

ENGL 4384: Senior Seminar
Student Anthology

Fall 2015
Dr. Chad Davidson, Professor
Department of English & Philosophy

UNIVERSITY *of* 
West Georgia

Printed on campus by UWG Publications and Printing.

DIRTY WORDS:

The Literature of Toxicity, Disease, and Global Filth

Introduction Dr. Chad Davidson	5
The Ecology of Tyranny: Nature and Empire in William Blake's <i>Visions of the Daughters of Albion</i> Andrew Barrow	7
Heteronormativity and Pollution in Christopher Isherwood's <i>A Single Man</i> Tyler Gott	19
Detangling the Kinks: Black Natural Hair in the Postnatural Era Monique Hyman	31
Taking Nature through the Carwash: Marketing SUVs in the Postnatural World Helen Menchinger	41
Poisonous Playthings and Toxic Toys: America's Fascination with Manufactured Toxicity Kara Purdy	53
Toxic Tourism: The Emergence of Toxic Attractions Ashley Roberson	65
Filthy Friends: Digging through the Trash of Children's Messiest Characters Brianna Strohbeck	75
Spiders and Gamma Rays: Comic Book Heroes in the Atomic Age Chandler Tillman	87

Introduction

AS I WRITE, officials from all the industrialized nations meet in Paris, in the wake of the terror attacks, to try (many believe in vain) and establish guidelines to curb global carbon emissions. On the news just last week, the fast-casual giant Chipotle suffered through yet another episode of widespread food contamination. Chernobyl has opened its doors once again but only for short intervals at a time. (Tourists may now travel there for brief forays into its radioactive town squares and parks, surely one of oddest forms of cultural immersion.) My colleague jokingly refers to the lake in town, the one notoriously affiliated with the copper-wire manufacturer Southwire, as Lake Contaminato. Toxins, disease, infection, pollution, global filth, and radioactive muck: these substances and conditions haunt our culture, spawning both fear and the *Fear the Walking Dead* franchise on cable television. Many of these contaminants, too, represent new threats to our health and safety. Often undetectable with our rather rudimentary human senses, new biological horrors seem to lurk in everything from our hamburgers and iPads to our drinking water and air. While the actual things we fear may change, however, the *way* we fear and the underlying targets of our fears often remain the same. With these sorts of tendencies in mind, our class asked a series of questions that fueled our research: what are the multiple significances of this particular iteration of a contagion? What lurks behind that television show's staging of a death-dealing virus? What prejudices and biases lie underneath this easily vilified contaminant? What, finally, are we *really* talking about when we talk about pollution?

The studies included here ask these questions and more, and represent the crowning scholarly achievements of these highly capable seniors. The papers cover a broad and fascinating range of subjects, from toxic-themed toys and candies to radiation in the origin stories of some of our favorite superheroes; from amusement parks that feature nuclear slime and radioactive DMZs to automobile advertisements in the postnatural era; from "going natural" hair trends, purporting to eschew harsh chemicals, to that filthy friend of Charlie Brown, the inimitable Pigpen; from Christopher Isherwood's midcentury novel *A Single Man* all the way back to William Blake's haunting *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Armed with little more than a theoretical sense of possibility, these students traveled into terra incognita, at turns applying new tools

to old stories and attempting to read new “texts” by contextualizing them within age-old frameworks. Finally, the contents of this anthology illustrate young minds as flexible as they are given to whimsy. Just a quick scan of some of the titles will confirm the high value we placed on wit, ingenuity, creativity, and plain, old pleasure. (That’s our “dirty” little secret.) I hope you enjoy and are edified by these essays half as much as I was. Caution: interesting material ahead.

Dr. Chad Davidson

The Ecology of Tyranny: Nature and Empire in William Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*

BY ANDREW BARROW

IN THE EARLY YEARS of the abolitionist movement in mainland Britain, the position towards Empire in Quaker anti-slavery tracts varied from ambivalence to quiet opposition. As Christopher L. Brown writes in "Empire without Slaves: British Concepts of Emancipation in the Age of the American Revolution," early enemies of the institution implored that "if empire required slavery [...] empire ought to be abandoned," calling upon years of Quaker moral opposition to human bondage and promising judgment upon slave owners in the afterlife (274). This hardline position, argued in religious terms, found few friends in an entirely Anglican Parliament, even among those otherwise sympathetic to human causes (274). As the movement grew from its Quaker roots to encompass a broader base of advocates, however, moralist rhetoric began to soften, embracing Enlightenment rationalism and "accepting the need to sustain the productivity of colonial plantations" (Brown 290). A new class of Abolitionist pamphlet emerged in the schema to end slavery while preserving the Atlantic empire. These new pamphlets, as emblemized by Maurice Morgann's *A Plan for the Abolition of Slavery*

in the *West Indies*, typically proposed the simultaneous end of slavery and “incorporation” of newly freed slaves into the empire as productive citizens, arguing against their bondage as inefficient and dangerous to the masters (280-282). The writing of such pamphlets flourished, although historians struggle to appraise the weight of Morgann’s contribution; soon, however, even ardent Quaker abolitionists such as James Ramsay were “urging slaveholders to consider ‘the state of workers in free countries,’ who, he asserted, each execute ‘thrice the labor of a slave,’” rather than painting tableaux of spiritual outrage (Brown 290). Britain’s abolitionists found their initial successes on the backs of these empirical, rather than religious, arguments, which culminated in William Wilberforce’s famous *Bill to Abolish the Slave Trade* in 1791.

Published a mere two years later, William Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* poses a very different attack on the slave trade, mirroring the earlier Quaker tracts skepticism towards empire in poetic, rather than prescriptive form. Bromion, the central antagonist of the text, forces dominion and ownership on human and nature alike, “stamping with his signet” both individuals and the “soft American plains” they inhabit, and demanding an association with Great Britain’s colonial ventures (18-25). Although the image of the British Imperial State as a brutal hegemon possesses all the pathos of the early religious abolitionists, it lacks even their limited religious ethos, invoking neither piety nor the Enlightenment notions of the superiority of “natural labor.” Yet, for all that it lacks in political potency when compared to the more mainstream tracts against slavery forwarded by other abolitionists, the unyielding, resounding condemnation in Blake’s tone reveal a deep skepticism on the poet’s part toward both Empire and the notions of nature that upheld it. Here, as in no other abolitionist writing, slavery emerges as a symptom of Empire, itself only made possible through the defining of humanity’s relationship with nature in entirely materialist terms.

Blake suggests the specific targets of his metaphor through a complication in the straightforward brutality of Bromion’s discourse and appearance, which betray a darkly harmonious vision of a world unfettered by distinctions between nature and humanity. Bromion asserts “one law for both the lion and the ox,” transposing as he does so Enlightenment concept of equality before the law upon the animal world (108). Meanwhile, the “burning fires” of his realm “that belch incessant” recall factories as much as they do Pierre-Jacques Voltaire’s then popular *View of the Eruption of Mount Vesuvius*, suggesting an equivalency between the two (32-33). Likewise, Blake’s physical descriptions of Bromion emphasize

the character's dual nature; the spirit's constant association with storms and "thunders hoarse" evokes the natural, Romantic sublime as surely as his whip does the human institution of chattel slavery (17, 22). In describing him in these hybrid terms, Blake begins to situate Bromion as a strange *mélange* of eco- and anthropocentric philosophies, reflecting in turn Blake's own anxieties over the place of empire in a proto-Romantic worldview or abolitionist political philosophy. Ultimately, however, Blake layers this critique further, presenting in one of Oothoon's final speeches an alternate view of nature and the material as accessories to spiritual enlightenment.

More so than his contemporaries, Blake posits a division between the human and the natural as an ideal, in particular recoiling from the integration of human institutions and nature, as in Bromion. Compared to Wordsworth's *Michael*, where, as Greg Garrard summarizes, "the distinction between observing human subject and observed natural object is systematically undermined" to produce a pastoral of feudalism integrated peacefully into the natural setting, Blake's image of such synthesis veers toward the apocalyptic (40-44). In *Visions*, the pathetic fallacy transforms from a poetic convention eliciting sympathy to a grotesque imposition. While Wordsworth's "boisterous brook" speaks of the "gentle agency of natural objects," Blake's "jealous dolphins" delight in rape and enslavement (Wordsworth 6, 29, Blake 19). By the end of the poem, Blake verges on open mockery of Wordsworth's experience of the poet in nature, asking in Oothoon's voice "wilt thou take the ape / for thy councilor, or the dog for a schoolmaster to thy children?" (119-120). Even as his heroine proclaims that "everything that lives is holy," Blake maintains a position of alterity, continually associating the Wordsworthian mode of expression with slavery and empire (214).

On its surface, the parallel between Wordsworth's poetry and imperial slavery presents no clear antecedents—certainly, Wordsworth never championed slavery and in the nineteenth century wrote in praise of abolitionists. Within the context of the contemporary movement in anti-slavery writing away from Quaker religiosity and toward Enlightenment rationalism, Blake's argument begins to take shape. Both form a part of what Blake, writing in his annotations to Wordsworth's poems, described as "the Natural Man rising up against the Spiritual Man continually," the replacement of the spiritual and imaginary, which Blake uses in an exalted rather than pejorative sense, with the purely natural, which becomes the purely tyrannical (1). Blake sees in Wordsworth the same preoccupation with the physical that he mocked four years earlier in

There is no Natural Religion, a pamphlet of satirical aphorisms parodying Cartesian philosophy by asserting that that “The desires & perceptions of man untaught by anything but organs of sense, must be limited to objects of sense,” and “therefore,” that for a person thus limited, “God becomes as we are, that we may be as he is” (a9-b12). By investing himself totally in the physical world, argues Blake, Wordsworth “weakens and obliterates imagination,” and loses sight of the “holy” spiritual realm in which he locates goodness (Annotations 44). Similarly, Blake’s Bromion represents a challenge to contemporary critiques of slavery, which isolate the perniciousness of that system to mere inefficiency perceptible through the senses.

One wrinkle in such a reading of the *Visions* clearly presents itself, and opens space to interpret Blake’s descriptions of nature in the poem as infinitely more complex than simple antimaterialist, anti-nature, and pro-spiritual diatribe. In a clear reference to both her kidnapper and Theotormon, Oona inquires of the audience whether

The sun walks, in glorious raiment, on the secret floor
Where the cold miser spreads his gold; or does the bright cloud
drop
On his stone threshold? Does his eye behold the beam that
brings
Expansion to the eye of pity; or will he bind himself
Beside the ox to thy hard furrow? Does not that mild beam blot
The bat, the owl, the glowing tiger, and the king of night?
(204-210)

Here, celestial phenomena reveal both the beauty of nature and the divine creation, both of which remain barred to the strictly materialist “miser.” Blake also suggests an element of ethical ambiguity to the “binding” of domestic livestock, impossible to read without consideration of earlier images of human bondage. Oona, if not Blake himself, posits an ecophilosophy that equalizes the human and the animal to a degree that surpasses even Wordsworth’s Pastoral scenes. Thus, Blake ties in his contradictory descriptions of nature a semiotic knot, as natural phenomena appear as both elements of the empirical, imperial shift away from the divine and imaginative, and vital paths to spiritual wholeness.

Such ambiguous readings have long presented themselves to interpreters of the *Visions*. Nelson Hilton, among others, makes a compelling case for Oothoon’s rhetoric as a deliberately “contradictory” progression into

intentionally illogical philosophical confusion, which “must not be read as fully consistent with Blake’s own views” by the end of the poem (Hilton 103). Likewise, Nancy Goslee proposes Oothoon as an embodied philosophical question regarding the nature of liberty, meant to ask but never answer the question of “whether one sort of liberation [gender] oppresses another [race]?” (Goslee 103). Continuing in such a vein, it stands to reason that Oothoon’s soliloquy echoes the contemporaneous co-optation of the abolitionist rhetoric by imperial, and more importantly to Blake, largely secular arguments. The Blake posited by such a reading, masterful in his ironies, writes an Oothoon who mistakenly conflates the glory of the spiritual world with the degeneracy of the material, and in doing so unknowingly becomes a tool of empire and patriarchy. While such a reading demands an uncharacteristic dogmatism from the text, it nevertheless picks away at another long-standing textual bogeyman, clearly positioning Oothoon’s shift in lambasting Theotormon as “a sick man’s dream” to “catching [...] girls of mild silver, or of furious gold” for him as logical steps down a road of materialist thought (170, 198).

In Blake’s denunciation of Wordsworth’s “natural religion” in his annotations, and association between it and an empire borne on the back of slaves in *Visions*, Blake seems to resemble modern Marxist critics in condemning “nature [...] as a refuge from politics,” a space where the poet need not interface with the complex problems of human society (Garrard 42). Certainly, such a characterization of Blake as “anti-natural” has found critical acceptance due to passages and scenes in his earlier work, which include descriptions of “the vegetable glass of nature” as “finite & temporal,” eternally opposed to the “Infinite & Eternal” world of imagination and spirituality (*Last Judgement* 555, Lullier 397-398). As such, the critical placement of Oothoon as a well-meaning, but ultimately beguiled mouthpiece for empire carries a hefty literary precedent, as an affirmation on Blake’s part of the essential inferiority of the physical world to that of the imagination and spirit.

Although such a reading of Bromion’s embodied sublime, Oothoon’s worship of nature, and the contemporaneous development of a new abolition movement seems consistent with Blake’s affirmations in *There is no Natural Religion* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, it nevertheless presents knots of its own. The suggestion of an equivalency between slave-owners, pro-imperial abolitionists, and Wordsworthian “nature-worship” as composed of the same materialistic, anti-imaginative dogma reads as distinctly ironic, considered alongside Blake’s opposition to Newtonian science on the basis of excessive generalization (Erdman

65). Even in *Visions* itself, Oothoon likely speaks for Blake in condemning “cold floods of abstraction” as endemic of materialist philosophy, even as praises particularity in all things (118-135). Furthermore, Blake does not entirely avoid idyllic scenes of the human in nature, although even in them acknowledges alterity—Oothoon’s decision to pluck the nymph of the opening’s flower reads as serene Edenic sexuality, but critically, Oothoon “turns [her] face to where [her] whole soul seeks” after the event, situating the philosophical and spiritual awakening she experiences as prompted by, but ultimately divorced from the natural realm (8-10). Taking into account Oothoon’s later treatise on the miser, it becomes clear that Blake’s philosophy allows for certain permeations between the imaginative and natural spheres, provided that they do not subject the former to the latter.

