

Trashed Future: Waste Objects and Identity Politics in Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*

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Abstract: This essay analyzes the eco-religious “God’s Gardeners” group as they appear in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood* as a possible model of capitalist “non-existence,” exploring the alternative potentials at which they arrive in relation to waste throughout the text. The Gardeners present an affective mode of consumer non-participation as a possible first step toward a reflexive awareness of the role trash plays in our subjective experiences of the world. Through a process of symbolic embodiment, the Gardeners exist in marginalized space and so re-situate waste for themselves as objects and spaces with new potential boundaries. This leads to a confrontation with social reality itself, piercing the reality-building project of capitalist logic in order to uncover the fabricated “antagonism between the Excluded—the ‘animals’ according to global capital—and the Included—the ‘political animals’ proper, those participating in capitalism” that structures characters’ experiences (Žižek 2008: 44). The focus here is not only on re-situating waste but re-inscribing it in the domain of social discourse in a way that subverts consumer expectations and challenges the limits of desire. In these texts, enjoyment is displaced onto waste objects as a point of psychological investment transmitted from subject to subject. In building reality through these kinds of direct relations, Atwood implies, one may challenge the imposition of ideology and expand its apparent limits in order to re-symbolize the spaces and objects marginalized as waste, proceeding in the end to a renewed interconnection between subject, object, and excess.

Keywords: Atwood; Capitalism; Ecocriticism; Kristeva; Lacan; Object Relations; Psychoanalysis; Waste Studies, Žižek

I

Margaret Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* (2009) comprises the second installment in her *MaddAddam* trilogy of post-apocalyptic, dystopian fiction. The novel's timeframe is roughly that of its predecessor, *Oryx and Crake* (2003), alternating between scenes that take place before and after the viral end of humanity. Atwood introduces the "God's Gardeners" in these texts, an ecologically-conscious religious group who live self-sustainably on the roof of an abandoned building (Atwood 2009: 42). While mainly active during the period of time leading up to the apocalypse, their belief in its coming allows them to live in accord with a vision of societal collapse that many others experience but fail to respond to through their persistence in the ideological circuits of Atwood's hyper-consumerism. Timothy Morton's discussion of the consumer prerogative to fuse desiring and enjoying in *Ecology without Nature* makes clear the seemingly only viable option of abandoning this very demand if one wishes to survive the "end" (Morton 2009: 112). However, a solution that promotes the abandonment of enjoyment will never hold ground, as "the tide of human desire" is one from which we cannot escape, making ascetic methods of environmentalism unfeasible in every-day life (Atwood 2003: 296). But what if one opts for non-identity instead? The approach of the Gardeners is one that abandons the limited symbolic sensibility of the capitalist pursuit, engaging in a subversive system of knowledge that is expressed through their coarse appearance and a poetic appropriation of waste. In this essay, I aim to show how the Gardeners present an affective mode of consumer "nonexistence" as a possible first step toward a reflexive awareness of the role waste plays in our subjective experiences of the world. Through a

process of embodiment, the Gardeners exist in marginalized space and so re-situate waste for themselves as objects and spaces with new potential boundaries.

Upon first encountering the God's Gardeners in *The Year of the Flood*, the reader is greeted by "a strange procession": its leader is "wearing a caftan that looked as if it had been sewn by elves on hash," and behind him are a number of people resembling "raggedy angels, or else like midget bag people" (Atwood 2009: 39). The description, situating the Gardeners first with the word "strange," invites a sense of separation from the social norm. The Gardeners are presented as an oddity within the hyper-capitalist society they exist in. Suggesting that the clothing is a result of inebriation, "raggedy" and bag-like, marks them as undesirable, a sentiment furthered by the derogatory insult of "midget bag people." The attachment of "elves" to the production of the caftan further displaces the Gardeners from consumerist modes of production. The visual appearance of the robes contains an aspect of fiction that exists outside of the expected scope of social reality, strange or not sensible. The common symbolic association between clothing and its surplus status as a consumer good, or more simply as an object of desire, is broken: outsiders fail to associate the Gardeners' appearance with what conforms to their symbolic sensibility, categorizing their material appearance as trash-like in its absence of uniformity with the signifiers deemed capable of generating surplus value.

