poems tackle a plethora of issues too lengthy to contend with here. There are clear colonial implications in lines such as, "The field is empty, sloshed with gold" (4), "The hand says weapon. The mind says tool" (4), and "Take a body, dump it" (8) and so on. While colonial critique is worthy of its own project, my aim is to examine the ecological underpinnings of Siken's landscapes and to connect these findings with the broader inroads already established regarding queer readings and materialisms. Yet, before undertaking a review of Siken through an ecological lens, it is prudent to take a step back and define the parameters of this approach to artistry and how its commentary resolves and instigates the relationship humans have to the natural and organic objects around them.

Picking Morton's "poem as object" back up, we can utilize their recasting of ecological conditions to attune to a more "ecologically" grounded poetics, as evidenced in Siken. While there may be a temptation to read the natural into Siken's work, picking up on the narrative fable-esque qualities in the titular poem, "Fox rounds the warren..." ("It's a blessing: everyday someone shows up at the fence" (20-12)), this approach

loses the real thread of ecological scope presented in the body of Siken's collection. This pivot allows for the new language of "landscape" which is distinct from "nature" in its resistance to fetishize, demarcate and project into. Morton's *Ecology without Nature* has provided critical insight into how art might circumnavigate the task of engaging with the environment through enmeshment rather than stilted observation. In reformulating "nature," Morton contends that it is "animals, trees, the weather...the bioregion, the ecosystem. It is both the set and the contents of the set. It is the world and the entities in that world. It appears like a ghost at the never-arriving end of an infinite series: crabs, waves, lightning, rabbits, silicon...Nature" (18). It is important to pick up on the "interior/exterior" boundary that is broken down in Morton's definition, as it posits an ecological awareness capable of writing about/within nature, rather than as a distinct form separate from the author. The exogenous approach picked up by Siken in "Detail of the Hayfield" follows this tact: "I followed myself for a long while, deep into the field" (9). There is a pivot not *to nature* but rather an awareness that compels Siken's poetic narration. It is revealing, too, in the second line of the poem that Siken writes: "Our scope was larger than I realized." In abdicating the "myself," the speaker seems to briefly imagine that the "field" is much bigger than it initially could have been conceived of.

Matters of scope and scale often appear in Morton's ecological work and are often leveraged to reveal an eschatological shift in the contemporary cosmos. Invoking Nietzsche's polemic (God is dead), Morton states in *Being Ecological*, "that there is a bewildering variety of scales on which to think and act—ecosystem scale, planet-scale, biosphere scale, human scale, blue whale scale ...—it's already the end of the 'world'"

(189). The scales do not become separated or parsed out in “art” or in speculative reality; rather, they are telescoped, fluid, and unimaginably pressed into one another. The scales do not necessarily reveal difference, whether larger or smaller; instead, they focus the poet’s awareness away from the ever-dominant, anthropocentric scale. Furthering the distinction between “nature” and “ecology,” Morton employs the term “ecomimesis,” which describes a rhetorical device capable of “going beyond the aesthetic dimension” and working itself underneath, behind, and “beyond art” (31), and contrasts with conventional environmental, in which the writer is distant and observing of the out-there phenomena of nature. Ecomimesis calls attention to the container of the art-object and reflexively echoes a sense of awareness that the artifact is not about-nature but, in a strange realization, “is-nature.” Nature obviously falls short here, as its connotations still rest on the pastoral and romantic out-there. Therefore, in a truer ontological sense, of all objects being materially equal, we might suppose everything as “ecological” scaled and baked into the fabric of a withheld reality. Ultimately, Morton wants to say that “You don’t have to *be* ecological. Because you *are* ecological” (*All Art is Ecological*, Morton 105).

The work of interdisciplinary artist Alize Zorlutuna and specifically her commentary on the kind of practice she enacts is perhaps not as subtle as Siken’s, yet worthy of investigation to see the ways in which Siken’s queered landscape is preceded by his contemporaries. Zorlutuna’s work engages with queer-ecological attention to the surrounding world. In her performance art and visual art, she adopts a sensual framework to “queer” the landscape and touches the bridge between the human and nonhuman. At times her artistry takes the form of photography or drama, but

most often, she uses her body and bodies of participants to perform the work of art. Whether she is crawling on all fours up a stairwell or constructing ritualistic patterns with natural elements, the central aim is also the enmeshment of subject and world. With her contribution to *CSPA Quarterly*, she articulates the critical stance of her artwork and the artwork of her ideological compatriots. She starts off by identifying the difference between place and landscape, using Lucy Lippard's definitions. For Zorlutuna and Lippard, the place is an intimate space "experienced from the inside." In this regard, human agency occurs within, is enmeshed with, and experiences itself within "place" (46). The latter, "landscape," is defined by its distance, its visual horizon, and the vast isolation of human agency. (This definition is complicated by the colonial expansion of the West on indigenous lands, wherein a mythological projection of landscape is fraught with cruel implications.) Landscape alludes to touch in our conception, but through a mediating force, Zorlutuna believes intimacy might be established. With artwork that sensualizes and eroticizes landscape, humans can connect in a meaningful and physical way with the ecology, previously reserved for sole optical contemplation. Approaching the land in this way requires a "queering," making unfamiliar of the familiar (47). In this way, the queer landscape emerges in our established comfort and asks the nonhuman environment to be given transposition-sexual qualities. This, she concludes, breaks the land and the nonhuman away from the Western normative assumptions and affords "a becoming other." So that the non-sentient, "unaffected/unaffected thing, is imbued with subjectivity" (48).

In similar regard to Zorlutuna's artistic purpose, Siken focuses his attention on the landscape in a critical but invested manner. Yet, where there is an erotic fascination

and a kind of kinship in Zorlutuna, Siken's poems are more forceful and confrontational with the land around him. He laments this fact in "Self Portrait against Red Wallpaper," writing, "Vanity, Vanity, forcing your will on the whole world" (40). This self rebuke is followed by the apt observation, "What's the difference between me and the world? Compartmentalization" (40), which recalls the earlier lines from "Still Life With Skulls and Bacon," wherein the world is broken down into the measurable and the compartmentalized<sup>6</sup>. He goes further in depicting a potential irreconcilable difference between humans and the world, writing in "Landscape with Fruit Rot" that "The mind fights the body, and the body fights the land," claiming that the landscape "wants our bodies" (6). The violent and brutal landscapes of Siken already begin to look shades different than nature writing, as he is not confronting the "polluting" subject or romanticizing the natural world; rather, he bluntly questions, "Can we love nature for what it really is: predatory?" (6). "*I like dead things,*" the landscape whispers mimicking the deceased lover (14). Siken forces the critic into a tricky situation as he rebuffs the assumed disposition and confronts nature with his barrages. The landscape is also treacherous beyond the sheer forces of its own churning will, but in Siken's poems, the landscapes are full of men who "try to conquer it" (6) and "armies "swarming about" (14). With all the violence that Siken paints and describes in his notional-conceptual ekphrastics, it is hard to find a way out of the poem's violent imposing forces. Yet, with the blended lens of new materialism and queer theory, we may be able to get access to the ecological concerns rife in Siken's work.