A broader analysis of Blake’s early work reveals a great deal of consistency in the manner in which his narratives permit humanity and nature to interact. Mark Lussier theorizes in “Blake’s Deep Ecology” that, in Blake’s works, “mind and matter, like word and design, operate in a mutually illuminating dialogue,” nature composing the key part of matter, with the two joining to reveal transcendent spiritual truths (397-400). Although Lussier’s analysis focuses on the earlier *Book of Thel*, where Thel’s interaction with nature provides him with an imaginative catalyst, *Visions of The Daughters of Albion* contains a similar language of the power of the imagination when prompted by nature (400-401).

Oothoon’s experience of the natural, closely resembles the visionary opening of Lullier’s text, as the miser’s “eye” and the “beam” meet at once, engaging in a creative act between the viewer and the viewer’s imagination spurred on by the energy of nature (205-206). In particular, Oothoon only achieves the “heaven of generous love” upon consideration of the twin conjugal images of a sexless, lifeless “frozen marriage bed” and “a bank [...] Red as the rosy morning, lustful as the first-born beam” (195-196, 199-201). Through her unmediated imaginative encounter with the latter, classically pastoral image, combined with the “London”-esque human construction of the former, Oothoon goes on to develop the Romantic awakening with which poem ends.

The major development to Blake’s earlier ideas on nature, however, occurs in the form of Bromion. When Blake refers to Bromion’s dolphins and waters as “jealous,” his thunders as “terrible,” and his caves as “religious” he locates these only in Bromion’s own consciousness, as a result of his own actions; Oothoon does not characterize any aspect of nature negatively until after Bromion does so (19-30). Bromion’s nature, then,

is one unceasingly mediated by human institution and consciousness, preconfigured and determined by its observer. This unique depiction of nature and the imagination as, in an unprecedented turn for Blake up to this point in his writing, a union with the potential for imperial expression follows logically only when considered alongside the ongoing change in abolitionism.

Any reading of Bromion's apocalyptic fusion of the ecological and human must necessarily consider as well the predominant mode of understanding natural terror in the 19th century—the Sublime. Although later embraced by Byron and the other Romantics, the Sublime, in Burke's original formation, is described as the existence of a force antithetical to aesthetic beauty "in which all the motions [of the soul] are suspended" (2.1). Whereas the beautiful delights and elicits admiration, Burke associates the Sublime with a single emotion, arguing through linguistics that "Terror," "fear," and "astonishment" all contain kernels of the transcendent Sublime (2.2).

In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, Blake borrows Burke's phrasing to formulate a decidedly imperialistic, conquering image of the Sublime. Bromion's "terrible thunders" represent not just a facet of his appearance but the very method by which he enslaves. In Bromion's caves "terror and meekness dwell," and he controls the slaves whom he claims to own through fear, forcing them to "[be] obedient," to "resist not, and obey the scourge" while "their daughters worship terrors, and obey the violent" (22-23). Blake almost certainly meant this phrasing as a deliberate reference to Burke's own conservative stance on the issue; while historians now regard Burke's 1792 *Negro Code* as a "plan for ending slavery" in the same vein as Morgann's, Burke himself presented it as a method by which the slave trade could profitably continue for an indeterminate amount of time (Brown 290-292). Despite this reference to Burke's aesthetics and politics, Blake's Bromion resists interpretation as a direct analogue to Burke, even if one ascribes to Blake a tendency towards hyperbole. In particular, the reference to nature as "flourishing upon the Earth / to gratify senses unknown... unknown, not unperceiv'd, spread in the infinite microscope" directly subverts more traditionalist Burkean philosophy in favor of Kant's rationalist reading of the Sublime as a purely psychological, rather than emotionally or spiritually transcendent, reaction (102).

Instead, Blake's terrifying, imperialistic sublime which merges with the imagination in terrifying ways reflects a major and heretofore unplaced development in Blake's personal philosophy, as well as one of

the earliest references to modern anthropological ideas of hegemony. As Nancy Goslee notes in “Slavery and Sexual Character: Questioning the Master Trope in Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*,” references to slavery within the text taper off over time, as the text focuses more on Oothoon and Theotormon (103). References to the negative imaginative visions of nature imposed by Bromion remain, however: even in Oothoon’s final speeches, where she declares that “everything that lives is holy,” images of “jealous clouds” recur (202). Even after his dramatic exit from the narrative, Bromion’s conception of nature continues to endure, scarring Oothoon and Theotormon with its sublime “terror.” In effect, imagination, and nature as understood in the Burkean sublime mix to replace actual slavery with the “mind-forged manacles” of hegemonic empire.

Read in the light of this imagination, mixing terror and beauty in critical facsimile of the sublime which nevertheless exudes genuine awe, Goslee and Hilton’s readings of an entrapped Oothoon take on a more coherent political significance. Goslee writes in “Slavery and Sexual Character: Questioning the Master Trope in Blake’s *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*,” that

The poem moves from the public issue of slavery [...], through an exploration of private vision, an exploration in which neither gender nor race is explicit, to a fuller exploration of the plight of women in the social, political, and religious conditions in Europe [...] yet such coherence might be illusionary—or at least merely formal—and may compromise the specific, revolutionary claims of race and gender. (Goslee 104)

Read alongside the previous observation of the Burkean sublime at work as a fundamentally imaginative force, however, brings together the (admittedly somewhat convoluted) historical metaphor at work, as the physical manacles of slavery slowly dissolve into the mental and social manacles of empire. By the end of the poem, slavery has been all but forgotten, and a semblance of equanimity between Oothoon and Theotormon created—at the very least, Oothoon begins to value her own selfhood and happiness (Blake 215-217). However, as Goslee notes, Oothoon is subsumed by patriarchy as she does so, coming to victimize other women as she “traps [...] girls of mild silver, or of furious gold” against their will (Goslee 106).

Oothoon becomes herself enslaved even as focus diverts from the physical reality of chattel slavery, much as Blake perceived British culture as enslaving itself to Newtonian physics, Burkean ideas of nature, and the “natural religion” of Wordsworth. Here, as in all of Blake’s work, he equalizes the imaginative and natural realms, and their subjugation: the Daughters of Albion “echo back [Oothoon’s] sighs” at the end of the poem just as they do her misery at her literal physical enslavement at the beginning (43, 216).

For all of the absurd privilege of such an attempt at equivalence, Blake’s attempt to portray what Marx would later refer to as false consciousness displays a remarkable political sophistication. It is, however, consistent with the revolutionary leanings other scholars have read into Blake; certainly, Raymond Williams saw Blake’s *London* as a location of “imposed and yet self-imposed organized repression” in the city-space (148-149). Where *Visions* differs from *London*, in addition to the former poem’s overt focus on slavery, comes in the complete abstraction repression—whereas *London* is located by its title, Blake’s own illustrations place *Visions* in a Limbo-like land of liminalities, with the shore and accompanying weather serving as the only consistent image. The sun in particular becomes a focal point for many of the images, visible in the text’s second image and lighting the third and final illustrations. However, this sun does not follow any logical circuit, but instead meanders, rising and falling with no consistent pattern, further implying the absence of a physical space in the decidedly spiritual *Visions*. This temporal abstraction, accompanied by the colonial symbols of shorelines and endlessly rising or setting suns, allows for *Visions* to serve as metaphor for the empire as a whole. Thus, Blake is able to criticize the wide-spread institution of slavery as easily as the mental subjugation that allows it to persist, even as he problematically equivocates the two by locating them both in nonphysical realms.

Visions of the Daughters of Albion does not stand alone in mixing nature and the imagination to arrive at empire and slavery. Maurice Morgann’s *Plan for the Abolition of Slavery in the West Indies* assuredly seeks the abolition of the slave trade, but also imagines a British Empire cutting “through the very heart” of Africa on the backs of black citizens, whom he supposed naturally and biologically suited to the environment (Brown 280). Although Morgann’s readership was quite limited, his ideas gained traction following the Seven Years War, when, as Brown writes, “the governance and incorporation of strangers had become, inescapably, the subject of intensive discussion” (286). Whether deriving

their arguments from those of Morgann or the general tone of public discussion, other abolitionists quickly followed suit, fantasizing vistas of “free” African people working for wages under the watchful eye of colonial governance, set apart in harsh environments “unsuited” to the white colonist (Brown 288).

Clearly, this imperialist abolitionism appealed to powerful Britons; arguments derived from these effected the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833. For Blake, however, these arguments were a direct betrayal of the morality expressed in his earlier writing, and a perversion of imagination to serve imperialist ends. While Morgann’s arguments hinged on a qualitative biological difference in Europeans and Africans, presaging in many ways the arguments for invading Africa put forth by colonial powers in the following centuries, Blake compares race to “a cloud” in “The Little Black Boy,” expounding on its artificiality even in the thoroughly ironized context of *Songs of Innocence* (*Songs* 8-9). This image, of course, recurs in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, where Blake employs the same nebulous image to suggest the immateriality of Bromion’s rule: the tyrant’s philosophies stem, like those of Morgann, from psychological expedience converging with imagination and opportunism, rather than empirical fact, ethical reason, or personal revelation.

Perhaps Blake’s distaste for the faux-naturalism of these arguments against chattel slavery—widespread by the time of Blake’s adulthood, to say nothing of his writing *Visions*—explains in part the apparent distaste for nature in his early writings, as remarked upon by Lussier. As Lussier notes, Blake in *Vala* associates the titular goddess-of-nature with the fall of his mythical Albion, “reinforcing the sense of Blake’s open hostility to nature” (398). Staged as a progression of the themes of *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and a response to the zenith of “rationalist” abolitionism, however, *Vala*’s betrayal of Albion becomes political pantomime. Nature itself has not betrayed England and the people confined by it against their will, but has been redeployed by rhetoricians and statesmen to accomplish such an end—hence the divergent rhetoric of nature employed by Bromion and Oothoon, which sets *Visions* as a conceptual battleground for the dominant interpretation of nature in the coming century.

Literary knots aside, we must not forget that, historically, Blake and those few who shared his sympathies lost. Their arguments that human beings are fundamentally equal—that distinctions of gender, color, class and creed are no more than fragile chains tethering the voiceless to the forgers—fell on deaf ears. In 1833, the British government bought its

way out of slavery, setting the price of countless generations of broken lives at “twenty million pounds sterling,” payable to the owners of those freed (Slavery Abolition Act). In this act of remuneration Parliament rejected the moral imperative of abolitionism, instead choosing to acknowledge the property status of those enslaved even as it conceded the inexpediency of slavery’s open practice. In the following century, imperialism hatched anew, as Blake and Morgann had both imagined it—a relentless machine of unfree freemen, perfectly evolved to fill an ecological niche of exploitation. Assuredly, the Abolition Act meant a great deal to those whose bonds it broke—in entirely equivocating his mind-forged manacles with the iron bonds of slavery Blake commits an act of no small privilege—but at the cost of providing the state an alibi against atrocity in the following centuries.

WORKS CITED

- Slavery Abolition Act 1833*, William IV. Chapter 73. London: The Stationary Office, 2000. Web. 27 November 2015.
- Blake, William. *Songs of Innocence*. 1789. British Museum, London. *The William Blake Archive*. Web. 27 November 2015.
- Blake, William. *There is No Natural Religion*. 1788. British Museum, London. *The William Blake Archive*. Web. 27 November 2015.
- Blake, William. *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. 1793. Houghton Library, Cambridge. *The William Blake Archive*. Web. 27 November 2015.
- Brown, Christopher L.. “Empire Without Slaves: British Concepts of Emancipation in the Age of the American Revolution”. *The William and Mary Quarterly* 56.2 (1999): 273–306. Web.
- Garrard, Greg. “Pastoral.” *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge, 2011. Print. 31-56.
- Goslee, Nancy Moore. “Slavery and Sexual Character: Questioning the Master Trope in Blake’s Visions of the Daughters of Albion”. *ELH* 57.1 (1990): 101–128. Web.
- Hilton, Nelson. “An Original Story”. *Unnam’d Forms: Blake and Textuality*, ed. Nelson Hilton and Thomas A. Vogler. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. 69-104.
- Lussier, Mark S.. “Blake’s Deep Ecology”. *Studies in Romanticism* 35.3 (1996): 393–408. Web.
- Wordsworth, William. “Michael”. *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth*. Ware: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 1998. Print. 255-257.

Heteronormativity and Pollution in Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*

BY TYLER GOTT

EDUCATING THE PUBLIC on the previously unknown threats of a chemical apocalypse, Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* raised environmental concern across the nation. Prior to its 1963 publication, dichloro diphenyl trichloroethane (or DDT) existed as the miracle chemical. Abbreviating the scientific name to distract from its associative link to other chemicals, DDT was praised for its prevention of the spread of malaria. Most importantly, though, "it protected crops the world over from insect damage amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars" (Dunlap x). Becoming the new weapon in the "war on pests," DDT annihilated insects for nearly thirty years before its heyday came to an end (xi). Its popularity waned, however, when Carson proved the war resulted in not only significant damage to the environment but also to the health of animals and humans alike. Creating anxiety across the world, but specifically in the United States, Carson added DDT to the ranks of other toxic anxieties including radioactive fallout. Post *Silent Spring*, this new era of environmental anxiety infiltrated nearly every area of American culture, leading to an increased interest in environmentalism.