The visual strangeness of the Gardeners leads others to assume that their "garden somewhere, on a rooftop" is "a wodge of drying mud, a few draggled marigolds, a mangy row of pathetic beans, broiling in the unforgiving sun," presenting a fantasy of marginal survival that is visible to others in their coarse appearance (Atwood 2009: 39). The Gardeners seem to embody waste because their appearance presents to others the same

symbolic extension to their subjectivities. The outsiders recognize the lack extending from the ragged clothes to the identities of the members responsible for the “pathetic” garden. Here, the relationship between subject and consumer society becomes critical for one’s reception by others as a successful individual. The Gardeners operating under the social assumption that they lack the means to live life “properly” (in a way that procures enjoyment beyond mere survival) because their appearance does not cohere with consumer expectations of surplus value.

Yet we soon find out that the garden is “beautiful, with plants and flowers of many kinds ... vivid butterflies; from near came the vibration of bees. Each petal and leaf was fully alive, shining with awareness of her. Even the air of the Garden was different” (Atwood 2009: 43). The reality of their situation is far different from what their trash-bag appearance signifies, providing not only a sustainable reality but one that is “different” to a point of exterior incomprehensibility, “even the air” inviting a different sensory interpretation that blurs the limits of subjective experience, and reflecting an “awareness” of things back at the individual instead of the usual one-way interaction found in daily object encounters. How then does this apparent embodiment of waste function as a productive mode of subjectivity for the Gardeners, inviting avenues of existence for the characters in the text that seem so strange and thus undesirable to outsiders? This answer requires examination beyond appearance as the actual live experiences of the Gardeners deny what their visual projection suggests.

The Gardeners espouse “serpent wisdom,” a mode of “feeling directly” in an attempt to escape the “intellectual frameworks” and consequent symbolic determinations of social, consumer space (Atwood 2009: 234). Serpent wisdom responds to encounters

and sensations in pre-symbolic immediacy rather than obtruding at a distance through an overlay of signification. This emotional or poetic awareness of the world is redolent of Kristeva's notion of the semiotic *chora* via the movement of affect, a "nonexpressive totality" of being that relates to individuals at a level of social pre-subjectivity; it "precedes and underlies [symbolic] figuration" (Kristeva 1984: 25-6). "Semiotic" refers to the direct "mark, trace," or feeling that one experiences in contact with something prior to the articulation of a specific linguistic sign used to signify it, connected by Kristeva to the subjective "processes which displace and condense both energies and their inscription" in language (Kristeva 1984: 25). Recognizing the semiotic nature of serpent wisdom in its direct approach to feeling, this mode of being operates in contrast to the deterministic and categorical structure of language systems that instate a particular signifier for every signifiable element. Serpent wisdom opens up the possibility of re-situating oneself in the symbolic in a way that approaches nonexistence.

Through this serpent wisdom, the Gardeners ex-sist in a position nonadjacent to the consumer absence structuring enjoyment: "the Serpent feels vibrations in the Earth. The Serpent is wise in that it lives in immediacy ... who can tell where its head ends and its body begins? (Atwood 2009: 234-5). What is important here is the reflexivity implied in these statements. One becomes attuned with one's surroundings through "vibrations," which signal an organic rather than linguistic method of subjective investment; they divest from the subject energy and thus value in a way that demands an instantaneous awareness of objects and surroundings prior to linguistic signification. Beginning with the affective or *sensible* cue encountered in a given interaction, feeling is thus a way of guiding the energy Kristeva speaks of with the *chora* in a way that shortcircuits the usual

ideological placement of value in the cycle of one's desire. Accordingly, "discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject *who is not yet constituted as such* and ... are arranged according to the various semiotic processes" (Kristeva: 1984: 26; my emphasis). Serpent wisdom displaces the subject from predictability, allowing for a re-figuration guided by the *chora* in its semiotic immediacy of being.

This re-figuration is then first illustrated in the text by Gardeners' trash bag-like appearance, which short-circuits the rigid structure of consumer signification that determines what is socially permitted to contain surplus value (Kristeva 1984: 26). What is crucial to recall in this instance is the connection between surplus value (or enjoyment) and the enjoying subject – the specific subjective formation that one seeks as an ideal but nonexistent identity via their desires. The clothing's interpretation as "strange" and "raggedy" implies a level of undesirability and thus symbolic absence via the perceived absence of surplus value they contain. With the Gardeners' appearance associated with the post-commodity status of waste, the enjoying formation sought is found lacking itself—its nonexistence placing the Gardener subject in tension with the circuits of consumer ideology. Kristeva's articulation of the "subject who is not yet constituted as such" points towards the founding of identity in an embodiment of waste that signals symbolic nonexistence due to this very displacement from the desiring circuit.