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<sup>6</sup> There is also the allusion to Frances Bacon, known for the brutality in his work.

The first line in Siken's string of landscape poems unlocks this reading. He writes, "To have a thought, there must be an object — the field is empty" (4). From its origin, the landscape is cast in the guise of the "thinking" subject, always bound to the inaccessible object. As Harman makes clear, the object's ontology will always be withheld from other objects. There is no process, no system at work; rather, the world is riddled with nothing except for objects hidden unto other objects, inaccessible even to themselves. In this way, Siken's obsession with "carving" and "compartmentalizing" makes sense as it is impossible to "think" the object into being while only its "lying" appearance is visible. That is precisely why the "field is empty" needing to be populated by the ontologically unstable "painting" that can be brushed over and "blurred." It clicks into place when considering the ekphrastic form Siken chooses to employ, as the artifice of painting reflects the aesthetic appearance of objects, as objects are all appearance, rifted by their immanence (Morton 212-216). Perhaps this view is pessimistic, but it appears that Siken's landscape is nothing but the "Fruit Rot" and the violence of trying to extract the extractable. Here is where picking up a suspended view of this rotted landscape will allow the agent of the poem to interject.

At times, Siken even contemplates resignation, writing, "I mean maybe it's better if my opponent wins" (40), as he recalled the same opponent from "Detail of Fire" — "What can you learn from your opponent?" It seems abundantly clear that the "opponent" is a stand-in for the "landscape" in which Siken battles through, paints around, and paints himself into. The turn to self-representation as an object within the confines of poetic form echoes a similar idea discussed in the scholarly literature on the ethics of objecthood and humanhood. Eunjung Kim's essay "Unbecoming Human"

proposes a new proximity to the inhuman/human distinction in which, through their work, artists can break through the lucid proximity of objecthood and insert their own being as dehumanized (315). By enabling a co-presence of object and human identity to exist in a conceptual space, Kim argues that this destabilizes normative humanity and produces a queer ethics in which previously “unproductive” bodies that were pathologized as objects can reassert themselves.

While Latour’s warning seems to be cast in miniature in regard to what we face today, some critics have seemingly run out of steam. Sandra Macpherson writes definitely, “About the end of our species, I say: fine” (402). While this might seem like an appropriate response to her reading of OOO, in which OOO theorists find humans in all the objects they examine (399). In giving an incredible amount of agency over to non-human objects, Macpherson claims that the human is smuggled into objects. Because the correlation of all objects—especially in the dominant anthropocentric access mode of writing and thinking—is done by humans and for humans, Macpherson claims that it is an impossible task to get outside of this closed loop. Still, I think there is a way forward, or perhaps less of a way forward and more clinging to the world and the ones that populate it. Queer theory may provide a way to at least mediate the suffering wrought by and onto the world.

It is the object’s emotions and their histories that provide the comfort to withstand the brutal predicament. While “everything casts a shadow. Your body told me in a dream it’s never been afraid of anything” (38), it is through the objects loaded with emotional history for which solace might be found. In one of the final poems of the collection, “Turpentine,” Siken voices brilliantly:

*It is too heavy, says the canvas. You lack restraint.  
I was sleeping in witness, drifts of snow,  
And you woke me and told me your dream, my blank  
Face upturned, listening. You came to me while we  
were sleeping, we were both sleeping, and you asked me  
to hold this for you. I am holding this for you (43).*

It is the canvas packed with its memories of painting in the same room together that “holds” the narrator together. Though the body has an even more difficult time navigating the landscape unscathed by violence, there is solidarity and shared history, holding together around the shared objects. While this reading is made possible by the insights of queer theorists and a broader ecological awareness, it seems like the mechanism through which all bodies cope and press on.



## ON HARRYETTE MULLEN'S *RECYCLOPEDIA*

Critical analysis of Harryette Mullen's work has often cleaved her output into two halves. Drawing a dividing line between her early output<sup>7</sup>, which John Stout calls a performance of "an affirmation of black identity and community, with a focus on female empowerment" (625) and her later texts<sup>8</sup> which are often lauded for their experimental playfulness and formal inventiveness. Allison Cummings denotes this shift as well, using "coherent" to describe Mullen's back catalogue and "fragmented" to describe *S\*PerM\*kt* and highlighting the polyvocal nature of *Muse* and *Drudge*. Much has been made about the observational shifts in Mullen's formal language, yet some scholars have been wary of retaining this divide. Courtney Thorsson rejects these often-discussed categorizations, and rather wants to imagine Mullen's work as consistently "vernacular" (189). The key difference is that scholarship on Mullen's poetry has sealed off boundaries of the "oral" and the "literary" (188). Thorsson cites Mullen's own view of poetry here, in which she attests, "I am more interested in a transformation of the oral into something that draws together different allusive possibilities in one utterance, which is something that writing can do better than speech" (Mullen 19 quoted in Thorsson 190). In making this move within and from the oral, Mullen's work breaks apart language and re-stitch it back together with complex word play, puns, and innuendos<sup>9</sup>. Mullen has discussed at length the perceptual tension between her identity as both a formal

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<sup>7</sup> Mullen's *Blues Baby* which reissues her first collection *Tree Tall Women* and contains some earlier previously unpublished poems.

<sup>8</sup> *Recyclopedia*, which is a reissue of *Trimnings*, *S\*PerM\*kt*, and *Muse and Drudge* and *Sleeping with the Dictionary*.