This interest in environmentalism and the toxic effects of chemicals can be reflected through literature and at the peak of *Silent Spring's* consumer popularity, Christopher Isherwood's 1964 novel *A Single Man* emerged amid threat of continued ecological apocalypse. Less concerned with the unknown effects of chemical toxins such as DDT, Isherwood highlights a different, but related, environmental fear—that of an exponential population increase. Though arguably risky on its own, this fear of overpopulation also existed in part due to the requisite waste and the inevitable increase of pollution and environmentally damaging actions. Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* highlights the neo-Malthusian concerns regarding the dramatic increase in population. According to Ehrlich's prologue, the world would eventually succumb to starvation, sooner rather than later, unless programs are “accompanied by determined and successful efforts at population control” (xl).

Mirroring the culture's anxiety, Isherwood presents his own unique perspective on the looming fear of apocalypse. Reflecting similar Malthusian paradoxes that are present in his other novels, Isherwood contextualizes the looming environmental apocalypse as a result of what Isherwood deems “breeders.” Brought about by “the Change,” returning World War Two veterans and their “just-married wives” sought “new and better breeding grounds” where the American dream could be cultivated (Isherwood 18-19). This active procreation is one of the most defining features of “breeders.” Through a Malthusian lens, the novel's homosexual protagonist George reflects the societal concern of environmental damage argued by Carson. Additionally, Isherwood's focus on queer relations distances George from heteronormativity, suggesting that even the phenomenon of normalcy itself is a pollutant due to its myriad of ill side effects.

The normative culture of heterosexuality, typically regarded as pure, exists not only to be questioned but openly critiqued by George's categorization of heterosexual coupling. Traditionally associated with “unnaturalness,” George's homosexuality is in stark contrast to “an encroaching, destructive, heterosexual world” (Anderson 56). In actuality, homosexuality is one of the most important lenses through which both George and Isherwood, critique the majority. The juxtaposition of ecocriticism and homosexuality creates a context which is extremely useful in navigating channels of natural and unnatural—illustrating how homosexuality is deemed “unnatural” while heterosexuality remains outside of the focus of impurity. According and Katie Hogan's vision of queer ecocriticism, George's homosexuality allows for a focus on the

“restoration of the neglected, the outcast, and the afflicted earth” (88). Through his marginalization as other—some of which remains self-induced through his secluded home—George critiques the normalized narrative of the perceived “naturalness” of heteronormativity. Juxtaposed against heterosexual naturalness is a myriad of other entities including those othered by sexuality and racial difference. Isherwood himself asserts *A Single Man* is “about minorities. And the homosexuals are used as a sort of metaphor for minorities in general” (Wickes 44). The minorities exist in contrast to, but also within, the sphere of heterosexuality and the ideals it progresses—humans need to “prepare themselves for life which means a job and security in which to raise children to prepare themselves for life which means a job and security” (Isherwood 47). This highlights the incessant pull toward heterosexuality, in turn creating an inescapable world of reproductive pollution. Essentially, the naturalness of nature becomes minoritized and compactly characterized to be conquered. George’s queerness highlights the heteronormative majority’s alleviation from personal guilt. This guilt, which perhaps stems from the remnants of a subconscious Christian doctrine of moral values, exists as evidence only in the majority but is easier to identify and thus explain in terms of ecocriticism.

Heterosexual normalcy encompasses unique multitudes of consumer pollutants available after World War II. The reproduction-production-consumption model so prevalent in heterosexual American culture remains notable for its ill side-effects. Isherwood’s critique of the nuclear family and what Anderson calls “their impetus to consume in excess” illustrates the tangible fear of excessive consumption as an obvious risk (59). Risky on its own, the excessive consumption Isherwood critiques is not only limited to sexually active adults. Termed “junior consumers,” young adults are “cheated out of their childhood[s]” with the constant crave for more (Isherwood 89). Isherwood takes this warning one step further, however, by juxtaposing consumers with the “real,” thus highlighting the lack of realness in the consumption model (89). This effectively deteriorates the *natural* route of heterosexuality: consume, give birth, and throw away.

The unnaturalness of factory-fed “soul destroying commercialism” is apparent with its Malthusian reaction to heterosexual consumption. The “soul-destroying” nature of commercialism exists due to the consumption model which highlights the inevitability of disaster. This idea stems from a pre-Industrialization “puritanical fear of the moral corruption inherent in commercialism and materialism, [which is] sustained by a

modern intellectual contempt for consumer society” (Goss 18). Isherwood argues that people are so consumed in the possession of products, which, unbeknownst to them, simultaneously represent the looming apocalypse. Isherwood’s argument mirrors Bourdieu’s statement that “the consumer helps to produce the product he consumes” (100). In laymen’s terms, the consumer comes to embody what it is consuming, theoretically constituting an identity only available to those partaking—the majority.

Industrialization’s side effects are not only evident in the lack of the “real” that heteronormative production’s children are “cheated out of;” pollution remains a direct and palpable effect of “turn[ing] out useless consumer goods [and] products” (Isherwood 89; 83). The usefulness falls to the wayside as corporate production harvests tangible consequences. Even the “defiantly bohemian Camphor Tree Lane”—which functions as George’s escape—cannot be spared from the consequences (18). Signs warn against “eat[ing] the watercress which grew along the bed of the creek, because the water was polluted” (19). Isherwood highlights the direct correlation between pollution and heterosexual reproduction. Tacked directly parallel to the toxic warning, the “sinister Children at Play” sign illustrates an anxiety less concerned with the consumption of produce and instead with the pollution brought about by unconcerned sexual reproduction (19). This reflects the cultural anxiety highlighted by Ehrlich’s novel, suggesting that “environmental deterioration and increased difficulty in obtaining resources” indicates a progressive overexertion of population (3).

As he continues through his daily life as professor, George notes the air permeating his campus stroll with its “tang of smog—called ‘eye irritation’ in blandese” (46). His characterization of pollution as merely an irritant is an obvious euphemism. Isherwood employs this specific understatement to illustrate the negativities of anthropocentrism. More concerned with an ill-effect directly human-centered, “the sick yellow fumes which arise from the metropolitan mess below” symbolizes merely an annoyance (47). Isherwood situated George in a nearly satirical manner through his subtle euphemism; this euphemism is used to highlight the collective guilt over conspicuous consumption by illustrating the smog’s disassociation from what it stemmed from (pollution).

George’s flippant regard for the smog mirrors society’s assuagement of guilt from a lack of admitted complacency. Unfortunately, for both George and society as a whole, pollution becomes euphemized so regularly that the belittlement of pollution itself becomes an extreme. The

very existence in cultural and political city life requires an active participant. Like Isherwood, George understands his own active participation in harming the environment. As an outsider, the paradoxical contradictions employed in critiquing an environmentally damaged society (while doing nothing to change the course of actions edging to the apocalypse) exists to highlight the active majority culture. Instead of rallying for a 1960s green initiative, George merely continues his active participation as a professor in collective society. By his queer status as an outsider, it is easier to contextualize the problems, but it does not alleviate any guilt simply due to his otherness.

The hypocrisy with which George, reflective of society, can criticize the pollution in the area and simultaneously enjoy—arguably love—the “indolence and ease” of the freeway illustrates a sort of anonymity from which George benefits (35). Typically symbolizing freedom and mobility, California’s freeways now exist as the border between city and nature while simultaneously existing as a result of the city and expansion. Roadways do not exist as natural, in any form of the word. George’s complicity in society is illustrated as he romanticizes the “wide pastures” of the countryside while not-too-subtly praising roadways (111). Cutting across natural lands, roadways allow for further expansion into the wilderness, effectively disrupting the natural. The very “wildness of [the] range” and the United State’s “natural condition” remain in confliction with the understanding that even the “wilderness” that attracts thousands of visitors is simply a commodification (110).

Isherwood’s commodification of nature illustrates the personification of nature that often oversimplifies historicity. George, while remaining nostalgic for the days past, reverts, again, to anthropocentrism which highlights his ownership of nature. Isherwood exemplifies the use of nature for personal agency—George reminisces the simplicity of the “uninhabited” (110). While simultaneously critiquing the city’s expansion which has “eaten up the wide pastures and ranchlands and the last stretches of orange grove; it has sucked out the surrounding lakes and sapped the forests of the high mountains,” George himself actively participates in the commodification of nature (111). Alluding nature’s “only strength,” there is less concern for the future of California’s wilderness; instead George guiltily mirrors the systematic appropriation of nature as therapeutic and pure—something existing separate from the city life George is accustomed to. Though it remains worth noting that Isherwood does simultaneously present a vision of oppression from the city and its expansion, the inescapability of expanding capitalism and increas-

ing families illuminates the disruption between “the American way of life” and those deemed othered (Rowe 37). . Adam Rome’s exploration of the population growth that occurred after World War II demonstrates an endless environmental disruption where “the single-family home[s] with a full complement of consumer goods become the most common image of ‘the American way of life.’ Yet the image of a mass consumer culture could only become reality with mass production of housing” (37). This stemmed from the socially and governmentally sanctioned environmental destruction resulting from exponential growth postwar and the subsequent need for expansion to combat overcrowding. The idealized freedom of the United States lent a hand in the progression into previously uninhabited lands. The aura of openness that the West symbolizes illustrates a renewed hope and escape from the demands of hegemonic heterosexuality but it is dependent on the stasis of nature. For example, George seeks the “primitive, alien nature” he was able to experience in times past with partner Jim (110).

Additionally, the suburban sprawl alleviated concerned for “preserving social order” by allowing “virgin” lands to be conquered and stripped of (then) bountiful resources (Anderson 54). Like heterosexual couples and nuclear families, queer and othered individuals existed in spaces of expansion and destruction. While this does not signify intellectual exclusivity in queer groups, it does illustrate the complexities of environmentalism, particularly in regard to the marginalization that occurs in both nature and minorities. The cooperation between nature and queer theory allows for the blatant recognition “that particular outdoor spaces and other environments are specifically adopted for the transgression of normative behavior” (54). Isherwood presents the idea that humans will cycle through the careless and endless procreation of “tots,” which essentially simplifies them to just another element adding to a culture already saturated with produces (18). Reproductive heteronormativity “enables a view of the planet’s resources as infinitely reproducible, thereby justifying the profligate exploitation and consumption of those resources” which is reflected by the cycle of reproduction with no regard to sustainability (Brown 95). In *A Single Man*, Isherwood highlights the “brown metal wastebaskets for soiled paper napkins and used paper cups,” which remains indicative of the overuse of “disposable” items (82).

After the return of veterans, even George’s central queer space—the beach—sees encroaching suburbia. “In the beach-months of 1946 [the] magic squalor of those hot nights, when the whole shore was alive with tongues of flame, the watchfires of a vast naked barbarian tribe” where

“coupling [was] without shame” highlight the encroaching heterosexual community onto his bohemian fantasyland of unashamed sex and desire (148). The importance of this sex scene lies in the implicit Southern California beach culture from which George hails. Aspirations of purity abound here and exist separate from the negativity of impurity often associated with homosexuality.

Carefree and naked in the ocean (alluding perhaps to the oneness one can find with nature by losing human individuality), George and new (potential) beau Kenny drunkenly experience catharsis. As the water washes over the couple, it sanctions and encourages “the stunning baptism of the surf,” allowing George to become “cleaner, freer, less” through its lapping shore (162-163). This juxtaposition of George with the ocean illustrates an important allusion to homosexuality’s (supposed) inherent unnaturalness. This is in direct conflict with other prevalent ideologies which have existed since the Apostle Paul’s outcry that homosexuality was a sin against nature, thus situating non-heterosexuality as unnatural. The paradigm of queerness and its unnaturalness becomes reversed with the insistent portrayal of heterosexual reproductive sex as inherently unnatural. Isherwood questions the resource burden that results from the cycle of reproduction. No longer an affront to nature, homosexuality becomes the context with which the hegemonic contaminations can be explored.

A Single Man explores the disruption of acceptable conventions and narratives by using the natural ocean as the site for queer bodies to exist (previous to the suburban sprawl) free of the social norms associated with heterosexuality. The ocean exists in three different, but equally important, distinct ways. It functions as a physical space where marginalized bodies can thrive and consummate (particularly George and Kenny); the space for symbolic and semantic questioning of terms such as pure and impure, natural and unnatural, and fertility and production; and as an accessible place to cross lines of sexual respectability and live life “like a tribal encampment” (148). It exists in complete opposition to the burgeoning sexual reproduction amuck in California’s hills and expensive neighborhoods.

Opposite of the queer-accepting beach scene in Isherwood’s novel, the university system denotes yet another pollutant of heteronormativity. Not typically thought of as a toxic contamination, public education takes on a new context in *A Single Man*. Imagined as a “clean modern factory,” the American education system immediately recalls the environmental troubles associated with factories (42). Isherwood’s intro-

duction and contextualization of George's employer—San Tomas State College—as a burgeoning corporate factory, however modern it may be, creates a tension in the text that cannot be ignored. Highly esteemed as the embodiment of social empowerment, Isherwood plays with the idea that American universities, in the 1960s, were these all-knowing, all-encompassing areas of social betterment. Instead, the apparent pollutant of normative, heterosexual culture exists in stark relation to the amount of money gained from the institution. Instead of signifying an eager student body willing to learn, San Tomas State College, and public universities generally, comes to symbolize corporate greed and its inevitable pollution. Ultimately, the university, supposedly indicative of the betterment of society, directly influences and contributes to the manifestation of pollution. Additionally, the university system is complacent in its role and the general public cares more about the money that can be earned and then used to progress an already expanding economy. The university comes to embody pollution itself, literally transformed from George's employer to the active manufacturer of both physical and noise pollution:

The storm center of all this grading, shoveling, hauling and hammering is the college campus itself. A clean modern factory, brick and glass and big windows, already three-quarters built, is being finished in a hysterical hurry. (The construction noises are such that in some classrooms the professors can hardly be heard.) When the factory is fully operational, it will be able to process twenty thousand graduates. But in less than ten years, it will have to cope with forty or fifty thousand. So then everything will be torn down again and built up twice as tall. (42)

This active manufacturer of physical and noise pollution soon highlights an active pollutant going through its factory doors: the extensive culture of students themselves. Isherwood's likening of students to speechless, complacent, and ironic products of a factory creates an interesting juxtaposition between human beings as the bearers of environmental toxins and the culture of education. Instead of merely being the cause of environmental toxins, Isherwood situates those deemed "normal" as environmental toxins merely on the basis of existence. The subtlety with which Isherwood contextualizes the university's complacency and creation of toxins illustrates the complexity of temporality and visions of a future not lush with wildlife but with seemingly mindless spawns of the machine.