Yet through this, lack also becomes displaced because at the core of this relation, "the definition [or constitution] of the subject comes down to the possibility of *one signifier more*," as Jacques-Alain Miller suggests (Miller 1977: 49; original emphasis). The repetition of the desiring circuit necessitates the introduction of a lack (or site of potential enjoyment) dialectically alongside each subjective event or occurrence along the

signifying chain, in order to invoke identity formation in the space of discourse. Here, however, the subject's emergence is obscured with the existent object they are perceived to embody, their integration into the signifying chain arising not just through the correspondence of a (n)onexistent subject + (1) existent signifier but a swapping of the two. In other words, the subjective "suturing" of reality into an interpretable whole that occurs when the level of the symbolic is introduced organizes itself around an object-oriented point of contact in which the subject comes to reside (Miller 1977: 44). The Gardener is perceived by others to embody waste, and the trash object in turn becomes a bearer of nonexistent surplus value. Consequently, the Gardener's lack of enjoyment (or lack of lack) becomes displaced into the space of subjective excess that now functions as a signifier corresponding to desire. The subject is thus integrated into the signifying chain through the social interpellation enacted here, but in embodying waste the new lack inscribed makes a revelatory gesture towards the very contingency of this creation, subjectively displacing enjoyment as it is reinscribed in a trash object.

The Gardeners persist in this direct mode of object engagement, which forgoes social expectations or fantasies. They are able to reclaim the relevant semantic triggers and re-situate them from a new point of a subjective contact, reframing symbolically-overlaid reality and in turn their possibilities of identity by approaching nonexistence from a point of embodied awareness. The stitched-together sacks are sacks, but the excess value they obtain as clothing is subjectively inscribed via semiotic re-situation. This subjective element stands in for the the absent symbolic element that one encounters via the illusory screen of consumer ideology. J. Brooks Bouson argues that the Gardeners "actively resist their society"

through their abilities to “cherish nature and respect animals” and recognize that “becoming compost” is a viable conclusion to one’s life (Bouson 2011: 19). While this aims at expressing the kind of interconnection outlined here, the individual remains isolated as an elevated “respector” of animals or “cherisher” of nature, even the concept of “compost” pertaining to a commodified split between living being and dead object, the latter desired only when the subject is extinguished. As Morton has suggested previously, the consumer subject is presented with a particular way of being that is deemed preferable in social space, structuring subjective experience in a way that anticipates capitalist conventionality in establishing the individual boundaries that determine the limits of desire (Morton 2009: 112). Progress towards “becoming compost” in Atwood’s reality must be taken more radically if one wishes to break from this trap: interaction between subject and object is both an opportunity to cross boundaries and immerse oneself in materiality so that subjectivity itself becomes the symbolic point of contact or value one finds in objects. The movement outlined here requires the reflexive awareness between subject and object associated with the immediacy of serpent wisdom, recognizing not only the subject’s potential to engage with a thing but the thing’s ability to pertain to the subject and invite the kind of semiotic displacement necessary to re-situate the object symbolically along new avenues of social resistance.

Here, the inscription of a new signifier at the level of the subject-as-excess produces a shift in language regarding the Gardeners’ clothing. Engaging in the Gardeners’ embodiment of waste brings an object into a unique position of contact with the subject who themselves metamorphose in non-identity to a point of semiotic reformation. The interpretation they engage in arises from a point of nonexistence that

fills in objective absence via a new pathway into signification. As opposed to encountering excess as the absence of enjoyment in capitalist object encounters, embodying waste through obfuscation and interconnection allows for excess to take on symbolic meaning directly from the interaction, displaced and reinscribed in the negative space originally existing between subject and fantasy that corresponds to illusory surplus value. Our understanding of this process must heed the potential for subversion that Atwood outlines here. It is not just that the Gardeners make “an attempt at transcending a degraded present,” as Nazry Bahrawi suggests, but that their mode of existence responds to this very present and expands its possible solutions (Bahrawi 2013: 261). Transcendence of one’s social position is not so much rooted in the remove of the individual but their immersive influence in the space of materiality.