<sup>9</sup> Mullen also mentions influences of Jazz in her oral definition: "Some of the lines I write aspire to certain moments in jazz when scat becomes a kind of inspired speaking in tongues, or glossolalia, moments when utterance is pure music" (*Cracks* 39).

inventor and a Black poet. Giving credence to Cummings theory, Mullen relays that avant-garde artwork has been particularly exclusionary of Black authors, and while writing through an embodied Black identity produces what Mullen calls a singular voice, this mode of access to literary space seems to delimit formal inventiveness (34). Going on further, Mullen talks about her transition period between the early poems and what became *Recyclopedia*, citing Lorenzo Thomas as an important inspiration while navigating this “aesthetic apartheid” (35). While Mullen cites Thomas’ formal innovation as a key to unlocking her development as poet dualling in spaces of marginalized identity and academic milieu, there may be something else going on worth noting. Particularly, the way Thomas leverages non-human objects in his poetry to demonstrate their withdrawal, their potency and contingency. Thomas writes of the “Linen napkins and hope’s frozen green peas” in his poem “My Office,” which not only inverts a more conventional motif by placing the emotion as the possessor of the object but also sets the stage in a blocked off “office” space where the subject’s progress is measured (208). Further still, he negotiates temporal space with objects that cannot be possessed fully or known in “MMDCCXIII ½” writing observantly how: “Our living room was once somebody’s home / Our bedroom, someone’s only room / Our kitchen had a hasp upon its door. / Door to a kitchen? / And our lives are hasped and boundaried” (267). The segmentation here also gets picked up by Mullen in her work with objects and spatial relationships, not just in poetry but also in her identification with the form as the container of boundaries (298). In the most Mullen-esque example, Lorenzo concludes his poem “Onion Bucket” with the following lines: “This is the world. / The vegetables are walking...” (39). Not just creating a world but finishing with a world in which

vegetables walk is not a simple movement into personification but seems rather in the unfolding landscape of Thomas' logic by which one must realize "nothing more than you need yourself." In getting out of the way (or, in other terms, anthropomorphizing), the vegetables can start their march. Thomas finds a unifier for both Black, coherent voice and the delightful formal instincts that expand language into questions of objecthood, identity, and ecological awareness. Operating in this legacy, Mullen works amidst these dualling modes often, although it is worth challenging the oppositional categories that Black poets are split into.

While the use of vernacular language is present in Mullen's catalog, Thorsson wants to leverage these instances to discuss the broad thematic elements at play when Mullen twists genre (192). In examining food as it occurs in *Trimmings* and *S\*PerM\*kt*, Thorsson unifies a theoretical model in which the locus of Mullen's experimentations plays out like a recipe book. My project draws some inspiration from this model, but instead of highlighting the instances of food in Mullen, I will attempt instead to look at the broader array of nonhuman objects that populate the work. Additionally, some important criticism has been made in assessing Mullen's engagement with environmental poetics, and I hope to use these two modes to discuss the ways in which the state of objects appears in Mullen's writing.

Specifically, in regard to an environmental lens, Mullen's poetry has been included in *Black Nature*, an edited collection by Camille Dungy that seeks to present Black poets whose writing centers around ecological concerns. Dungy's introduction to the anthology provides a helpful understanding of where current scholarship is in regard to Black poets engaging with nature. She writes that "Blacks have not been recognized

in their poetic attempts to affix themselves to the landscape” (xxvii). In thinking about Black poetics and the landscape, Dungy articulates that previous scholarship makes distinctions between Black poets and their temporal distinctions be it “on or in the landscape.” In thinking about creating a more just representation of objects and their ecological relationships, this notable gap in our assessment of poetry—particularly Black poetry—has reproduced colonial stereotypes and cut off the vital conception of being “stewards” of land, a definition and constraint that must be grappled with (xxvii). In thinking with Mullen’s poetry, we can see this grappling unfold. “You’re not fully here until you’re over there” she writes in *S\*PerM\*kt*, followed by the declaration: “Never let them see you eat. You might be taken for a zoo” (69). In these few lines, Mullen is challenging the same impetus that Dungy points out in her introduction: that of the Black body being placed within a landscape while not being embodied as a steward of that landscape. The historical reference here is explicitly evoking the practice of “human zoos” and more specifically, Mullen might be referencing the Ota Benga, a Mbuti man taken from Africa by Samuel Phillips Verner and displayed at the 1904 World Fair and the Bronx Zoo. Mullen’s work should trouble the ecologically-minded critic for immediately collapsing human beings into the folds of landscape. While a notion of nature in which human beings and ecology entwine helps displace the romanticism of “out there” nature, in which distance from non-human entities is held up by the humanism, this concept has also been a cudgeling tool. Some of the fiercest proponents of early conservation efforts were also explicitly linked to, and propagators of, scientific racism. Madison Grant who is credited with saving several species at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was also the man responsible for Ota Benga’s imprisonment at

the Bronx Zoo and wrote numerous articles and books on eugenics. It seems likely that concerns for nature can have an excluding effect, in which concern is spread out to non-human entities at the exclusion of other humans. As ecological concerns ramp up, far-right white supremacist groups are frequently co-opting environmental action to promote their agenda. The British-based fascist group, the Patriotic Alternative, frequently recruited during litter pickups and tree planting initiatives.

In this light it is necessary to underscore ecological concern with considerations of how racism undercuts non-white human beings' ontological status. Mullen's keen awareness of this history is reflected in her interviews, scholarship, and poetry. In specific reference to her identity and how critics box out Black voices from aesthetic ingenuity, Mullen asserts that she has "no nostalgia for segregation nor any need or desire to divest myself of my black identity and connections to black communities nor any particular stake in defending traditional 'humanism,' I hope that my work continues to challenge that deadly distinction between 'blackness' and 'humanity'— or 'universality'—that is still imposed on black human beings" (34). In skirting "humanism", Mullen extends a poetry out into the inhuman and avoids playing on the turf of ecological thought that has a tainted history of fracturing the universal, oftentimes splintering on racial and gendered lines. Taking this approach to Mullen's work, we maintain an emphasis on the nonhuman objects that populate her work, as they become agents unto themselves, often riffing off one another in quick-twitch stanzas full of word play. In looking at *Recyclopedia*, we are able to see a unifying principle at work in which Mullen repeatedly engages in ontological ideas, while complicating them through the history of Black experimental poetics and injecting a new ecological awareness. The

title of the collection also evokes this ecological concern with the portmanteau. Ultimately, there is a disorienting effect that can be employed strategically to disrupt static images and traditional expressions of voice to create a newfound mediation through which the literary critic can dip into the pockets of the philosophers.