Interestingly enough, Isherwood's novel at the height of the Cold War focuses more subtly on fears of an overextension of resources (through unchecked population growth) and the subsequent waste associated with growth, but in that fear exists a ripple of effects—including, but not limited to, chemical disaster. The fear of a literal toxic world is most effectively illustrated as George surveys the California canyons, thinking the natural state of the earth will soon "die of overextension." (111). Before it can be ruined by "rockets" or an "earthquake," the earth will die at the hands of inhabitants themselves. This death, fueled by corporate insatiability and the "brashness and greed" of commercialist society signifies an apocalyptic cleansing (111). With threat of a return to the "natural condition," of the earth, Isherwood identifies the falsified ideals of an "American utopia" including idealized heterosexual concepts of brotherhood and good neighbors (26). Anyone unwilling "to purge and starve themselves for generations, in the hopeless hope of inheriting" what little is left of an unsustainable earth remains an outsider, unwelcome in the "kingdom of the good life" (26). The ever-burgeoning, over-burdened society, then, becomes almost a parasitic entity needlessly consuming but unable to sustain itself for long.

This lack of sustainability stems from the obsessive commodity culture and the apocalyptic race for "new and better breeding grounds" to fill with "litter after litter after litter" of children (18-19). Isherwood's clever use of "litter" not only illustrates the expansive number of children but also alludes to the relationship between heterosexual reproduction and literal litter that is waste and debris. This looming apocalypse does not result from nuclear warfare and literal toxins but, instead, its apocalyptic vision is an effect of the consumer greed and misuse of the earth. Satirizing the future's seemingly inevitable environmental apocalypse in an almost Jonathan Swift fashion, Isherwood sardonically references the upcoming "Rubble Age" in which "it will be quite natural for Mr. Strunk to gun down Grant and his wife and three children, because Grant has neglected to lay in sufficient stores of food and they are starving and may therefore possibly become dangerous and this is no time for sentiment" (88). Instead of seeking sustainable practices, Isherwood argues that Americans are living only symbolically—driven nearly mad with greed from the hegemonic obsession with merely things.

Isherwood mirrors Jean Baudrillard's argument that people in the modern consumer culture "are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects" which are "neither flora nor fauna" and are completely removed from "natural

ecological laws” (25-26). The disconnect illustrated here is mirrored in George’s understanding that to be a breeder “you need a steady job, you need a mortgage, you need credit, you need insurance. And don’t you dare die either...” (Isherwood 19). The sheer “need” for all of this results in amassing amounts of commodities detrimental to the future of the planet. Subsequently, the staples of the American dream help create a constant cycle of production-consumption-reproduction that simultaneously represents the inescapable heteronormative pollution.

The only chance of escape from consumption, reproduction, and environmental violence lies in death, as illustrated by George’s silent departure at the conclusion of *A Single Man*. Lest Isherwood conform to historical literary tropes where the sexually deviant is subject to a horrible and painful death, usually by way of self-harm, George’s brain is merely “murdered in the blackout with the speed of an Indian strangler” after a cathartic masturbation (186). Using personification to illustrate how the body and its muscle memory will “die without warning at their posts” with the lights going out “one by one” until there is “total darkness,” Isherwood uses George’s death to illustrate the inevitability of death and simultaneously reiterate the idea that mankind itself is a pollutant, even in unknowing homosexual George. Concluding the novel with a fatal tone, Isherwood designates George as the new “cousin to the garbage in the container on the back porch.” By concluding the novel in such a manner, Isherwood implicates even non-heterosexual, non-reproducing George as inevitable waste needing “to be carted away and disposed of” (186). George dies in the same bed that the novel opens with, but instead of symbolizing hope for his future, it highlights the inevitability of stopping the cycle of environmental apocalypse. Instead, all of George’s judgements of the sphere of heteronormativity that surrounds society exists to illustrate the certainty of an upcoming breeders’ apocalypse through the consummation of a “disproportionate amount of the world’s resources” (Ehrlich 7). Isherwood’s careful juxtaposition between “breeders” and those deemed unnatural—homosexuals—alleviates the negativity of “others” and instead places blame on those actively participating in the waste culture known as reproductive heterosexuality.

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Jill. “‘Warm Blood and Live Semen and Rich Marrow and Wholesome Flesh!’: A Queer Ecological Reading of Christopher Isherwood’s *A Single Man*.” *Journal of Ecocriticism* 3(1). (2011): 51-66.

- Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008.
- Brown, Gavin. "Queer Ecology Roundtable." *European Journal of Ecopsychology* 3. (2012): 82-103.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. "Distinction and the Aristocracy of Culture." *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Ed. Storey. (1998): 431-441.
- Ehrlich, Paul. *The Population Bomb*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1968.
- Hogan, Katie. "Queer Ecology: Writing as re-vision." *European Journal of Ecopsychology* 3. (2012): 82-103.
- Isherwood, Christopher. *A Single Man*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1987.
- Rome, Adam. *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Wickes, George. "An Interview with Christopher Isherwood—1965." *Conversations with Christopher Isherwood*. Ed. James J. Berg and Chris Freeman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. 24-44.

Detangling the Kinks: Black Natural Hair in the Postnatural Era

BY MONIQUE HYMAN

THE CHEMICAL RELAXER surfaced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by French and German scientists and cosmetologists. The first perm consisted of a cow urine mixture to create a more permanent waved texture in the hair of whites. Later, the use of lye, an incredibly caustic chemical, would be adapted for the scalps of black men, women, and children (Morrow 96-128). Malcom X's autobiography provides a harrowing, yet commonplace, account of his experience with chemical straighteners trying to achieve the Conk—a popular men's hairstyle adopted by the black community in the 50s. He describes a homemade “jellylike, starchy-looking glop” called congolene—later, renamed “perm” for permanent hair relaxer—that he and an informally trained companion concocted and administered on their own (42). Black consumers converted kitchens into chemical laboratories, conducting caustic experiments. As Malcom X explains, “it burns bad. But the longer you can stand it, the straighter the hair [...] [B]e sure to tell me anywhere you feel any little stinging, [...] You always got to remember that any congolene left in burns a sore into your head”

(43). Brother Malcolm remarks on a rite of passage many members of the black community engage in as both a survival strategy, and a visibly painful token of their own self-hatred.

The use of chemical straighteners causes massive destruction on the scalps, and in the minds of African descendants across the globe. The FDA asserts the use of lye—the same ingredient used to melt the clogged hair inside drainage pipes—as caustic for all people, unsafe for air-borne digestion, and safely handled with a chemical mask and rubber gloves (Morrow 117). Chemical relaxers very commonly cause immense hair breakage, thinning, and irreversible balding. Permanent damage to black scalps and hair occurs as commonly as the application of the creamy crack itself. Many blacks that have suffered from chemical burns hide their shame from each other, and their children, allowing the application of these chemicals to continue their permeations through the scalps of African descendants. Just a few years after Malcolm's chemical white-wash, blacks across the globe would ditch the caustic chemicals and epidermal burns for afro pics and locking cream.

A growing ecological awareness emerged in the mid-twentieth century, as well as a materializing Civil Rights era, stimulated the burgeoning Back-to-Africa politics and the Black Pride movement to accompany it. The unprocessed and heat free-hair of the unmodified African head became a site of beauty and pride. Willie L. Morrow—scholar, theologian, and self-made billionaire—imported the afro pic to America in the 60s, marking the first time an African American sought a tool from their own nativity and actually used it (Morrow 108). Afros were considered, and still are, militant, anti-hegemonic, renegade hairstyles. The United States government forbade teaching the afro in cosmetology schools and barber shops, instead focusing on chemical straighteners and the press-n-curl (Morrow 129-33). Marcus Garvey's famous statement: "Remove the kinks from your mind, not your hair" exemplifies the revolutionary consciousness regarding hair treatment that pervaded minds of blacks in America. To possess a "natural" in the 60s and 70s exuded contentious political ideals of black liberation and empowerment, marking afro-bearers as targets for a laundry list of discriminatory practices including police profiling, unwarranted arrests, unemployment, interrogation, police brutality, and political assassinations (Byrd 48). Criminal and racial profiling surrounding the Afro hairdo, its appropriation by mainstream popular culture, and the dissemination of the Black Panther party in 1968, stimulating an overall rejection of the Afro

and, subsequently, a reversion by African Americans to hairstyles that appeased Eurocentric grooming standards (Byrd 51).

In an era of American consumerism rapidly reclaiming organic foods and herbal medicine, while simultaneously shunning chemicals considered inorganic and human-manufactured, black natural hair has re-emerged in a new, scientific, and systematic fashion. PH balances, natural acidity, curl patterns, shrinkage, clarification, moisture retention, co-wash, TWA (teeny-weeny-afro) name just a minute corner of an anthology of terms dedicated to the everyday care of black natural hair. To “go natural,” for black women today, consists of a “journey” undertaken by the brave and racially conscious that begins with a process called the “Big chop.” As this name implies, this radical severing serves as a rite of passage, initiating black women into the natural hair community. A sort of purifying baptism occurs when the brave shear long, fine, permed strands that are stripped, damaged, and chemically processed. Kinky and coily spirals emerge from the scalps of the newly natural.

However, this natural hair process consists of more than a haircut and a daily conditioner. A new natural hair care science, regimen, literature—complete body of knowledge, essentially—has burgeoned with it. Embarking on this natural hair journey manifests as all but a natural process, in which black women just let their hair be. Rather, going natural consists of the systematic application of various treatments and “natural” compounds: such as shea butter, jojoba oil, Moroccan oil, argon oil, olive oil, keratin, biotin, aloe, henna, to name a few. The “natural hair care journey” is scientifically created and research-driven, yet it refrains from the uses of alcohols, parabens, sulfates, and other “un-natural” hair applicants. What ideological vestiges expose themselves when analyzing narratives of natural hair within the context of a post natural age? How does the new natural hair movement work to demystify notions of authenticity, purity, and natural in post natural consumer markets? What political and theoretical implications arise when an unmodified trait from a specific demographic sets the new bar for natural?

The new natural hair movement, although residing on the black woman’s head—a notably political site—presents itself as remarkably apolitical in comparison with previous African American natural hair movements. At best, the circumvented buying power of black women from monolithic corporations like L’Oréal, Pantene, and Dove to local, black-owned, natural haircare lines such as Aunt Jackie’s, Carol’s Daughter and Shea Moisture, serves as an economic sit-in, boycotting purchasing authority from those not representative of the natural hair move-

ment. Controlling the buying power of black women in the hair care industry ultimately transforms the entire multi-billion dollar market, of which black women own three percent (Byrd 98). In that regard, black buying power represents an overwhelmingly tangible political strategy in which black women have direct access and connection to. The new natural hair movement lacks a telos that situates it as a movement with political authority. However, its effect on established multi-billion dollar markets exposes a seemingly anti-capitalist agenda.

New natural hair care consists a multitude of practices that reframe the everyday maintenance of black hair. In many ways, the intensive research-based, and commodity-driven market center the new natural hair movement as a manifestation of bourgeoisie cultural and economic elitism. The new natural hair movement contains a very superficial telos of long, healthy, un-processed, black hair that shirks it of any long-term, substantive political engagement. Cynthia Deitering applies a postnatural critique to various works of 1980s literature in her article “Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s.” Deitering affirms theoretical analyses within the discourse of the “post natural world, whose conscious need for nature is merely superficial” (291). The mass of niche markets, mainly online, didactically approach the topic of natural hair. In the natural hair community, product selections and treatment applications constitute a key benefactor in healthy hair growth. As a result of extensive education available on haircare products for natural hair, black women have become heavily researched and knowledgeable in areas of haircare not previously attended to. Textural patterns, moisture retention, natural PH balances and acidity commonly navigate daily natural hair care regimens. Methods for maintaining natural hair vary as much as the natural heads themselves. Products range from “Aunt Jackie’s Don’t Shrink Flaxseed Elongating Curling Gel” to the “Puff Cuff hair clamp for Thick, Coily, Textured Hair.” The limitlessness of the burgeoning natural hair market manifests in the term “product junkie,” an allocation to those that invest countless hours, and dollars, researching, ordering and applying specialized haircare products. Homemade DIY hair treatments have also flooded the hair tonic recipe books of black women, in which they become trichologists, bathrooms and kitchens become labs, and household oils and groceries become solvents and compounds. A Homemade protein treatment consists of eggs, olive oil, avocado, plain yogurt, honey, and coconut milk. While seemingly resourceful and divergent from enabling the continued financial buttress to large haircare companies, the use of these very edible ingredients signifies as superfluous in a society with a

significant amount of individuals in positions to greatly receive a balanced breakfast of yogurt, honey, eggs and avocado. In this light, the new natural hair movement operates as a time and money vacuum for women of the black community, further occupying their mind and wallets with the material growing from their scalps.