The Gardeners present being in “rupture,” offering new “articulations [or] (rhythm)” in language that previously existed as the gaps or lacks in the signifying system of surplus value (Kristeva 1984: 26). This is bound in their ability to act reflexively in response to the material cobbled together into what they signify as clothing. What is lacking to others is to the Gardeners still the same absence-inclusive thing, yet their acceptance of ideological absence as such, accepting waste as it is yet demanding overdetermination in the same move, allows them to reinscribe this lack from an equally nonexistent or non-participatory position. They shed the “intellectual frameworks” of symbolic fantasy and utilize the movement of the *chora* to displace themselves from the participatory circuit of consumer ideology that obtrudes between subject and object. The separation between an enjoying absence and a subjective one is obscured at the level of language as both appear as an excess element on top of the regular constitution of subjects and objects,

allowing the Gardeners to displace or “rupture” the absence that waste comes to embody in consumer space. They reproduce this nonexistent subject position via a recognition of the dynamic totality of being that responds to the subjectively created values one is able to create in language in the moment of the interaction. This is the same process as consumer surplus value association, but, because it relies upon serpent wisdom that demands direct feeling, their being is rearticulated in a way that harmonizes new subject-object potentials in encounters with waste. This is what invites the resignification necessary to mark makeshift materials as clothing in tension with consumer circuits of signification and in spite of undesirability.

Slavoj Žižek suggests that this reflexive attitude of “accepting waste as such” radicalizes the perceived limits of so-called “ecological” capitalism and denies its illusory boundaries (Žižek 2012: 35). One may find in “the inertia of rotten material which serves no purpose” an aesthetic purpose of a different sort, approaching excess in the sense that “the aesthetic potential of waste” is precisely that which deviates from mere survival (Žižek 2012: 35). In this frame the Gardeners’ clothing may border on what one considers waste after it is stitched into caftans, which provide a use value alongside their re-figured aesthetic potential even as their new symbolic status arises in contrast to the conventional circuits of capitalist desire. It is then the challenge of the environmentalist to find “no purpose” in waste yet still recognize its excess potential for aesthetic enjoyment. This is the nonexistent position that presents a challenge to consumerism. The re-figuration of the signifying chain in serpent wisdom is thus bound in poetic movement over rhetorical structure in this sense, exemplified at the beginning of the text by a particular Gardeners’ poetic appropriation of a trash object.

Ren, who is one of the Gardeners, makes serpent wisdom visible at the level of language when she writes her name over and over with a discarded eyebrow pencil: “*Renrenren*, like a song” (Atwood 2009: 6). Here Ren acknowledges the mediating potential of language in the encounter with an object, reminding us of the Gardeners’ belief that writing is “dangerous.” She also demonstrates language’s discursive potential to dismantle the logic of signification in her slide from *name* to *song*, subject to object (Atwood 2009: 6). The danger here is directed at the symbolic system itself, where the illusory signifier that stands in for the subject of enunciation is shattered in this movement of resistance that signals both nonexistence as a mode of semiotic “feeling” and an excess ordering that entails a different kind of participation, interacting with the discarded eyebrow pencil on an aesthetic level that engages in its object potential as a device of poetic re-figuration. It remains a trash object, hygienically unusable for its socially-deemed purpose. Ren, however, engenders a subjective excess onto the pencil that re-figures it for aesthetic enjoyment exterior to its consumer designation. This act simultaneously aligns her with consumer nonexistence and produces an unconventional or displaced point of subjective contact rooted in immediacy, rupturing the process of identity formation via this very same aesthetic excess.

This process enacts the symbolic displacement necessary for the Gardeners to subvert the consumer formations that plague one’s daily experience of objects. What becomes apparent in these instances of linguistic reclamation via waste is the remove of the subject to a point of absent or pre-social being, “divested of all qualities,” as Lacan suggests, precisely because the symbolic contract that situates them as a particular identity is deemed nonexistent in this new moment of determination (Lacan 2018: 44).

The existing qualities of the subject as desiring are discarded in the exit from consumer space and subjectivity via the “*chora* [or serpent wisdom] is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated” emerging not by the symbolic integration of disparate elements but through direct semiotic intrusion, re-figuring the capitalist system of surplus absence as a displaced set of individually created significations connecting subject, object, and excess through reflexive signification (Kristeva 1984: 28). Embodying waste allows the Gardeners to approach the symbolic absence of enjoyment from a path incongruent with desire. It attunes the Gardeners with being and allows them to exist in a metamorphic and malleable relationship with the objects and environment around them, inscribing value in what *is* through interconnection and a persistence in displacing the logic of consumer ideology. The Gardeners thus express identities radically distinct from consumer formations and open themselves to a lifestyle in an alternate rhythm from that of consumer ideology. This alternative aligns with Gerry Canavan’s reading of Atwood’s “strident insistence that things might yet be otherwise” (Canavan 2012: 156). Actualizing this insistence in the space of reality requires not just a recognition of consumer absence but a mode of existence that breaches it.