Mullen's *Trimmings* is the first of two books in *Recyclopedia* that directly respond to Gertrude Stein's 1914 Modernist classic, *Tender Buttons* (*Cracks* 54). Writing about her literary forbearer, Mullen shows poetic deference to Stein and draws from her formal innovations, but she is careful to not become too entrapped in the allure of Stein, writing "I cannot say that I am a devout ancestor worshipper" (53). Mullen is drawn to the possibilities afforded by Stein's poetics, in its stark engagement with objects and playful dances around rigid correlational formality; yet Mullen grapples with possible interpretations of Stein's work as antisemitic and racist. Several scholars have devoted research to the Steinian influence on Mullen, examining how she later forwards the Modernist tendencies and pushes a new frontier for the study of objects in their enmeshed webs of orientation with race and femininity (Mix 71). Similarly, Elisabeth Frost identifies Mullen's injection of popular culture and Black feminism as a break point with Stein in which the poetry of *Trimmings* and *S\*PerM\*kt* looks through language with braided intentions more challenging to the holism of a modernist project. Frost also points to specific textual examples where "Mullen creates a dialogic text about women's clothing—'girdled loins' wrapped in Steinian 'tender girders' (*Trimmings* 26)—complete with everything from dress shields to belts, gowns to 'shades'" (335). The updates scholars have identified here, to Gertrude Stein's project are not just a playful recalibration of object studies but a decidedly political injunction into the avant-garde.

This isn't to say that Stein's work is apolitical; rather that Mullen cuts through more hegemonic tendencies of Stein's assessment of objects, instead placing them in contexts and appended formal constructions where the reader can see how objects cross stitch onto a Black feminist perspective. Mullen's approach is a proving ground for disoriented object ontology as she makes clear that even in their impermeable essences, objects stick to different bodies in quite distinctive ways.

The first poem of Mullen's *Trimmings* establishes the logic of objects slipping out of tangible grasp and their capacity to transform with language into mediated forms. This status of objecthood follows throughout the three-volume collection. She writes, "Becoming, for a song. A belt becomes such a small waist. Snakes around her, wrapping. Add waist to any figure, subtract, divide. Accessories multiply a look. Just the thing, a handy belt suggests embrace. Sucks her in. She buckles. Smiles, tighter. Quick to spot a bulge below the belt" (3). Starting off with the gerund "becoming" puts her reader *in medias res*, taking away any trifles of a slow start. The fragment invites in a bracket for the collection, suggesting that in the process of becoming there is something like a song on the other end. Additionally, it is always important to recognize the dual-layered meanings within Mullen's poetry, as "becoming" could also elicit a flattering quality, as if this song itself is an object of admiration. The prepositional phrase "for a song" adds to this reading as if Mullen's speaker is destabilizing and centralizing something that ought not to. This prepositional phrase does not reveal anything about what the song is for or who the song is sung by, rather the song is displaced as the recipient of the becoming. Already, Mullen has set up the nonhuman as an agent, capable of receiving action in and unto itself. However, the poem immediately redoubles

by taking a belt and making it become “a small waist.” Moreover, honoring Mullen’s penchant for paronomasia, we can read the belt as an attractive object in and of itself as it adheres to the waist of the figure. Additionally, “belt” can be further read as a pun on “belting” a song itself, furthering the collapse of function. By taking the inanimate and making it transform into a part of a body, Mullen offers an inhuman entity the capacity to express its “human” qualities. Then, in a move parallel to Siken, she arithmetizes the body, by playing off the dimensions of the waist and its capacity to denote form. There is a lot to unpack here, as Mullen is playing on one hand with an object-centered jump from the belt and its movements from waist to snake. However, there is also an overarching commentary that will become more evident from the first collection of prose poems, in Mullen’s consistent use of clothing articles to highlight how bodies are adorned, accessorized, and coated with meaning laced to materials.

Something else is happening in the first few lines of this poem that should pique our ontological interest and is worth addressing in considerable detail. Mullen does not refer to the belt/snake/waist of the poem as an object, but rather as a thing. More specifically “just the thing.” The colloquial language here also represents another distinct feature of Mullen’s work, shifting between the avant-garde and the casual. One might imagine the speaker sighing while relaying this message. And because things can be so many “things,” there is a brief characteristic on the type of thing Mullen wants us to pay attention to. Particularly, it is the “handy belt [that] suggests embrace.” By coupling things with utility, noting their handiness, and loading them up with suggestions of intimacy, Mullen’s work is riffing on the Heideggerian cleft that has so dominated contemporary ontology. While Harman has taken a more philosophical and architectural



centered approach to this fissure, with his focus more naturally falling on the object, we can recall how Brown might pick the “thingness” in his literary analysis.

Brown’s first move is to identify the dislocation of a “thing” from the object/subject dialectic traced back to Heidegger (13). Each of these moves requires Brown's closing distinction that thinking and thingness represent different properties. This statement separates Brown from the philosophical position of correlationism, which has been the prevailing wind of ontological and epistemological insight since Kant. Brown does a series of analyses, looking across the art world to pick out “things” that seemingly constitute themselves apart from a “thought” of a thing. Working through Heidegger, Brown is able to develop a literary theory, more primed at getting beneath sentiment, conjecture, and pretense, but rather examining the art object as an entity beyond, or perhaps besides, thought (13-16).

This move would not have been possible if Mullen had suggested the belt was thinking, perceiving, or embodying an anthropocentric access mode. Instead, it is the union of embrace with the utility of the thing that makes the poem hum. As Morton often points out, the predominant access modes for obtaining data consists of thinking and rationalizing — predominant, simply because this is the preferred and trusted method in which human beings process information about the world. When trying to think a world outside of an anthropocentric point of view, we might then need to consider how other objects get at the boundary line beyond their own means of accessibility. The way that Western philosophy has traditionally run leaves out the possibility of non-cognitive access points, thus leaving up the possibility that nonhuman entities are able to grapple with the world in a meaningful way. However, Morton argues that access modes ought

to be considered as valid beyond the scope of human beings. Importantly, Morton's ecological awareness makes a way for an access mode of "brushing against, licking or irradiating" they argue that each is as "valid (or as invalid) as thinking" (*Humankind* 22). In the same way, the belt's embrace should be examined as an access point in which it takes the subject in, enveloping as it transforms. Even if the belt, understandably so, cannot vocalize, or rationally construct a relationship with the subject, it is still accessing it through its properties and functions.