Within the arena of global capitalism, the conscious needs of the new natural hair movement evoke not only superficiality, but also social individualism. On one hand, the natural hair movement represents an overt reclamation of African-ness through a rejuvenation of African hair by treating it with elements of Africa's so-called natural environment. However, the superficial and politically-docile telos of the movement: producing and possessing healthy, long, natural hair reifies civic individualism. When embarking on one's natural haircare journey, a temporary period of solidarity between new and experienced natural women emerges. Through the formulation of profound online niche media outlets and social media dedicated to natural hair, newly natural women have a virtual community established for their support through the social and political perils associated with natural black hair.

However, the temporality and focus of this community deny sustainable unification within the black community to form. Once one has reached "hair goals," learned the intricacies of creating an organic deep conditioner from the contents of cabinets of refrigerators, and mastered the complex art of twist-outs, the communion of the natural hair movement becomes less necessary. In this regard, the new natural hair movement operates as merely a means for self-reclamation and reconnection to cultural and physical identities. The beauty and self-esteem-based telos of the movement serves the affirmation, knowledge, and acceptance of the self. The natural hair movement's repatriation to African ecological systems works not in the interest of Africa itself, or for the sake of uplifting global Africans, but rather for the sake of the individual affirmation of the African self. This varies radically from natural hair movements of the past wherein solidarity and political activism configured the heart of the campaign.

The new natural movement bolsters exploitation and exoticizing in Western consumer markets. African American natural haircare products evade using organic compounds native to the Western world. Privileging organic compounds found in African and Eastern ecological systems such as Moroccan Argon oil, Jojoba oil, Shea butter, henna, and coconut oil exoticizes them, and establishes a dichotomy in which substances native to Western landscapes signify as less pure and natural. Shazia Rah-

man, discusses a “lack of attention to the local” which is found in the “marketing of products associated with the non-western world” (406). Companies capitalize on the natural hair movement’s predication on Eastern and African milieu by tokenizing cultural vestiges and signifiers in advertisements and packaging. They use signifiers that evoke ideas of African and Eastern culture and materials untampered by Western cultural imperialism. “Africa’s Best Triple Repair Oil Moisturizer Miracle Cream with Shea Butter” caricatures the type of trite orientalist marketing strategies of African origin by its title, leafy images on its packaging, and with an overtly pan-African color scheme of green, yellow, and red. Ironically, the jar advertises a “new look,” one that more effectively markets it as non-western. “Cantu Shea Butter leave in conditioning repair cream” alludes to an African cultural knowledge base by its name and the Kente cloth imagery and coloring on the container. Strikingly, Cetearyl Alcohol and Parffinum Liquidum—ingredients no more native to Africa than the labs that configured them—compose major active ingredients within these natural haircare products.

The new natural hair movement perpetuates orientalist notions of non-western purity, and restoration, while simultaneous exoticizes Eastern and African organic compounds. The natural hair movement’s consumption of products that blatantly caricature eastern and African representations for western capitalist profit, while simultaneously affirming critical support in non-western organics. This reifies the overall orientalist consumption of these products in global markets. The new natural hair movement situates knowledge of black hair, and proper maintenance as premier foundations to its overall success and implies that the most valuable knowledge pertaining to haircare resides in Eastern in and African epistemic spheres. Black women indulge, as consumers, with orientalized markets in order to pacify feelings of cultural displacement through economical engagement. However, they simultaneously bolter consumer-based markets that openly exoticize and exploit those exact foundations. In this respect, black women of the new natural hair care movement, albeit honest in their attempts, promote orientalized consumer-markets in efforts to restore abstracted genealogical and cultural non-western foundations.

In a post-natural era, black natural hair supplants nature in the “man vs wild” narrative and functions as a site of ideological and cultural displacement and expression. Its malleability and overt noticeability marks hair as the most contested racial signifier, second only to skin (Mercer 33). Kobena Mercer reframes common understandings blacks

have of black hair from merely a demarcation of inferiority, to a “raw material, constantly processed by cultural practices” (34). As a raw material, new natural black hair symbolizes the natural resource richness of continental Africa. A wealth of healthy natural hair descendant from Africa assuages black guilt in regards to Africa’s current plights with politics, economics, healthcare, education and natural resources. Showcasing bountiful healthy, manes composed of the “raw material” of the African head—by extension of the African descendant wearing it—reestablishes a healthy African presence in America, providing a counter narrative to common perceptions of the Dark Continent. The kinky curly hair of the new natural movement serves as symbolic retribution for the piracy of Africa’s people and raw materials done by the imperial West; the cultivation, and toiling of the black scalp existing as latent desires to reap native African soils.

Utilizing the words “natural” and “virgin” to typify unprocessed black hair establishes a limiting and potentially violent dichotomy. The aforementioned terms exclude women with chemically processed and texturized hair that also suffer and strive to appease Eurocentric beauty appeals. Considering unprocessed black hair as “natural” and “virgin” insinuates a certain purity resides within the untampered African head. Jake Kosek traces “the entanglement of eugenicist conceptions of bodily purity with wilderness protection and demonstrates how past formulations of whiteness articulate with current struggles over wilderness” (125). The new natural hair movement has inverted former purity narratives regarding whiteness and wilderness to blackness and the untamed “wilderness” that is unprocessed black hair. Within this new, post-natural purity narrative, black hair supplants the unchartered, untampered wilderness frontier. Processed hair symbolizes the ingested racism of blacks; going natural frees black scalps from internalized whiteness and restores them to fully black individuals—in both culture and appearance. Instead of retaining whiteness, the frontier of black hair seeks to purge itself of whitewashed beauty standards and chemical processes and resituate understandings of beauty that comprehends the care needs of black hair. Assuming senses of naturalness, purity, and virginity to unprocessed hair anti-coalesces black women, and renders women with processed hair as subordinate and a representative threat to purity narratives regarding black hair

The extensive categorizations and hierarchal formulations stratifying hair texture and maintenance situate the current natural hair movement as a reiteration of Eurocentric beauty assessments that work to dissipate unity between black women. 3a, 3b, 3c, 4a, 4b, 4c, classify varying

textures of curly hair. Instead of approaching black hair as merely hair, the new natural hair movement's systematic approach catalogues kinky textures in a scientific format that sets a precedent for understanding black hair types. On one level, the comprehensive knowledge established around the care of black women's hair, in its natural state, remarkably affirms black women's psyche and overall beauty-consciousness. More so, black women, by and large, produce the body of knowledge sustaining the movement, providing an edifying canon of scholarship created, and consumed, by black women. However, in the process of intricately understanding the nature of natural, and chemically processed hair, black women have applied value judgments to varying classifications. Sabrina Perkins, Clutch Magazine writer, explores the apparent inequality within the natural hair community. The movement seemingly resituates black beauty as desirable and acclaimed, however, Perkins notes that advertising agencies and large companies representing natural black women provide a "poor representation of [black women's] truth. This image is not equal or accurate. It seems that lighter-skinned women with curly hair have more supporters, more opportunity, more value" (clutchmagonline.com). The number of black women embarking on natural hair journeys has grown exponentially, with consumer sales of chemical relaxers declining 30% between 2010 and 2012 (Holmes 96). The formulation of natural "Hair Crushes" has coupled the insurgence of new naturals, providing inspiration and haircare guidance through online niche media outlets. Jouzley, a renowned natural hair vlogger and freelance journalist in Washington D.C, criticized the natural hair community as "full of swindlers, largely because they continue to promote the idea that healthy natural hair is curly, it's shiny, it's laid full of baby hairs, and that's the pinnacle for what healthy natural hair should look like" (clutchmagonline.com) since majority of hair crushes and models fit this textural caste. Jouelzy's statement resounds with dissent for centuries of colorism and internal racism practiced within black communities that subjugated kinkier hair types as undesirable and more defined curl patterns as "good hair." Taren Guy, successful YouTube vlogger that fits the more "accepted perception of healthy natural hair" responded to Jouzley, remarking on the "continued separation within this community on whose struggle is worse [...] who has it the best based on what they look like and what kind of hair they have" (clutchmagonline.com). In this regard, black women displace feelings of undesirability within themselves onto other women who possess the traits they differ from. The new natural hair movement has provided a scientific outlet to divide

and stratify the hair of black women. This breeds a scientifically sanctioned chart for “good” and “bad” hair resurrecting American eugenicist and racialized scientific understandings. Texturing systems allow for the methodical privileging of hair types by casting certain qualities upon certain textures. Signifiers such as course, unruly, tangled, matted, dry, and no distinct curl patterns commonly describe qualities of 4b and 4c hair—the kinkiest of hair types.

The natural movement, on a myriad of intersectional tiers, fundamentally serves as a vessel to stimulate positive narratives regarding black physicality. The aversion to perms and caustic straighteners increases the health of black bodies and black minds, alike. More so, the natural hair movement has provided an avenue for black women, the purchasing power of a multi-billion dollar black hair care industry, to reestablish themselves as shareholders within the market. However, the natural hair movement, in the midst of its efforts at self-restoration, could actually catalyze dissent within the black community—or worse, a distracted political orientation by those consumed by the politically-evasive telos of the movement. The spoils of capitalism further complicates what could have been a movement borne of cultural altruism, into another cog in the violent machine of global consumer-based cultural appropriation. The natural hair movement, then, exists within its own tangled socio-economic global platform that does not allow its interpretation to form one concrete analysis. Rather, the natural hair movement and its implications remain full of complicated kinks not to be dissected on a strand by strand basis, its detangling best achieved by widely situated theoretical strategies, much like the teeth of the afro pic.

WORK CITED

- Byrd, Ayana, and Lori Tharps. *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America*. Boston: Macmillan, 2014.
- Deitering, Cynthia. “The Postnatural Novel.” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm eds. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996.
- Kosek, Jake. “Purity and Pollution: Racial Degradation and Environmental Anxieties.” *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements*. (2004): 125-165.
- Haley, Alex, and M. S. Handler. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1992.

Morrow, Willie Lee. *400 Years Without a Comb*. Morrow's Unlimited, Incorporated, 1973.

Rahman, Shazia. "Cosmopolitanism, Internationalization and Orientalism: Bharati Mukherjee's Peritexts." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 49.4 (2013): 405-418.

Taking Nature through the Carwash: Marketing SUVs in the Postnatural World

BY HELEN MENCHINGER

IN A 1960 *TIME MAGAZINE* ADVERTISEMENT for the Chevrolet Suburban, the vehicle—a Sports Utility Vehicle (or SUV)—appears waxed and shiny, an immaculate coat of sky blue paint and pure white trim, the crimson Chevy cross logo centered on the grille. Inside, a picturesque American family sits together, smiling and laughing. Rocks, trees, and imposing craggy cliffs immediately surround the vehicle and reflect in its clear windows, and the sun illuminates mountains in the distance under a vibrant turquoise sky. Fast-forward to winter of 1996: another Chevrolet SUV ad—the Blazer—resides amid a snowstorm. This time, the crepuscular light reaches the snow-capped peaks in the background but its rays do not extend into the vehicle, obscuring the contents or people within. This advertisement includes written claims of the SUV’s capabilities to protect “from what’s out there” and offer “safety, confidence, and maneuverability” against “the worst Mother Nature has to offer” (*SUV Ad Comparisons* 1). In these two ads, the representation of nature shifts from a peaceful escape, which needs only a photograph to capture it to an obstacle over which to embark with caution, complete

with a written warning. Most recently, fourteen years later, the Chevrolet Trailblazer faces the camera with its darkened windshield allowing enough visibility to perceive that no one occupies the driver's seat. The vehicle sits parked in a deserted concrete lot as sunset's final glow dimly reveals a black and still-darkening horizon.

Comparing these three ads from the same manufacturer over time exposes a trend that extends to advertisements for other SUV brands than Chevrolet, in which representations of nature assume a dramatically different meaning: from a place for family to explore together in 1960, to a destination for adventure at one's own risk in 1996, to an ominous presence in the distance in 2015. This phenomenon of manufacturing an identity for a vehicle through representations of nature stretches past printed advertisements, too, with car manufacturers adjusting the names of various models over time as well; for example, Land Rover produces models whose names shift from Range Rover in 1970 to Defender in 1983 to Evoque in 2011. In so doing, nature appears to lose its innocence—from a place of escape, to “range” and “rove”—to a location in which to practice caution or against which to “defend,” to a post-apocalyptic presence, which no longer “evokes” the attitudes American culture once held about the natural environment and thus becomes outdated. So why this mutation of the representation of nature within manufacturers' marketing of their SUVs? To what may we attribute the change in representation of SUVs from a means of connecting with nature to one of defending its passengers from it? What accounts for such a new perspective on nature when selling vehicles specifically designed to go there?

One way in which to read this curious trend in environmental representation in SUV marketing resides in their manipulation of the images they portray to alter how the target market perceives SUVs. The 1960 advertisement places the vehicle in the midst of a sunny and harmless natural environment; since marketers want their target market to focus not on the pollutive properties of the SUV but on its ability to connect the driver with the “great outdoors.” The 1996 advertisement shifts the intended focus, emphasizing the safety the SUV offers in contrast with the danger of a mountain snowstorm. Finally, the 2015 ad places nature in the far background, and guides the viewer's focus instead to the pristine luster of the SUV itself. This shift in the portrayal of nature from essential to the character of the SUV (and by extension those who drive it) to a far-off object—almost an afterthought—serves to distract consumer focus from the inherent irony surrounding the SUV's dominance

as a vehicle for the “outdoorsy” type, when this kind of person generally possesses ecological consciousness and invests in avoiding rather than perpetuating pollution. Previous SUV ads sought to “hint at a new synthesis of civilization and nature, but with their deep-lugged tires and high emissions, SUVs ultimately must be regarded as an egregiously perverse expression of our postmodern environmental consciousness” (Rollins 686). As the popularity of the SUV risks endangerment due to public awareness of its pollutive properties, manufacturers seek to eliminate natural imagery from their ads—nature itself becomes a pollutant to the “environmentally friendly” image that SUV manufacturers need consumers to see in order for them to purchase these vehicles. Whereas an ad in the 1960s or 1970s could portray nature freely because of a less ecocritical public, its presence in advertisements now reminds consumers of their own culpability in the current state of the environment, about which people may easily educate themselves via documentaries such as those Helen Hughes discusses in her book *Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the 21st Century*. Chris Kassar and Paul Spitler’s “Fuel to Burn: The Climate and Public Health Implications of Off-road Vehicle Pollution in California” offers enlightening statistics about the effects of SUVs on the environment: “In the past 15 years, pollution from off-road vehicle use has increased significantly. [...] Carbon monoxide emissions have increased by 56 percent” (1). As more studies raise public awareness of the role of vehicles in air pollution, people want to make purchases that make them feel as though they help rather than add to the problem.