We must now explore the tension between responsibility and enjoyment, recognizing in instances like the Gardeners’ clothing or Ren’s song both the aesthetic potential leading to new avenues of subjective enjoyment and the responsibility of the individual to confront the marginalization-as-waste with which capitalist logic threatens objects and spaces. The Gardeners ultimately demand a re-situation of being accomplished by their engagement with the mediating potential of language. This introduces new modes of knowledge against those of consumerism. I now turn my

attention to *Oryx and Crake* alongside discussion of *The Year of the Flood* with this tension in mind, the radical nonexistence of the Gardeners providing a throughway for linguistic reclamation in the everyday life of the consumer subject.

II

The issue encountered here is not only one of symbolic re-situation but the application of it in a way that invites the potential to live radically different in relation to objects, emphasizing the tension between the enjoyment we derive from them and the responsibility we hold in our consumption. While the “serpent wisdom” of the Gardeners introduces a way of interacting with objects outside of existing symbolic frameworks, it dismisses their social presence, subsequently removing their ability to engage in the cultural discourse surrounding the issues they confront. The need now is for a subjectivity that will cut across the nonexistence of the Gardeners, acknowledging both desire and awareness, enjoyment and responsibility, as interconnected modes of interaction rooted in symbolic re-figuration. Here, waste returns not just as an object or through subjective embodiment, but as a conceptual point of contact between identity and ideology, invoking both trashing and reclamation simultaneously as a challenge to the limits of perceived reality.

In *Oryx and Crake*, Snowman’s early years are spent inside of a walled suburban complex, his father comparing their life to a time “long ago, in the days of knights and dragons, [when] the kings and dukes had lived in castles, with high walls and drawbridges ... the Compounds were the same idea. Castles were for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside” (Atwood 2003: 28). Here,

a point from which this tension between enjoyment and environmental responsibility is breached becomes visible. In Atwood's text the Compounds serve as societal microcosms, existing for the advancement of scientific and capitalist pursuits, such as marketable organ-farming in genetically-modified pigs (Atwood 2003: 23). Here Snowman's pre-apocalyptic life exemplifies what Hannes Bergthaller describes as the dystopian subject "that fails to understand itself as a bio-political project" (Bergthaller 2010: 737). While individuals directly or indirectly participate in this project as consumer-citizens of the Compounds, the reality of such aggressive social expansion is obscured under the fantasy of "knights and dragons," providing the project with a sense of both nobility and extravagancy, the clash between human and nature that ends in conquest and heroic rewards. The presentation of social reality at this level of fantasy incentivizes participation in the capitalist project that maintains it: the promise of enjoyment is valid only if the conquest is supported to its end.

Following this analogy of knights and dragons to its limit places capitalism itself in the position of the castle. The Compounds act as physical illustrations of the objectification behind the notion of social progress. It is not just that Snowman fails to understand the project he is a part of, as Bergthaller suggests, but that the project itself becomes the reality he is situated in (Bergthaller 2010: 737). Capitalism, when presented as a space of communal effort or social participation, displays the desires of individuals at the level of ideological fantasy, no longer just the dream of a lone subject but a shared reality-to-come via social progress. This creates a discursive space in which subjectivity proper is admitted only to the individuals residing within it. In this sense, the capitalist project itself becomes as an objectively defined apparatus or "Compound" emerging or

discovered through interaction with reality. A castle is an effective image here due both to the sense of collectivity it implies and the loyalty it demands from subjects of the crown; it reinforces the logic of participation as the only means of achieving enjoyment or making progress (here posited as equivalent). Capitalism as a castle or space of collective participation figures it as an opaque and faceless structure of authority, objectively “out there” rather than subjectively manifested.