Graham Harman has also highlighted the view of access modes in his article "Fear of Reality." The thrust of Harman's article is in response to Quentin Meillassoux and Paul Boghossian's systems of knowledge. The aforementioned theorists are sometimes lumped alongside OOO thinkers under the broad umbrella of *speculative realists*. However, it is important to draw a boundary line and show that not all realists share the same epistemology. Harman's main line of query is to examine why realism cannot be a theoretical position of *knowing* the world (127). Rather, for Harman, realism needs only to demonstrate the discreet being of existence out *there* in the world. Harman's realism seeks to get past the view that a realist is one who believes in a world outside of human thought. Instead, Harman's neologism, *Infra-Realism*, attests to a view in which objects exist outside of relation all together. The tennis racket hitting the tennis ball is just as "untouchable" an access point as the mind's ability to *think* being into being. Because Harman accepts Kant's idea that objects are hidden unto and into themselves, he is able to synthesize this position away from the idealists, amending Kant in his image to be a kind of proto-realist (131). Harman's pivotal critique of the other "realist" philosophers is that they believe in an access point for knowledge. Harman is skeptical

of this point because of his commitments to a world in which thought lacks relation to being. The fissures and charges presented are fascinating to wade through, though there may be some specific and literary claims hiding in this philosophical knife fight. Harman coins the term “antitheatrical fallacy” in a two-pronged criticism of Boghossian and Michael Fried (126). The fallacy accuses art and literary critics of failing to recognize the internal “givenness” of a text beyond the relational. The commitments of Harman’s epistemology allow this fallacy to exist in his analysis because, according to Harman, there is no relationship between *text* as an object and *thought* as object. These two translate, or “character” one another, but an access point is untenable (140). Rather, it must be the case that the “real” text is nestled within itself. The appearance is only what could be but rooted in literary text, there is a thing one might not access.

When considering Harman and Morton alongside Bill Browns’ literary analysis, a fuller appreciation can emerge as to how Mullen’s poem utilizes *thingness*, keeping the thought out of the equation, instead letting the characteristics transform and access on their own terms. However, considering what we’ve discussed in relation to a disoriented model of ontology and ways in which Brown’s analysis may limit the perspective for appreciating how art objects are transformed by other access modes (recall the eidetic reduction that brackets out an object and allows the reader to see what operational capacity is being composed) a slight wrinkle begins to emerge. In Mullen, it is the belt’s first move that draws the subject in, but the subject also seems complicit to the point of giddiness at the prospect. The following lines, “She buckles. Smiles, tighter,” implicates a further coalesce of the two, highlighting the ability for two to be co-joined. The subject-object divide starts fraying here through a strange causality. This causality isn’t entirely

clear here, as one reading might suggest the smiling is what gives way to the tightening. In any case, the erotic energy is changed in the poem, punctuated with the final phallic allusion in the closing line. Mullen employs this erotic coupling with objects frequently and has commented on it explicitly in reference to *Muse and Drudge*, the final collection in *Recyclopedia (Cracks 40)*. She employs the term “kink” to refer not only to content but also to the forms of her poems. Again, always the wordsmith “kink” has a double meaning in Mullen’s poetic conception, referring to hair texture. In her essay “Optic White,” she highlights the inventiveness of George Schuyler and his reinterpretation of the *Kink-No-More* hair straightening product in his novel *Black No More* (199). Again, allowing disruptions to emerge amongst ontologies, demonstrating the double-bound nature of language. The objects in Mullen’s work don’t shy away from untouchability but are forward. Accessing the world full of its eroticism and commercial interests bootstrapped to racist ideologies.

Further on in *Trimblings*, Mullen writes, “In feathers, in bananas, in her own skin, intelligent body at- tached to a gaze. Stripped down model, posing for a savage art, brought color to a primitive stage” (43). In these lines, Mullen is clearly pulling apart the sexualization of Black female bodies, a fact well established in the sociological literature (Benard 4-7, Thompson 9, French 47). She begins, like with several poems, with an object. The feathers and bananas both act as containers in the opening line and get the reader to the subject — “in her own skin.” By starting with the non-human, Mullen alerts the reader first to the objecthood status of the “skin,” in which skin serves the same purpose as the aforementioned feather and bananas. Just as the preposition “in” sets up the container idea of each element, so too does the association with these items—

the feathers to the plucked and the banana to be peeled. Each case is closely linked with food consumption (you have to pluck the bird to eat it, you have to peel the banana, etc.). In this way, an immediate and uncomfortable association emerges. Not that the skin will also be pluck/peeled away but in the sense that Mullen's ontology warns of the slippage from non-human to human so easily. Continuing in the poem, Mullen deploys a brilliant enjambment with the word "attached." Not only is this a wry visual representation it is also a fascinating formal description of the "gaze" that is stuck to the speaker.

The gaze as a theoretical concept has been richly explored, from Foucault's medical gaze to the male gaze to Frantz Fanon's white gaze. However, as developments in ontology dictate new ways of conceptualizing being, these terms gain new meaning. Ahmed picks begins this work by taking Fanon's white gaze and running it through her theory of objects and their phenomenologies. She articulates how in Fanon's analysis, the white gaze objectifies the person being gazed at. However, in her queered phenomenology, she senses a stabilizing force through objects. She writes of

Fanon's example of what he would do if he wanted to smoke, which is an example of being orientated toward an object, is a description of a body-at-home in its world, a body that extends into space through how it reaches toward objects that are already "in place." Being in place, or having a place, involves the intimacy of cohabiting spaces with other things. We could even say Fanon's example shows the body before it is racialized or made black by becoming the object of the hostile white gaze (144).

In the extension toward objects, Ahmed claims that Fanon can find a space out of the white gaze if only for a reprieve. In this example, the act of reaching out and setting the body in motion for the matches and cigarettes stabilizes and settles. When thinking about OOO, this scene wouldn't necessarily add up because the capacity of the objects would slink away from Fanon, the other object in this scheme. Instead, Ahmed's point is that the subject and object are drawn into a point of desire in which orientation takes over like inertia.

Unfortunately for Mullen's subject, there are no cigarettes or objects to orient oneself to; instead, the subject is being subjected to comparison and ultimately an artwork itself. The nude, objectless figure in Mullen's poem is exactly what happens in the white gaze that has affixed itself to her. Mullen wants to make it clear that this process brutalizes the ontology of the subject and turns them into an object. This isn't the cheery; we are all objects scene that plays out amongst speculative realists; rather, it is the historical reality of Black female bodies, utilized as objects and defined in such terms. In order to breakthrough then, it seems as if Ahmed's queered sense of objects would be the way through and not the prevailing logics of OOO.