In current American culture, a person cannot leave his or her house without encountering businesses or people who support the “Go Green” movement. Leaving one’s house without needing to use a motor vehicle remains a less and less common occasion—as people become more aware of their contribution to the classification of modern culture as post-natural, or “a culture defined by its waste” (Deitering 202), their sense of culpability in the perceived “decline” of the environment forces them to more carefully consider their choices when selecting a vehicle. Advertisers do not want consumers to educate themselves about more fuel-efficient means of transport, because it would decrease the sales and profit of SUVs. If an advertisement features heavy natural imagery, it risks reminding consumers that “these vehicles virtually require their own oil well to feed their huge engines” (Garrard 9), and that their daily commute only contributes to the pollution of an already disintegrating world.

The change in nature's role in SUV ads could also indicate a shift in consumer demand: where drivers once desired the rugged image associated with the SUV as a means for exploration, many now uphold this type of vehicle as a sophisticated means of transport. Natural imagery such as the dust, dirt, and mud often associated with SUVs would again exist as a pollutant to this new refined image for which advertisers now aim. The names Trailblazer, Cherokee, and Forerunner used to offer an ironic tribute to the idea of exploring unknown land and pioneering in general, which directed consumer focus towards a specific desire—that of innovation and breaking new ground—rather than on the fact that a majority of people who own SUVs do not use them to explore nature. A 1998 study found that married men in their mid-forties purchase SUVs most frequently (Davis and Truett 4). In consideration of these numbers, the belief in the SUV as the best vehicle for achieving some sort of harmony with nature loses its luster—and the shift in naming provides just one example SUV advertising executives' recognition of this lost association with nature. Now, names like Evoque, Encore, and Edge denote less the desire for new horizons and more that of modern self-fashioning—people want to appear urbanized, civilized, and daring (in a manner which portrays them as stylish and chic rather than weathered and rugged). For example, manufacturers constructed the name “Evoque,” which originates from the word “evoke,” to mimic French spelling; typically, American culture associates French words with a sense of sophistication. In contrast with the distinctly Native American word “Cherokee,” this deliberate manipulation by manufacturers to make the name of their vehicle suggestive of European culture indicates a shift in consumer perception of the SUV from a vehicle that represents the American spirit of adventure to one which signifies value in Euro-centric urbanization.

So why would advertisers shift so drastically the degree of nature's prominence in their ads, to the extent that even the names of the models mimic this change? This specific example of the role language plays in manufacturers' presentation of SUVs to consumers directly relates to the diminishment of environmental representations in their ads. Rather than the rugged appearance of frequent use held by SUVs of the past, a slick, polished look, which signifies professionalism, has garnered more focus in advertisements. But could this desire for a sophisticated look really account for the chronological reduction of nature's presence in such a wide range of advertisements for SUVs? Surely the SUV—*Sports Utility Vehicle*, recall—still holds its title as the vehicle for traversing rugged

terrain for a great many consumers. Perhaps marketers have identified the consumer's need to feel more intelligent than the "average" person. Despite the early intended "purpose" for the SUV as a mode for pioneering the wilderness and discovering new frontiers, more recent ads appear to recognize that America's "new horizons" no longer exist—"wilderness" no longer exists for exploration, or as Slavoj Žižek asserts, "Nature doesn't exist" (*Žižek on "Ecology without Nature"*). So when advertisements do include heavy natural imagery, intelligent consumers likely scoff, finding quaint the antiquity of this trope of the SUV as a means of connecting with nature. But perhaps at the next commercial break, a new type of advertisement comes on: one in which the SUV navigates through a city instead of over rocky mountainsides. The elimination of nature from ads plays to consumer intelligence, since most people know enough about the SUV's reputation for high gas emissions that they will not likely believe that these vehicles create or lead to any kind of contact with nature. Marketers count on potential customers appreciating that the notoriously misleading car salesman views them as too intelligent to fall for the old gimmicks and the pathos of the idealized SUV.

This shift in the way car manufacturers market their vehicles illuminates certain deep-seated fears held by society. In the earlier ads, the seemingly cooperative relationship between SUV and nature in the midst of the Vietnam War could indicate a fear of the destruction that wartime brings; the earlier ads emphasize a connection between vehicle (and therefore man) and nature in response to an inherent fear of losing the "wilderness" to which we escape. If this is the case, then more current ads' shift away from a focus on nature becomes confusing, considering that we live in a society that identifies as environmentally savvy. In this time full of documentaries about going green and consuming "natural" foods, why would advertising aim to move away from a natural landscape? Car manufacturers likely do not secretly shudder in fear of petrifying preservationists. Far more probable is the idea that this move away from nature in SUV ads seeks to take consumer focus off of the pollution the SUVs bring into the environment (Davis and Truett 1). The underlying fear, then, is that no matter how environmentally knowledgeable we strive to become, a vast majority of people cannot afford the eco-friendly hybrids (the initial price of which "may be between \$2,000 and \$10,000 more than a gasoline-engined car" ["Average Cost of a Hybrid Car" 1]) and must therefore contribute to the pollution by which SUVs maintain environmental infamy. Manufacturers, then, attempt to temporarily manipulate our focus on the necessity of owning

a vehicle, even a “gas guzzler,” to navigate anywhere from an office job to a hiking trip to a Greenpeace campaign.

Perhaps SUV manufacturers identify a modification in the public view of nature: its former status as a vital part of the American identity seems to have lost its significance for many Americans, which would explain the decrease in nature representations in SUV ads. Nature, which Americans once associated with “finding oneself,” has surrendered its title as a place for self-discovery to indicative of changing American attitudes regarding nature. When settlers first arrived in the New World, the concept of Manifest Destiny, the belief that settlers were destined to expand as far westward as possible, prevailed. This exploration eventually led to what Frederick Jackson Turner explained in his “Frontier Thesis” of 1893: “Now, four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier has gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history” (“Frederick Jackson Turner’s ‘Frontier Thesis’” 1). Today, no corner of the United States remains undiscovered; because of a lack in the supply of “wilderness” and new frontiers, the demand for traversing the unknown as a means of self-discovery cannot be met. Because of this, the demand changes from a desire for expanding America to that of building up the individual. Many people associate this with the “rags to riches” story—the idea that someone can come from any background, upbringing, or circumstance and still achieve success. Because of this extreme shift in the collective awareness of the “best” method for self-discovery through the achievement of success, the manufacturers of SUVs at some point recognized that, as SUVs and trucks have passed cars as the most common vehicle used in daily commute (Plaut 1), their target market of “adventurers” has shrunk and continues to decrease.

This recent change in the main use for SUVs reveals manufacturers’ apparently successful efforts in manipulating the public image of the SUV to reflect its ability to help people achieve their goals for success—rather than a Sports Utility Vehicle, they wanted their potential customers to envision a Career Utility Vehicle. The focus on nature that earlier advertisements practice would not hold as much appeal to people seeking vehicles which would help them navigate big cities in pursuit of big business accomplishments. These specific consumers would likely view an advertisement for a Jeep which features the SUV off-roading and churning its tires through muddy terrain as irrelevant to them, which would result in the transference of their attention to ads for Lincoln or Mercedes-Benz sedans. Because of this possibility for repelling custom-

ers, nature again becomes, to those marketing SUVs to the public, a contaminant. If the largest target market for SUVs now resides in urban areas and consists of people who do not want or need a car with off-roading capabilities, then marketers would need to either assign natural aspects a smaller role in the narrative of the ad or remove their presence completely. In this way, the physical development of the United States and the effect it had on the goals of its citizens accounts for the gradual decrease in nature's presence in SUV advertisements over time.

Many current SUV ads, like the aforementioned printed advertisement from 1996, emphasize the danger of the outside world, thus accentuating the protective qualities of the vehicle; however, whereas the 1996 ad focused on the natural danger of a mountain snowstorm, current advertisements portray surroundings whose post-natural qualities prove hazardous to drivers. A 2014 ad for the Nissan Rogue depicts the imaginings of a young boy riding in the back of the vehicle—he envisions a tree coming to life and malevolently grasping with long and apparently sharp branches to try to reach the car; he visualizes a bear running after the vehicle; and finally, he imagines a ship sailing through tempestuous seas in place of a trailer carrying a speedboat in the rain. Though this ad does illustrate images that represent nature, these images exist separately from their innate environments, making them scary to the boy. The tree, with its fantastical assumption of monster-like qualities, represents anything but the natural role. The bear that the boy envisions chasing the car does so through city streets, a highly improbable and unnatural occurrence. And his most imaginative vision, that of the struggling ship, also occurs within the city, far from any body of water large enough to hold a dinghy, let alone a sea vessel of the size he pictures. Each of the representations of nature within this ad transgresses its “natural” qualities or location. Because of the existence of these representations of nature where they do not “belong,” they exist in the child’s mind as threatening. The end of the commercial states, “The only thing left to fear is your imagination.” In this statement, marketers seek to comfort potential consumers by portraying unrealistic situations as more threatening than the dangers people face when driving every day. Their assertion aims to depict their product, the Rogue, as an effective bulwark against even the most unlikely threats to not only the driver, but his or her loved ones as well. Natural imagery in this ad becomes unnatural, again making nature a pollutant as it contaminates the idea or possibility of an otherwise safe transport of the small family to their home. This type of ad also serves to sublimate nature, as it attains syn-

onymy with imagination. This representation of nature as both a post-natural threat and a product of imagination allows SUV manufacturers to continue to change the public perception of their products from tools for venturing into nature to vessels for prolonging the lives of the people who use them.

As advertisements develop to include less nature and more urban settings, the reason for the size and therefore excessive emission of the SUV comes into question: if consumers now recognize that they no longer want to use their vehicles for off-roading but rather for navigating city streets, the bulkiness of the SUV, which once signified protection from the elements, seems to lose its purpose. Through this lens, a smaller car or a minivan begins to appear more practical, and if consumers do not plan on using their vehicle to drive over the river and through the woods, the worth of the initial cost and gas that SUVs require become factors for consideration. Manufacturers faced this argument when they established the Sports Utility Vehicle as more than just a *Sports Utility Vehicle*. They then confronted the challenge of depicting the post-natural world as dangerous enough for consumers to continue to want a vehicle that embodied safety. In order to keep the image of SUVs relevant and clear of the risk of losing popularity because of declining demand, advertisers had to reveal the inherent hazards existing in urban settings against which their product's bulkiness and weight would effectively defend. William Rollins' article "Reflections on a Spare Tire: SUVs and Postmodern Environmental Consciousness" elaborates on manufacturers' techniques for making consumers view their surroundings, whether rural or urban, as hazardous: "Ads for the Chevy Blazer bluntly promoted it as providing 'a little bit of security in an insecure world'; [...] 'SUV buyers want to be able to take on street gangs with their vehicles and run them down.' This kind of implicitly violent 'rugged individualism' is the key to understanding the SUV phenomenon" (695). Where the aforementioned commercial depicted a post-natural world in which nature only exists where it does not belong and therefore threatens the family, this statement applies to the ads which portray a completely post-natural environment in which one's fellow humans offer the most significant threat.

As Rollins explains, "Toughness and a sense of safety, especially in city streets that are often portrayed as unpredictable and threatening, remain among the cornerstones of SUV appeal" (695). This appeal to the human instinct for survival assures potential buyers that even in a world with no driving obstacles such as wooded mountains or grainy dunes in sight, an SUV with its otherwise superfluous weightiness and bulk

remains not only relevant but essential for self-preservation. Urbanism seems to have attained synonymy with wildness, leading to this idea of urban commute as the new frontier.

One could argue that this chronological shift in representations of nature in SUV ads represents a declining public interest in nature. Though modern American culture may consider itself environmentally informed, the increasing popularity of technology such as iPhones and tablets has created a culture that receives constant criticism for its incessant staring at and scrolling through small screens. Many of today's youth would sooner sit inside on their phones than spend time at a 4-H or environmental club learning about the environment—statistics from 1976 to 2005 showed a decline in adolescent environmental interest (“Examining Trends in Adolescent Environmental Attitudes, Beliefs, and Behaviors” 1). Because of this widespread interest in technology over environment, advertisers likely do not feel the need to market their products to those who will not use them for outdoor activities. Unless a product exists solely for use out-of-doors, such as a tent or rock-climbing gear, a manufacturer's ideal plan for marketing would emphasize in advertisements the versatility of the product to increase the chances of people buying it.

This concept of marketing the adaptability of a commodity directly applies to the advertisement of SUVs. If people assumed that only those who frequently go off-roading should use SUVs, the industry for this kind of vehicle would likely suffer greatly—the initial appeal of the SUV, according to Greg Garrard in “Beginnings: Pollution,” came from manufacturers' ability to “to appropriate the wild as the ‘natural home’ of their products in their advertisements” (9). Because manufacturers face the task of selling as many of their product as possible, they must focus on multiple target markets and demographics. For this reason, SUV advertisements can no longer depict the corpus of SUV vehicles to exist for the “purpose” of traversing multiple types of terrain; now, advertisements reduce or exclude representations of nature in order to refrain from the still widespread perception of SUVs as “outdoorsy” vehicles. Because of this long-held view of SUVs as intended for use outdoors, marketers could view nature as an unnecessary ingredient to a recipe for an effective advertisement; too much natural imagery could “spoil” the ad, since SUVs already carry with them the expectation that they possess the capability to navigate various types of topography. In this way, nature again exists for manufacturers and advertisers as a pol-

lutant, this time to their otherwise perfectly planned and proportionate formula for proficient advertising.