In actuality, however, the ideological boundaries of such reality are situated by social discourse and the very subjective manifestations this reality appears to deny as a collective space. Atwood exaggerates this operation through various neologisms in the texts such as “pigoons,” “rakunks” and “OrganInc,” expanding the cultural vocabulary and naturalizing it, symbolically (Atwood 2003: 22, 49). Alenka Zupančič suggests that these kinds of grammatical structures posit themselves as “another reality” in which the speaking subject dwells, mediating one’s relationship with reality through the imaginary screen propped up by the symbolic network (Zupančič 2017: 79). Language thus functions as the prop of capitalist reality that gives it sense by providing it with an articulable structure. For example, Snowman’s father’s work on “pigoons” would hardly be marketable were it not for a common language shared by his society. This is the reality where discourse is possible because the ideological structure that provides sense to individuals is a structure of language, where facts and observations may be proposed in words and appear to constitute the world through discourse. It is useful here to recall Lacan’s comment in Seminar XIX: “life demonstrates that it is merely a necessity of discourse,” (Lacan 2018: 41). The capitalist injunction that is given to the individual to not only enjoy, but to structure their subjectivity *around this enjoyment*, an “opaque

sequencing” of signifiers attached to objects on the circuit of desire obscuring actual life and rendering reality a consequence of discourse or signification in language (Lacan 2018: 41).

Another possible reading of Snowman’s father connecting the space of the Compound to that of a castle is found in the separation it invites between the social “inside” and “everybody else outside.” The movement of capitalism is shown here as operating from the “inside” as an inclusive force folding into discourse an exterior space. Capitalism figured in this way as a noble pursuit worthy of “kings and dukes” also implicates its participants in a hierarchy where non-participatory spaces, objects, and beings are involuntary placed at the bottom of this relation.

This bears on what Žižek describes as “the antagonism between the Excluded—the ‘animals’ according to global capital—and the Included—the ‘political animals’ proper, those participating in capitalism” (Žižek 2008: 44). Yet even in being “outside,” those “Excluded” beings are still figured as a “part of no part,” their very nonparticipation in capitalism signifying them as such within it (Žižek 2008: 41). The logical set that is “no part” of capitalism takes on a symbolism that, despite its apparent exteriority, is still inscribed in the space of the Included in order to invoke the distance necessary to register this antagonism in discourse. An impasse is thus encountered as the attempt to render excluded subjects abject necessarily stops short if the “political animals” of the Included wish to maintain a level of symbolic separation. This challenges the interpretation of the Gardeners as one of “two possible ways forward,” like Calina Ciobanu suggests (Ciobanu 2014: 155). Stepping away from the illusion of binary separation allows readers to

envision how the “way” of capitalist logic may become restructured or subverted from within without necessitating the total exclusion of the subject.

The Gardeners exist in the same space of marginalization that Snowman demands of the waste he encounters. The explicit link between waste and non-participation makes clear how this concept of marginalization via symbolic embodiment is capable of distending capitalist logic at its core. Recall that the Gardener, by becoming integrated in the signifying chain, must reproduce itself via inscription in discourse. But, in doing so, another lack is created in the marginalized space of waste, introducing here the subjective suture that assumes wholeness of discourse on the periphery of the symbolic logic of the Included that demands a re-centering of the signifying chain. The relation of subject and object that is accomplished via the work of the symbolic suture is projected into the future as a new potential surplus value. The subject encounters a duplication of lack but this time the movement is temporally disjointed, the initial point of nonexistence (the socially perceived subjective lack) subsumed under the lack corresponding to aesthetic enjoyment that is reinscribed in waste alongside the subject at the limits of perceived discourse. This works towards denying the “illusory boundaries” of capitalism but it also works towards producing a shift in what is considered Included. The extension of the signifying chain via the displacement of lack into a new signifier of desire inscribe a new point of surplus value at the limits of capitalist ideology.

Let us take another look at Ren and the eyebrow pencil. Her interaction introduces an unconventional aesthetic potential for the trash object that subverts the consumer-oriented or “Included” aesthetic ideal it once held. Morton suggests an approach to this kind of subversive, direct aesthetics via the emphasis of “kitsch,” “art or *objets d’art*

characterized by worthless pretentiousness” or a sense of garish excessiveness and poor taste (Morton 2009: 152). The notion of kitsch being in “poor taste” already invites a sense of separation from conventionality, as social perception is usually what situates its aesthetic range. Kitsch is “pretentious” to some but holds value for others, having “no power except for the love we invest in it” and thus signaling the subjectively-dependent aspect of an object’s signification as such (Morton 2009: 152). The potential that waste holds is unique in this sense: its post-commodity status recognizes the inherently subjective nature of kitsch’s constitution, as well as its fracture from the conventional circuits of desirable objects in the space of the Included. Ren’s subjective investment in the eyebrow pencil thus does not return it to commodity-status but aestheticizes it unconventionally in resistance of consumer directives regarding the object’s purpose.