Given her fondness for Schuyler's "instant assimilation machine" and satire of commercial dark cosmetics, it makes sense that Mullen's second book compiled in *Recyclopedia, S\*PerM\*kt*, takes the experiment of language and places it in the marketplace. Here Mullen takes her Stienian influence up a notch and maintains the sections from *Tender Buttons* ("Objects," "Food," and "Rooms"). However, the surface influences are complicated in Mullen's world, one full of global consumer goods (their

advertising), bodily autonomy, politics, and commercial reproduction.<sup>10</sup> Frost points readers to the first poem of the collection as an effective survey of what is to follow, writing, “as Mullen progresses through the aisles: “Lines assemble gutter and margin. Outside and in, they straighten a place. Organize a stand. Shelve space. Square footage. Align your list or listlessness” (*Recyclopedia* 65 and *Crack* 304).

*Trimnings*, as a title also evokes a sense of cutting back, reducing out space, and shaping something. The double meaning also has reference to food and meats with trimmings of portions and cutting into the body. These ideas resurface and demonstrate themselves in the reductions of language that can service more purposed than one through economic sparsity. “Trimnings” is also a way of parsing something up and reflects the wastefulness of production where undesirable sections are sloughed off to get at the choice cut. Mullen works this idea out on a societal scale in examining the fraught genocidal and eugenic projects that have treated marginalized bodies in paralleled to trimmings

Mullen spends particular energy riffing on commercial advertising, how objects are created into products, and the particular logic of capitalist consumption in regard to race and ecology. In one prose poem, she references poet Lew Welch’s famous slogan for the insecticide RAID™ “Kills bugs dead” in the opening line and follows it with a comment on how syntax repetition is “overkill” (74). Dosing the reader with some dry humor, Mullen evokes dualling modes of formal experimentation and the observational

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<sup>10</sup> The asterisks in *S\*PerM\*kt* again play into the potential for double meanings, reading as either “Super Market” or without the asterisks, “Sperm kit”.

comedy that works throughout her more satirical poems. Yet the poem quickly turns into a commentary on the link between pesticides and genocide. She instructs the reader to “Invest in better mousetraps. / Take no prisoners on board ship, to rock the boat” (74).

This instruction comes after the initial commentary set up by Mullen in which she makes explicit reference to the transatlantic slave trade and mentions enslaved Black chefs poisoning the food they've cooked. In some ways, she is parroting the logic of genocidal racism in which the extinction of a certain group it's justified based on a faulty association with disease. In trying to tease apart all the elements of this poem, it is helpful to examine how the point of view shifts as we move through it. At the beginning of the poem, Mullen starts with a mixed third and first-person perspective writing, “Their noise infects the dream. In / black kitchens they foul the food, walk on our bodies as we sleep over oceans of pirate flags.” There's a bit of a disorienting nature about the switch here because at first it seems as if the speaker is targeting their fear of infection towards those whose bodies will be walked on. Yet, when the line comes, the speaker has collapsed themselves into this first-person perspective. Then, the following prescriptions are seemingly directed at the collective “we” as Mullen suggests that we will be cannibalized unless we kill the captors first. Finally, when the poem reaches its fever pitch Mullen's speaker claims that “we dream the dream of extirpation,” followed by the quick providential, “Wipe / out a species, with God at our side. Annihilate the insects. / Sterilize the filthy vermin.” As with so many of her poems, there are several interpretive angles that can get at the varying level changes of this short piece. On the one hand, the legacy of slavery, forced sterilization, eugenics, and genocide are all present in the content of the poem. Here, Mullen offers up some of the dangers that can occur when



human beings start to exist as other. Because it is a disturbingly natural response to eliminate filth and vermin, all the genocidal racist has to do is change the ontological category of the target for a seamless justification. This should keep us on guard as we start trying to think about all entities as objects because the historical categorization of human beings has been utilized as a cudgel more often than not to separate those worthy of ethical treatment. Recalling Bennett's critique of OOO's use of "objects," we might heed her and Mullen's perspective and start thinking about things and bodies rather than pure objects to avoid the conflation of non-white human beings with anything other (230).

On the other hand, Mullen is also directing some satirical commentary toward consumer advertising by playing off the insecticide slogan. By linking this initial advertising with the following genocide and eradication of species, Mullen cautions her reader about the danger of language when employed for the wrong ends. Even if the consequential ends are not within the foresight of the advertiser and consumer product, there is still a troubling mechanism of late capitalism to contend with that propagates mass extinction by its internal constraints. Even in the supermarket, we see evidence of species extinction, or at least the attempt to eradicate certain beings that don't fit into an anthropocentric schema. Pesticides to spray on unwelcome roaches, wasps, sugar ants all bottled and ready for deployment in ridding these pests from the home. Additionally, the produce aisle is rife with evidence of species modification and chemical blankets that kill or prevent infestation or blight. However, when you consider the ontology of consumer goods, we might heed Morton's perspective that "Consumer products count as nonhuman beings in their own right. It's simply a matter of the amount of nonhuman

styling of ourselves to which we are susceptible; nonhumans constantly impinge on our world” (166). Mullen is getting at this impingement by cycling through the initial ad, following with a stylistic comment, and then delving into how this unfolds from a historical and future time scale. Ecological awareness it's not just mean the romanticized *out-there*, but it is an acknowledgment that even the can of insecticide is part of a mass of co-determined ecology.

It may be worth picking up another perspective on the link between consumer goods and ontological perspectives, as critics have pointed out that OOO may be shortchanging the moral complexity of objects within capitalism. Cultural theorist Alexander Galloway notes that the philosophies of Harman, Latour, and Meillassoux mirror production modes in their essentialist properties. He draws further parallels between the speculative realists and the software used by big businesses.<sup>11</sup> A concern emerges out of his critiques in which these burgeoning ontological positions mimic or reinforce the industrial-late capitalist model. He arrives at this conclusion by contextualizing the “new realists” as fundamentally apolitical (364-365). Galloway believes that their insistence on “objective” essentialism leads to a dangerous outcome, where the material absolute is abdicated for a squishy blown-out view in which objects are all everything. This is a thoroughly Marxist analysis, and Galloway makes it clear that there is a moral implication to the theories of Harman et al.; a moral center he feels has been abandoned in the crisis of our socio-political time.

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<sup>11</sup> Morton may be the most prominent offender of this software-ontology conflation, frequently employing algorithmic metaphors for ontological systems. In *Humankind* alone, Morton uses the term “bug”, in reference to a computer virus, to talk about a philosophical idea at least 17 times.