How are we to deal with this theme of nature as a contaminant to advertisements for a product which we know contaminates nature? If “[n]ature doesn’t exist,” as Žižek asserts, it seems obvious that SUV manufacturers would need to alter their advertising techniques in order to accommodate for the fact that consumers in a post-natural world no longer seek a vehicle which can carry them over perilous peaks and treacherous trails. However, seeing as how this trend is one which occurred and advanced over time, one becomes curious when looking into the future of not just SUV ads but the environment as a whole. How could the natural environment go from existing as the essence of the Sports Utility Vehicle’s identity and purpose to a factor so contaminated that many advertisements no longer feature any natural elements? Advertisers once encouraged consumers to consider disharmony with nature as a problem which SUVs could help families solve; later, the natural environment morphed from benevolent entity to dangerous obstacle—something through which one had to struggle to reach a destination; finally, nature turned into a impurity for advertisers, since natural imagery only served to remind consumers of their role in the deterioration of the natural environment. This trajectory of deterioration and departure of nature in SUV advertisements compels us to consider what end we may predict if this trend continues.

WORKS CITED

- Davis, Stacy C., and Lorena F. Truett. “An Analysis of the Impact of Sport Utility Vehicles in the United States.” <http://cta.ornl.gov/cta/Publications/Reports/Analysis_of_Impact_of_SUVs_in_US.pdf>.
- Deitering, Cynthia. “The Postnatural Novel.” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm eds. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996.
- Garrard, Greg. “Beginnings: Pollution.” *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge, 2011. 31-56.
- Hughes, Helen. *Green Documentary: Environmental Documentary in the 21st Century*. Bristol, England: Intellect, 2014. MLA International Bibliography. Web.
- Kassar, Chris, and Paul Spitler. “Fuel to Burn: The Climate and Public Health Implications of Off-road Vehicle Pollution in California.”

- <http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/publications/papers/Fuel_to_Burn_for_Web.pdf>.
- Plaut, Pnina O. "The Uses and Users of Suvs and Light Trucks in Commuting." *Transportation Research: Part D: Transport and Environment* 9.3 (2004): 175-183. EconLit. Web.
- Rollins, William. "Reflections on a Spare Tire: SUVs and Postmodern Environmental Consciousness." *Environmental History* 11 (October 2006): 684-723. <<http://envhis.oxfordjournals.org/content/11/4/684.full.pdf>>.
- "10 Of The Best Environmental Documentaries." *Green4U*. N.p., n.d. Web. <<http://www.green-4-u.com/2015/04/22/environmental-documentaries/>>.
- "Average Cost of a Hybrid Car." *CarsDirect*. N.p., 11 Nov. 2013. Web. <<http://www.carsdirect.com/car-pricing/whats-the-average-cost-of-a-new-hybrid-car>>.
- Chevrolet Blazer. *SUV Ad Comparisons*. 16 Nov. 2015. <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~derekcmartin/suv_morecomparison_ads.html>.
- "Examining Trends in Adolescent Environmental Attitudes, Beliefs, and Behaviors Across Three Decades." *HHS Public Access*, 1 Jan. 2010. Web. <<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2790169/>>.
- "Frederick Jackson Turner's 'Frontier Thesis'." *The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*. 9 Dec. 2015. <<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/development-west/timeline-terms/frederick-jackson-turners-frontier-thesis-0>>.
- Imagination—2015 Nissan Rogue TV Commercial*. YouTube, 2015. Web. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyruFTL-xBg>>.
- Žižek on "Ecology without Nature". Narr. Slavoj Žižek. YouTube, 2007. Web. <http://harvardpress.typepad.com/hup_publicity/2007/11/zizek-on-ecolog.html>.

Poisonous Playthings and Toxic Toys: America's Fascination with Manufactured Toxicity

BY KARA PURDY

IN MARCH 2007, the Consumer Product Safety Commission discovered “high lead levels [...] during a routine inspection” of various toy “trucks, helicopters, and soldiers sold under the Elite Operations brand,” and issued the first lead-related toy recall in the United States (Schmidt A71-A72). Soon, the U.S. toy market, which “generates \$22 billion in sales,” felt the impact of the quickly-following “endless stream of recalls” that emerged from the outcry of horrified parents and retailers (7). Notable among the toy companies affected the most remains Mattel, one of the largest toy manufacturers in the world. Mary Teagarden reports in her article, “Learning from Toys: Reflections on the 2007 Recall Crisis,” that “Mattel [recalled] 967,000 toys that [contained] hazardous levels of lead paint (8). After another recall involving lead paint and yet *another* recall, “this time for millions of toys that [contained] magnets,” Mattel’s total damages in 2007 alone amounted to the loss of “20 million toys made in China,” as well as “a \$40 million charge for recalls” (8). Outraged customers “threatened to boycott Mattel and

all toys made in China,” and the stunned American parents snapped to attention regarding what toys they gave their children.

In the political and ethical stampede of toy recalls, the fear among American parents, especially those of small children, remained at high levels and cost toy companies and their markets thousands and thousands of dollars in potential sales as “retailers [...] remove[d] toys from their shelves just prior to the peak toy demand season, Christmas” (Schmidt A72, Teagarden 7). Charles Schmidt, author of the article “Face to Face with Toy Safety: Understanding an Unexpected Threat,” estimates that in 2007, toy companies sent out “42 recalls involving nearly 6 million toys [...] because of excessive lead levels” (A72). An invisible threat that slowly reveals itself in children via “behavioral changes [...], abdominal pain, nausea, constipation, anorexia, irritability, lethargy, and neurologic dysfunction,” lead poisoning emerged as a formidable threat in the years following 2007 and remains a latent fear among American parents of young kids (Datta-Mitra and Ahmed 691).

Far from constituting mere floating numbers and vague statistics, parents’ worries about hazards like lead poisoning and magnet-swallowing stem directly from actual events involving injuries to and occasionally even deaths of children who sadly become the very statistics that prompt toy recalls. One case “[in] 2005” involved “a seven-year-old Indianapolis girl [who] accidentally swallowed tiny magnets from a Polly Pocket toy”; after enduring extensive surgery, the girl lived (Swan). But in 2006, a plastic piece from a toy tool bench “lodged in the throat of [a] 2-year-old [boy],” and despite all efforts to save him, the boy died (Rendon). Although her mother tried to watch her every minute, a little girl ingested crayons and contracted lead poisoning; while she recovered, parents continued to turn scathing eyes on toy companies accused of engaging in the ultimate betrayal—producing playthings that harmed the very children to whom they marketed (Robertson). Eco-blogger Katherine Martinko describes post-2007 America as a “chemical Wild West” with uncertain, hyper-aware “consumers [...] very much on their own” when buying playthings for their children. Indeed, many parents—distrustful of big-name corporations claiming to advocate children’s safety—turned to upon various watchdog groups, trusting “testing authorities or advocacy groups [to raise] a flag” about potential toxicity in toys and to provide necessary information to concerned families (Dean and Fischer 35-36).

However, among the frenzy of this “chemical Wild West,” a profoundly different kind of toy burst onto store shelves and gained popu-

larity among kids and adults alike—Candy Dynamics’s “Toxic Waste” confections (Martinko). Not literally toxic waste, of course, this “Toxic Waste” brand of sweets emerged in 2006 as a line of toxic-themed edible sweets that proclaimed itself as “hazardously sour” and promoted, courtesy of googly-eyed mushroom-cloud mascot “Mr. Toxie Head,” a “Toxic Challenge” in which participants placed within their mouths a piece of the candy and measured in 60 seconds how long they could keep it on their tongues without spitting it out from the sour taste (“Products”). Oddly, even with names like “Nuclear Sludge” and “Sour Smog Balls,” the popularity of Toxic Waste candies exploded in 2007, the *very* year of the infamous toy recalls.

As Candy Dynamics continued to produce new goodies like “Goop Gum” and “Slime Lickers,” The LEGO Group introduced, a mere 5 years later, a series of storyline-backed buildable merchandise sets called “Ultra Agents,” which feature a motley band of top-secret agents who spend their days saving the world from various villains. One antagonist in particular, “Toxikita,” “[is] a former environmentalist turned sneaky opponent [to the Ultra Agents],” according her character biography on LEGO.com, and she, with her “toxic henchman, Retox,” fills the mad-scientist-villain role in the “Ultra Agents” theme. The characters’ green skin, bodysuits printed with peculiar biohazard symbols, and their appearances in the building set “Toxikita’s Toxic Meltdown” ultimately define them as the epitome of toxicity, and cement their status as evildoers who, albeit comically, expend effort to “[cause] complete metropolis meltdown” via “dropping toxic bombs from [a] helicopter” (Toxikita’s Toxic Meltdown”).

Other faux toxins under the umbrella of toys and games include Moose Enterprise’s 2011-released “Trash Pack,” a line of gross and slimy critters with cars, cards, plastic beakers of slime, and even battle items, as well as, more recently, Bethesda Softworks LLC’s fourth incarnation of its massively popular *Fallout* game series, which draws heavily upon the Cold War era and the effects of nuclear radiation. Many more examples exist of these inherently harmless “toxic toys,” and yet American parents happily purchase them for their kids instead of boycotting the manufacturers for selling playthings that appear dangerous and inherently toxic. So the questions stand: Why do parents—as they keep their children away from toxic waste dumps, forbid them to run around in landfills, and withhold from them lead-painted toys filled with magnets—purchase such vivid representations of literal toxicity for their kids to enjoy? While religiously following toy-safety organizations, washing their kids’

hands after trips to the restroom, and reminding their broods to not touch strange items on the ground, what compels parents to buy for their children garbage-themed creatures, Toxic Waste candies, and a video game that explores a world ravaged by nuclear fallout?

Frank Loreto, in his review of the 2010 film *Hyper Parents and Coddled Kids*, maintains that “[c]hildren are not encouraged to engage in rough-house play” because their “helicopter parents” swiftly “swoop in to save the child from anything unpleasant.” Although they mean well, the smothering safety nets “helicopter parents” provide sometimes drive their young children to act rashly and to seek out occasionally dangerous activities in which they can immerse themselves to escape parental influence, even for a little while. Combine this desire for freedom with how children naturally gravitate towards what their parents instruct them to avoid, and the results—frustrated kids with nowhere to channel their pent-up energy—subsequently “act up” in attempts to explore the world for themselves. Providing children a safe outlet to satisfy their curiosity about potential dangers ensures that a lack of harm and actual toxicity comes to them, and toy companies manufacture and sell “little scientist” experiment kits for this very reason. Toys ‘R’ Us’s “Edu Science 15 Experiment Disgusting Science Kit,” for example, allows children to “[c]reate everything from stink bubbles and electric sludge to yucky worms and snot slime.” A pressure release for the coddled child who longs to roll in the proverbial mud, harmless toxic experiences—like mixing slime in a kit or removing a piece of Candy Dynamics’s sour “Goop Gum” from its striped yellow-and-black wrapper and chewing vigorously—ease the frustration of hovering parents rebuking him over and over for engaging in what they may rightly perceive as harmful activities.

In the same manner that overprotected kids immerse themselves in parent-provided nontoxic toxins in efforts to escape the bubble of parental indulgence, however, the parents of these children might purchase for their offspring Toxic Waste candies and slime, etcetera, to assuage their grown-up fears and worries about the effects of actually harmful byproducts that the United States produces *en masse*. Part of these terrors about toxicity stem from the media’s propagation of certain recurring images and themes, such as 55-gallon drums of mysterious goo flowing into crystal streams of water, smoke pouring from stained chimneys, and faceless factories obscured by smog and heaps of trash. Paul Malyugin’s *Save the Earth for the Future of Our Children*, for example, a digital stock photo designed to promote awareness of pollution in the United States and around the world, reinforces the

problematic idea of pure, grassy “nature” as completely separate from the smoky, rubbish-filled “city.” To consider nature as an entity separate from civilization, though, effectively creates a binary between two parts of one whole; critic Slavoj Žižek maintains the impossibility “of conceiving of the ‘natural’ precisely because such a conception would be just that, a conception, a construct, which is what the so-called natural is being posited against” (Hook and Neill 5).

Therefore, if “nature” exists as the summation of everything—trees and smokestacks, rivers and factories—on Earth, no clear line draws itself between what people think of as pure, untouched wilderness, “nature,” and the mounds of garbage and buried nuclear waste that they consider “unnatural.” This realization further problematizes the media-pushed images that promote humans as apart from “nature” and subsequently links the lush forest with the smog-filled city, equating them and erasing any ideas of “unnatural.” So parents, then, by purchasing Toxic Waste candies and Trash Pack toy sets for their kids, ironically *reinforce* the idea that rosebushes and rubbish bins exist under the category of “nature”: Since parents forbid children to play with dangerous objects, their purchasing and support of nontoxic “toxic” toys—and subsequently the objects to which the toys correspond “in real life”—normalize and “naturalize” the all-too-real presences of pollution and toxicity, which, albeit compressed into child-friendly playthings on the living room floor, exist on the planet and affect it in negative ways.