Yet what also occurs in the transformation of trash into kitsch or the aesthetically unconventional is the abolishment of the gap between subject and consumer fantasy. The crude simplicity of Ren’s song juxtaposed against the medium of the pencil, “unashamed about its status as a mass-produced commodity,” presents this instance as not just an example of kitsch but the performance of it. The production of the song as an aesthetic object re-situates both the subject and object that engage in the encounter (Morton 2009: 151). Ren invests a new subjective potential in the pencil in the same moment that she denounces her ideological identity, closing the gap between subject and fantasy in favor of an ontological immediacy exemplified by the aesthetic link between her name and the song. The obfuscation of the two produces the nonexistence of the subject discussed earlier that now also comes to stand for the nonexistence of the gap or of the fantasy itself that is built into scientific reality. For Morton, “kitsch indicates the unalloyed enjoyment of

an object not normally considered aesthetic in a ‘high’ sense,” allowing for a subversion of the regular circuits of consumer desire by re-situating what is considered enjoyable in a more direct sense of contact with what is enjoyed (Morton 2009: 151). Waste here is neither solely embodied by the subject or characterized by the object but signals a breach of the space between the two. Ren and the eyebrow pencil interact in a way that “trashes” prior significations attached to them and reclaims both beings in a new accord or dynamic. The relation produced in the interaction is one marked by consumer nonexistence or scientific exclusion, both subject and object separated from the ideological frame that institutes them as such and reinstated in an alternative space.

The trick now is to return from kitsch to social reality – to imbue the subjectively engendered signification or value created here in the ideological register of culture from which it was originally extricated. Or to reverse Lacan’s formulation, we must render discourse a necessity of *life*, building one’s symbolic attachments out of the lived experiences they have of the objects and spaces they interact with. In figuring Snowman’s subject position as participatory in the space of the Included, Ren and the Gardeners are readable through the non-participatory marginalization they express in embodying waste; they actively resist the objective appearance of reality yet also displace the limits of discourse with their serpent wisdom or chora-immediacy.

This movement is exemplified in the Gardener’s “Tree of Life Natural Materials Exchange,” a makeshift market set up in an abandoned parking lot (Atwood 2009: 140). Attracting an upscale consumer crowd from the Compounds, the Gardeners sell organic fruits and vegetables that “stank of authenticity,” here seen by their customers as “amusingly bizarre, but at least they were ethical ... wrapping up their purchases in

recycled plastic” (Atwood 2009: 141). A number of concepts converge here to illustrate the subversive point of contact waste offers the subject in confronting capitalist ideology and its reality-building project.

First, kitsch is invoked in the recognition of the “amusingly bizarre,” emphasizing the possibility of aesthetic enjoyment in the act of purchasing something “authentic.” Its power comes from its exteriority to the conventional circuit of capitalism and the commodities with which capitalism is associated. Authenticity here does not denote a more “real” or “really there” reality in comparison to the “inauthenticity” of symbolic reality. It instead draws attention to the fact that the subjective nature of reality is not obscured behind a veil of scientific objectivity and is thoroughly malleable, shaped by the flow of life into discourse. In drawing enjoyment from this awareness, the immediacy of the interaction enables symbolic re-figuration this time at the level of social reality, the interaction between producer, product, and consumer issuing forth a new take on reality as meaning is produced anew via the pathway of the bizarre. The Gardeners are able to work from a point of dual-signification to instigate displacement within the system of capitalism, bringing subjectively-valued kitsch into the space of socially-valued commodities. They demonstrate the necessity of reclaiming signification in the space of the Included in order to re-situate the limits of desire.