Considering that Galloway and Bennett's critiques of OOO rely on the central idea that when objects become everything through and through, essentialism takes hold and crowds out space for political dexterity. I find their main premise quite convincing, especially when demonstrated through reading creative texts. Although Harman has tried to develop a "weird formalism" out of his ontological commitments in the 2018 book, *Art and Objects*, he doesn't escape the essentialism that limits more salient and representative critiques for examining art (166). In the Harman OOO theory of art, artwork and the beholder converge to produce a third object (173). His claim relies on the fundamental notion that object interactions and their corollaries can't metabolize or interact with one another. In reading Mullen's poetry, there is a stark realization of the limits realist conceptions surrounding objects might have.

Rounding out *Recyclopedia* is Mullen's *Muse and Drudge*, which is, in Mullen's words, a "praise song to women of the African diaspora" but also a "blues riff on Sappho as Sapphire" (43). The musical elements are again highlighted when she likens *Muse and Drudge* to jazz music and its ability to "play [ ] "mysterious" music," and "locate[ ] itself in a space where it is possible to pay dues, respects, and "props" to tradition while still claiming the freedom to wander to the other side of far" (40). The jazz comparison is apt, as *Muse and Drudge* darts around from quatrain to quatrain, freely associating between history, satire, slang, politics, feminism, and Black identity. In many ways, this is Mullen at her most playful but also on the cutting edge of the innovative form. Speaking into this tension, Mullen has noted that *Muse and Drudge* was an attempt to regain some of the Black audience she feels that she lost with *Trimnings* and *S\*PerM\*kt*. In her interviews and commentary, Mullen expresses frustration that Black

writers can only be Black writers when writing about their identity and that there has been a long-standing cleft between experimental poetry and Black poetry (33). This distinction was highlighted earlier when discussing Mullen's body of work overtime, but it comes out in an intentional way with *Muse and Drudge*.

At its core, *Muse and Drudge* dives headlong into this fissure and asserts itself through the disorientation of the experimental blending and compounding vernacular. It is also important to note that while the whole of the book is composed in quatrains, Mullen herself is less concerned with this tradition and instead argues that "texture" should be starting place for her poems (38). Like a jazz soloist, Mullen's texture pulls in several elements of poetic writing to blend them into powerful sonic vignettes. From rhyme scheme and lack thereof to found poetry, to varied line length and semantic and syntactic tension, Mullen's prose poems empty out the poet's toolbox and play around with each feature to produce astonishing results.

In addition to the formal arrangements, Mullen's *Muse and Drudge* draws from a variety of images and scenes to comingle into garden-path phrases. In our interest to get a more complete grasp of ontology through poetry, Mullen affords plenty to choose from, but I am particularly fond of the following untitled quatrain:

handheld interview cuts to  
steady voice over view  
extra vagrants gobble up the scenery  
this camera's gonna roll all over you

discarded barnacle bard grinning with bad dentures  
remembering coonskin adventures in your hackneyed backyard

solar flares scrambled  
bell bottoms sunnyside  
signal didn't she ramble  
those black holes backslide

drippy tresses bagged  
in plastic do-rag  
sensible heel in excu-drag  
whose dress sucks excess (157)

The enjambment intensifies the assonance and consonance from line to line with subtle echoes throughout. There are also the enjoyable linguistic moves Mullen pulls off in this poem, going from “scrambled” to “sunnyside” to “ramble” to “backslide” in a rhyme scheme that also contains categories of words sharing similar characteristics among the play and darting characteristics, there is also a deep study of objects at work.

In the final stanza of the poem, Mullen is evoking Black identity as well as her experimental texture. The first two lines are in direct reference to African American hairstyles, while the quatrain runs uninterrupted by punctuation and with an unconventional syntax that holds everything together. In the final two lines, Mullen brings back elements of dress that dominated *Trimnings*. In a similar way to the belt's

enclosure of the waist, the dress in the concluding line takes space and sucks it away Quite literally trimming off the excess. Here there is a commentary on form and how its edges don't mingle with the fabric; instead, it gets vacuumed out of the way. This recalls how Morton describes OOO's views of objects in *Being Ecological*, "I adhere to a philosophical view known as object-oriented ontology (OOO), which holds that, in many ways, everything is like a black hole" (31). They use this metaphor frequently to describe the way objects slink back from correlation, but it seems to go even further in which we might get caught up in objects, letting them pull in and collapse sense-data of forms they encounter. Interestingly enough, Mullen also employs the black hole image in the poem with a particular description of "backsliding." This is bracketed in the quatrain with "solar flares scrambled." Backsliding is an odd action to associate with black holes as backsliding evokes form to be slid away from, whereas black holes suck everything into a crushing light snatching hole. I think Mullen is playing here a bit with ecological scales, considering the solar imagery referenced above. In going from the chaotic energy of a solar flare to the dark energy of the black hole, Mullen is quite literally on the hyperobject scale. In doing so, the miniature scales of fashion, hair, and eggs serve as slices in the ontological action at work here. By mincing the massive energy of extra-terrestrial phenomena, Mullen expertly disorients and destabilizes objects much in line with OOO's version of withheld qualities. Again, there is another level to Mullen's poem when paired with the other lines. In the opening stanza, Mullen warns that "this camera's gonna roll all over you." The same totalizing force exists in the camera lens, as does the dress, as does the black hole. With references to interviews,

gobbled up scenery, and a sense of memory — “bad dentures / remembering coonskin adventures” Mullen’s poem is in full apocalyptic mode.

In a few short lines, Mullen is able to sneak in breakfast food, the cosmos, cosmetics, and clothing in one go. In these objects, we can see OOO and its principles unfold at massive and micro scales, but there are also new ways to engage objects that Mullen gives us. In Mitchum Huehls’ analysis of *Muse and Drudge* notes that Mullen frequently uses doubling of images, words, and formal components to arrive at a double consciousness. This double consciousness has already been established in Mullen’s reflection on her project, wanting to exist as both a Black writer and an experimental poem. Huehls writes that “In order to work self-consciousness out of double consciousness, Mullen tends to pack her text with representations of subjectivity that are usually allusive, de-essentialized, and fragmented” (36). As already noted by Alexander Galloway, OOO is far from de-essentialized; in fact it is bed rocked on essential definitions of what objects are and the properties they can and can’t show. In this view, Mullen’s de-essentialized work appears when she is manipulating the reader’s experience of linear reading. For example, when Mullen writes, “handheld interview cuts to / steady voice over view” she presents the reader with one space between “over” and “view.” When reading, it is hard to stop at this pause and not read “overview.” The visual information is disjointed from what the reader’s internal voice just said. While it is a small instance, the interpretive purchase of the poem can completely change based on the substitution. In one reading, the “overview” reading, the reader might imagine the interviews and the camera are associated with a documentary crew barring witness to the gobbled scenery, quite literally providing an “overview” of the phenomena captured

by the camera. However, when reading the way it is written – “over view,” even more possibilities emerge. One could get the same documentary feel if reading with this clump: “steady voice over” or if the clumps goes like this: “over view extra vagrants” the reader might imagine the “steady voice” belongs to the interviewee or the interviewer and the next syntactical unit relates to the potential camera direction pointing the lens at the vagrants. Again, the changes here will not send readers into two vastly different interpretations, but it is just enough to exist in a doubly conscious space. Mullen pulls this same maneuver countless times throughout *Recyclopedia*. As with the rest of the project, it isn’t just how Mullen takes objects and displays them in a clear cut OOO fashion, rather, these moments of disruption and disorientation give crucial depth to the state of object and their relationships.



## CONCLUSION

While recent developments within metaphysics shift the focus away from a subject-object binary and enable post-humanist thought at a level that encompasses all objects, there are potential side effects that need to be defanged in order for OOO to embody queerness, ecological awareness, and a Black feminist perspective. While surveying the pitfalls of flat ontology, it becomes evident that we must lean into a disruption of conventional landscapes and rehabilitate its assumptions from the ground up, including consideration for those that have been objectified and previously outside of the privileged subject-object binary. In reading the poetry of Richard Siken and Harryette Mullen, we can start to see this project underway and provide a forwarding into new territory to consider post anthropocentric thought.

Siken's *War of the Foxes* brackets poetry through the lens of ekphrastic, consistently relying on a landscape motif that speaks both to the poem's materiality as an agent and potential ecological readings that subverts the concept of nature as a sentimental region outside of the agricultural-logistic. Siken's work instead grapples with its entwined being, both existing as a marker of space and causality within the text and as a rooted ontological fact that marks ecology as a space consistently out there and within here. Additionally, Siken shows us how to queer a landscape by disrupting its origin point, telescoping in and out of temporal locations and in a similar fashion to how queer bodies mark queer time. Furthermore, the disruptive strategies employed by Siken's poetics center around the disorientation of objects and their relation to the subjects of the poem. Here we see an amendment to OOO in that within Siken's poetry, objects radiate affect and link human beings through their ability to carve out space and

shift the focal gaze out and away from themselves, in a seemingly relational capacity with the human and object. This doesn't mean that we must drop our anti-correlationalist perspective to appreciate the logic of Siken's universe, Rather reminds us how multifaceted bodies are, and looking at ontological status from a non-hegemonic viewpoint produces through lines to objects and their withheld essences. While still possessing a flat ontological perspective, Siken can disrupt the apolitical nature of OOO essentialism and instead show how withheld objects and their lumpy masses provide footholds for emotion to climb back into the equation.

In a different stride, Mullen's *Recyclopedia* works objects into the poem's language, producing moments of satire and a conscientious engagement with Black feminist ideas. When assessing the potential drawbacks of an object-oriented approach, we can see that objecthood has been an established category for human beings long before contemporary metaphysics. For big swaths of that history, African Americans, particularly black women, were subjugated to this objecthood categorization. Whether hypersexualized or collapsed into the natural landscape through colonial projects, nonwhite identities have been thinking about what it means to be and have primarily found an oppressive ideology that creates boundaries on what an acceptable being is. Before rushing into a collapse of subject-object binaries, it is essential to listen to and pay attention to the poetry of Mullen. In two Stienien influenced projects (*Trimmings* and *S\*PeRM\*\*K\*T*), she leverages the language to identify intersections of clothing, food, advertising, and colloquial language to investigate modes of being, especially as it relates to the socialization of Black women. Her observations and witty formal inventions paint a picture in which being is constituted amidst objects, and the objects

don't sit idly by either. Instead, objects in Mullen's poems are always bursting at their access points (a feature OOO persistently highlights) and coming into relationships with the speakers and subjects that populate her books. However, what objects mean to the white otologist is not entirely what they mean to Mullen or her speakers. Her persistent use of double entendre and free association of words links a much broader web. In this theory, withheld objects can be glanced at from new perspectives not considered in the new materialist playbook. Mullen demonstrates why it would be a helpful amendment to retain some distinctions between bodies and things, as the role of bodily autonomy and its interaction with broader ecology and nonhuman entities consistently demonstrate how a collapse of all things into their objecthood leads to inequitable results. Hopefully, I've demonstrated that in order to press on in metaphysical territory, it is important to see what the philosophical schools can give literary critics and vice versa?. Leaning into the aesthetic form, with critical consideration of history, allusion, and how objects are constituted in their relationship to subjects of the text, opens the door to updated notions of being. It gives a broader array of data points to assess or appreciate a poem. While maintaining that poems themselves are objects, capable of marking time with their form and containing capacities beyond our consumption, I hope we can smuggle in relevant perspectives that key in on the disorienting strategies employed by poets.

This term, disorientation, is not just meant to be a cheeky reversal of the second O in OOO, but it instead represents the access mode we have to art that remains relatively unexplored in the context of recent materialism. *Muse and Drudge* is perhaps the most in line with this type of disorienting aesthetic and ontology. In her final collection compiled in *Recyclepedia*, Mullen lets loose and scatters images and multi-

layered interpretations across each of her quatrains. As discussed, several of these poems carry a disorienting distinction and represent ways of reacting to racism, its contemporary manifestations, its legacy, and a collapsing ecosystem built on top of capitalism and consumer societies. It ought to feel weird living in an age of mass extinction. While Morton seems to address this point, several other thinkers in the ontological debate are keener on demonstrating the validity of Heidegger's updated reading and piecing together an ontology based on object-orientation. Instead, I think it is more philosophically consistent and politically necessary to think of objects and their disorientations to one another but primarily to the subjects that are interlaced in a broad ecology with them. When we make this move, we allow queer theory in with full force, are more attuned to our ecological position and its absurdity within the grand scale of the climate crisis.

Additionally, thinking with disoriented objects reintroduces affect, and the legacies of those dismissed as objects they're almost of history. Starting from the ground floor and building up, adopting a disoriented object view will still be post-humanist but will afford the literary critic more significant purchase on how writers deal with objects in their work. Additionally, amending OOO will legitimize states of being often neglected or, even worse - considered objects amidst humans. Finally, as a queer theoretical device, bringing back disorientation gets more out of OOO and should ultimately be the fertile ground where more representative and sound ontologies are built.

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