Second, the Gardeners move towards a mode of ethical action via serpent wisdom, recognizing through the direct connection one feels with other beings the responsibility to build an ecologically sustainable reality in which the possibility of waste-free goods exists. Re-situating trash as “recycled plastic” wrapping in the space of commodities resists the symbolic marginalization that normally occurs in its entrance into capitalist space. The

Gardeners echo the movement of Ren and the eyebrow pencil here as the subject who produces the object is included in the act of signification, their lived experience persisting in the recognition of waste as resisting its marginalized status and thus displacing symbolic value into something via the stake of one's own subjectivity. Transmitting value from subject to subject forgoes the gap inherent to capitalist reality, allowing for a sense of interconnection between subject, object, and aesthetic excess to develop out of direct personal connections rather than an acceptance of what is ideologically situated around us. Bouson's emphasis on the Gardeners' "extreme environmentalism" or social resistance may gain a more material foundation in the text when this subversive staking of the subject is considered (Bouson 2011: 19). The Gardeners at the Tree of Life invoke the personal relation that re-situates consumer desire, but they also obscure the boundaries Bouson articulates between subject and object in a way that demands an ethical response to the waste one finds themselves reflected in.

Finally, purchases wrapped in trash begin to deny the fantasy of capitalist surplus value. They provide enjoyment from the point of subjective creation, which is visible in the act of wrapping, and is transmitted to the consumer directly instead of via ideological pressure. Direct relations from subject to subject created through the access point of waste are able re-figure social reality at the level of the group that is beyond individual perceptions. This act introduces new signification through the transmission of affective or felt value at the point of ideological inclusion, recognizing that in capitalism the same move is performed but obscured by the insistence on its objective, social project. The element of the "bizarre" allows for an individual revelation of this process; it subverts the

usual symbolic isolation of a commodity in its surplus value as the displaced inscription of potential enjoyment is triggered via the immediate embodiment of a waste object.

Here, everything depends on whether the Other is the big Other of the capitalist injunction or an Other that can be figured into the new dimension that is created here between object, subject, and excess/value. Reality expansion via the reclamation of symbolic value in waste makes one aware of the occurrence of affective imbuelement that occurs in the direct subjective encounter, rather than carrying with it a denial of this occurrence through the instantiation of the gap between fantasy and subject. The Gardeners at the Tree of Life are capable of overriding the injunction that demands enjoyment of kitsch. With the act of commodity-creation occurring in the moment of the subject-other encounter, they produce a potential for surplus value that responds to the subject who actually aims to enjoy.

The Gardeners inject waste back into capitalist discourse by selling it: but is this any different than selling empty “pre-waste” commodities? It is, I argue, because the value attached to the objects is subjectively imbued, and so it gains a more direct connection with the actual individual who will enjoy it than it would through the usual fetishization of the commodity. When one becomes nonexistent like the Gardeners, the symbolic status of both subject and object becomes reflexive: they extricate themselves from participation in the conventional circuits of consumerism in order to return with a challenge arising from a now alternative and confrontational space. The purposelessness of waste that Žižek mentions is thus rooted in a wholly capitalist perspective. Trash in Atwood obtains a subjective purpose that pertains to enjoyment and resignification in resistance to ideological constraints, which offers an opportunity for “the radical break” with capitalist

reality that Canavan speaks of at the level of one's investment in material embodiment (Canavan 2012: 156). The Gardeners' awareness of waste invites a responsibility towards building an ecologically sustainable reality through the power of discourse, only this time the power is in the hands of subjects.

The ability to accept the gap at the heart of existence lies in the acknowledgement of waste as symbolically "empty" only insofar as capitalist logic dictates it be so. Submitting to nonexistence interrupts this system to a point where subject and object obscure their relation in embodied immediacy. While the Gardeners exist in the fictional space of *The Year of the Flood*, readers can recognize the satirical connection Atwood makes between their radical approach to waste and real-world attempts at "greening" our daily experiences, whether this is consuming foods that "stink of authenticity" or more proactive methods of ecological resistance. Equally so, the figure of Snowman in *Oryx and Crake* exemplifies how the capitalist veil over trash creates an ideological limit on what is desirable. Promoting the subjective value of kitsch in this situation provides a start in combating the strict but illusory categorization imposed on social reality. The encounters with waste outlined in these novels exemplify the subjective ability to push the limits of discourse where one's lived experiences of objects demand a symbolism reflective of its subjective inheritance. From here, trash takes on a new meaning reflective of its transformative potential in the space of ideological inscription, challenging the process of signification via the introduction of aesthetic excess. As the characters in both texts grapple with the very real materiality of the world in which they find themselves, the possibility for a renewed awareness of this world is also introduced – one in which both

responsibility and enjoyment are given the potential to manifest from a point of interpretative suture that is known only as the subject.

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