More disturbing than the prospect of kids receiving and playing with representations of toxicity to soothe their parents’ subconscious fears of unavoidable poisons and pollution, however, remains the idea that the parents themselves possess acute awareness of nuclear plants, overflowing landfills, and oil-soaked beaches and buy for their kids similar toxic-themed toys in order to introduce them to the world in which they live. Through their “support, control, and modelling [that] have an important role in forming social bonds, opinions, and [behavior] patterns” in children, parents demonstrate their bizarre “comfort” in the midst of myriads of toxins” (Žaloudíková, Hrubá, and Samara 43). Since their oft-middle-class mothers and fathers seem at ease in the midst of scary-sounding words like “carcinogens,” “nuclear meltdowns,” and “poisonous substances,” children accept these abstract concepts as part of normality and think nothing of how they eat parent-purchased Toxic Waste candy and play with The LEGO Group’s “Toxikita’s Toxic Meltdown” building set. Aware that “toys have become high-stakes playthings [that] provide children with fun and fantasy while teaching

hard-edged social norms,” parents consciously choose certain toys that inevitably convey distinct messages to their offspring (Benson). While dolls typically appeal to little girls and fire trucks to little boys, for example, “toxic toys” remain bizarrely neutral and appeal to both genders, signifying true toxicity’s all-encompassing nature that sees neither gender nor ethnicity and affects everyone in a generally equal manner. In their efforts to slowly filter into kids’ minds the awareness of actual pollution through miniaturized, categorized representations of such in the forms of little toys and goodies, parents effectively package the issue of toxicity and chop it into bite-size samples, addressing but simultaneously downplaying it for the sake of child-friendliness.

Seeking out and purchasing toys so vividly representative of hazardous materials—the actual toxins themselves which parents would never permit their children to touch, much less play with—could also indicate a unique sense of consumer guilt in wealthy countries, namely the United States. Eco-reporter Alina Bradford writes that “[i]n 2010, Americans produced about 250 million tons of [...] product packaging, grass clippings, furniture, clothing, bottles, food scraps, newspapers, appliances, paint and batteries,” and all this trash, rather than vaporizing into nothingness like some people would like to believe, ends up somewhere. Whether stacked high in massive landfills, buried underground, or in the smoky ashes that waft from industrial incinerators, garbage never really “goes away,” and the average American citizen knows all too well the hyperconsumption of his country and how he plays a part in it.

Parents with severe cases of guilt-by-garbage and who feel helpless to stop the cycle of consumption may try to relieve their nagging thoughts by buying for their children toys that look, feel, and perhaps even smell like real toxins but in reality exist harmlessly as the friendliest of playthings. Far from being “helicopter parents,” these mother and fathers allow their kids to freely play with the Trash Pack creatures and to roam the harsh wasteland in *Fallout 4*, etc, in efforts to ease the guilt that emerges from living in a society built on waste. Unlike the less-wealthy families—whose more urgent concerns of putting food on the table and clothes on their backs outweigh those of considering the environment around them, including themselves—the members of the American middle and upper classes find themselves burdened with the ability to care about the waste they produce and where it goes and how to make less of this waste in the process. By placating themselves and their children with manufactured, nontoxic toxicity that completely removes itself from “actual” trash and “genuine” toxins, parents who try

to substitute mounds of real garbage and nuclear waste with carefully-constructed ideas of what they *think* should be the actual pollutants, create, as Slavoj Žižek postulates in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, a kind of “theatrical spectacle” driven by “the passion for the Real,” held by people who long to engage with real hazards but lack courage and deeply-rooted desire to actually follow through (Bakan 276).

Yet because not every parent feels certain about buying such blatantly “toxic” toys like The LEGO Group’s “Toxikita” character, or Candy Dynamics’s “Toxic Waste” confections, however, both companies’ products contain a disclaimer of sorts, or at least provide an “opposing force” to the mass flow of “pollution” they seem to promote. For example, The LEGO Group includes a good-guy character foil for Toxikita—the Ultra Agent “Trey Swift,” whose LEGO.com biography states that he “is a vegetarian and leads an active and very healthy life. He starts each day with 100 pushups and a large carrot-cucumber shake. Then he is ready to catch bad guys!” While Toxikita thrives in slime and toxic disasters, Swift’s character mirrors her in the most opposite ways possible; since he as an Ultra Agent exists as a hero and Toxikita as a villain, The LEGO Group excludes itself from any possible confusion regarding its position on environmentalism.

Similarly, Candy Dynamics’s colorful website contains some “Environmentally Friendly Tips Courtesy of Toxic Waste Hazardously Sour Candy and the Toxic Takedown Challenge” to not only increase product revenue but to help lower consumers’ guilt for living in and participating in the waste production of a country renowned for such. Among other ideas, the company encourages families to “[r]un [their] dishwasher[s] only with a full load” and to “[r]ecycle old clothing by donating it [...] to homeless shelters, thrift stores, and other community organizations,” both of which parents and kids can accomplish fairly easily. However, Candy Dynamics also posits more difficult, time-consuming, and expensive solutions like “[p]ainting] your home a light color if you live in a warmer climate and a dark color if you live in a cold climate, [because] it can help regulate the heating and cooling of your home” and also “[w]rite to policy makers to urge them to raise fuel economy standards to 40 miles to the gallon, [and] we can save nearly 4 million barrels of oil a day.” Yet finding such environmental advice on a candy-supply website designed to sell products made to remind consumers of *the very toxins* it claims to want to eliminate leads to an ultimately troubling conclusion: If enough people take its suggestions and actually manage to reduce the amount of general pollution, etc, the mass decrease in toxicity would

mean less profit for Candy Dynamics—why buy toy representations of actual pollution when toxicity exists as a defeatable entity, no longer a vague blanket of potentially harmful substances?

By far the most distressing reason why American parents may support the presence of faux toxins through their purchases of such remains the notion that kids in America *should* play with overtly “toxic” toys for no other reason than because the wartime history of their country earned for them the privilege to enjoy these kinds of playthings. For example, in The LEGO Group’s “Ultra Agents” building set “Toxikita’s Toxic Meltdown,” villain Toxikita “aim[s] to take over the world using barrels of lime-green ooze and “toxic bombs” to “[cause] complete metropolis meltdown.” Similarly, in 1945 America released not one but *two* atomic bombs on Japan’s Hiroshima and Nagasaki, these literal “toxic bombs” which most certainly created “complete metropolis meltdown” and negatively affected many generations of Japanese people. America, puffed with its rugged, fighting spirit, emerged victorious in World War II and jumped into the Vietnam War 20 years later armed with “72 million [liters] of chemicals, of which 66% was Agent Orange” (“Chemical Warfare”).

Although America destroyed a major amount of Vietnam, its own soldiers suffered tremendous damage and side effects from the mass amounts of chemicals unleashed during the war, namely from Agent Orange, which “not only destroyed trees but caused chromosomal damage in people” (“Chemical Warfare”). Though anti-war propaganda surged through America during and post-Vietnam, the country’s subsequent fascination with chemical warfare revealed itself in Hasbro’s 1975 G.I. Joe figure, “Atomic Man,” who possessed “atomic limbs [with] intricate wiring, transistors and power sources that endow[ed] him with super-strength and lightning speed,” as well as an “atomic telescopic eye” (“Hasbro G.I. Joe 1975 Catalog”). Emblematic of America’s “ownership” of chemicals and chemical warfare, these simple toys demonstrating the United States’ prowess at using eventually led to new generations’ curiosity about synthetic toxicity and its effects and turned into more observation-related playthings that asked their consumers about how they might survive in a post-apocalyptic wasteland filled with chemically-altered creatures, or how they think “Nuclear Sludge” might taste.

Through its politically-unspoken but patently obvious fascination with toxicity, the United States exhibits its imagined dominance over the realm of chemical warfare and welcomes its children into a bizarre and unique milieu founded on the idea that American kids *can* and *should*

play with (false) toxins and be safe. Critic Michael Brandi writes that children's "[play] is always spontaneous and active [...] joyful, [and] undirected," and for a child to "joyful[ly]" and without direction select The LEGO Group's "Toxikita" minifigure or a piece of Toxic Waste candy demonstrates—to his proud American parents—his comfort with items representing blatant toxicity and therefore actual toxins (26). Through the power of imagination, kids in the United States defeat toxic villains trying to destroy the world via green goo. Those same kids also eat "Sour Smog Balls" for candy and dip their little fingers into slippery slime canisters. They can handle it.

As a country defined by what it produces as waste—over 250 million tons of it in 2010—yet which curiously manufactures and sells children's toys and games designed to look exactly like said waste, America reveals its long-held, somewhat naïve fascination with toxicity and pollution (Bradford). By miniaturizing and compartmentalizing actually-harmful toxins into playthings and candies, America not only assuages its latent fears about pollution but also massages away the guilt that arises from existing as a country so marked by its garbage—all while simultaneously embracing toxicity as a necessary and pertinent ingredient to the American culture as a whole.

WORKS CITED

- Ananya Datta-Mitra, and Omar Ahmed. "Ayurvedic Medicine Use and Lead Poisoning in a Child: A Continued Concern in the United States." *Clinical Pediatrics* 54.7 (2015): 690-92. *CINAHL*. Web. 19 Nov. 2015.
- Bakan, Abigail B. "Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates." *Labour / Le Travail* 56 (2005): 269-82. *America: History and Life [EBSCO]*. Web. 10 Dec. 2015.
- Benson, Etienne. "Toy Stories." *Observer*. Association for Psychological Science, 2006. Web. 9 Dec. 2015.
- Bradford, Alina. "Pollution Facts & Types of Pollution." *Live Science*. Purch, 10 Mar. 2015. Web. 6 Dec. 2015.
- Brandi, Michael. "Children's Play and Military Toys Today." *Psychological Science and Education* 2 (2011): 26-29. *Academic Search Complete [EBSCO]*. Web. 6 Dec. 2015.
- "Chemical Warfare." *Spartacus Educational*. Spartacus Educational Publishers Ltd., 2015. Web. 19 Nov. 2015.

- Dean, Peter, and Thomas Fischer. "Toying with Safety: A Diplomacy of Pointing Fingers and Saving Face in the Name of the Consumer Protection." *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* 9.2 (2008): 35-37. *Academic Search Complete [EBSCO]*. Web. 15 Nov. 2015.
- "Environmentally Friendly Tips Courtesy of Toxic Waste Hazardously Sour Candy and the Toxic Takedown Challenge." *Toxic Waste Hazardously Sour Candy*. Candy Dynamics, 2008. Web. 4 Nov. 2015.
- "Hasbro G.I. Joe 1975 Catalog." Review. Web log post. *PlaidStallions*. Blogger, 2015. Web. 23 Nov. 2015.
- Hook, Derek, and Calum Neill. "Žižek, Political Philosophy and Subjectivity." *Subjectivity: International Journal of Critical Psychology* 3.1 (2010): 1-6. *Academic Search Complete [EBSCO]*. Web. 9 Dec. 2015.
- Loreto, Frank. "Hyper Parents & Coddled Kids. (Doc Zone)." Rev. of *Hyper Parents & Coddled Kids. CM: Canadian Review of Materials* 18.37 (2012): 6. *Library, Information Science and Technology Abstracts with Full Text [EBSCO]*. Web. 9 Nov. 2015.
- Martinko, Katherine. "Children Have Become Unwitting 'Chemical Sentinels' for the U.S." Online posting. *TreeHugger*. Narrative Content Group, 27 Mar. 2015. Web. 4 Nov. 2015.
- Malyugin, Paul. *Save the Earth for the Future of Our Children*. Digital image. *Dreamstime Stock Images*. Dreamstime, 20q5. Web. 20 Nov. 2015.
- "Products." *Toxic Waste Hazardously Sour Candy*. Candy Dynamics, 2007. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.
- Rendon, Ruth. "League City Boy's Death Brings Toy Recall." Online posting. *Chron*. Hearst Newspapers, LLC, 23 Sept. 2006. Web. 15 Nov. 2015.
- Robertson, Annabelle. "Lead in Toys: Could It Be Lurking in Your Home?" *WebMD*. WebMD, LLC, n.d. Web. 15 Nov. 2015.
- Schmidt, Charles W. "Face to Face with Toy Safety: Understanding an Unexpected Threat." *Environmental Health Perspectives* 116.2 (2008): A70-76. *Academic Search Complete [EBSCO]*. Web. 9 Nov. 2015.
- Swan, Scott. "Girl's Injury Prompts Toy Recall." Online posting. *Wthr.com*. WorldNow and WTHR, 2005. Web. 15 Nov. 2015.
- Teagarden, Mary B. "Learning from Toys: Reflections on the 2007 Recall Crisis." *Thunderbird International Business Review* 51.1 (2009): 5-17. *Business Source Complete [EBSCO]*. Web. 13 Nov. 2015.
- "Toxikita." *Toxikita - Characters - Ultra Agents LEGO.com*. The LEGO Group, 2015. Web. 11 Nov. 2015.

- “Trey Swift.” *Trey Swift - Characters - Ultra Agents LEGO.com*. The LEGO Group, 2015. Web. 2 Dec. 2015.
- Žaloudíková, Iva, Drahoslava Hrubá, and Ibrahim Samara. “Parental Education and Family Status – Association with Children’s Cigarette Smoking.” *Central European Journal of Public Health* 20.1 (2012): 38-44. *Academic Search Complete [EBSCO]*. Web. 8 Dec. 2015.

Toxic Tourism: The Emergence of Toxic Attractions

BY ASHLEY ROBERSON

A FLAWED REACTOR DESIGN, combined with the mistakes of incompetent employees, and a lack of safety regulations regarding nuclear power in the Soviet Union caused the now infamous Chernobyl accident on April 26, 1986, in the Ukraine (World Nuclear). Two people died immediately, one on site and another at the hospital, with 134 confirmed cases of ARS (Acute Radiation Syndrome) and twenty-eight people would later die as a result of ARS. The contamination even reached other countries, including parts of Belarus and Russia (world nuclear). Although not proven, an increase in the affected area of childhood thyroid cancers may have a direct link to the radiation. Reports of psychological effects from the accident also exist, similar to victims of earthquakes and other natural disasters. Incompetent doctors advised mothers to abort their children, lest they suffer mutations from radiation exposure (world nuclear).

On the other side of the world, the United States suffered from its own chemical incident, the Love Canal disaster. Love Canal, the name of an abandoned canal project and the adjacent neighborhood, still affects

former residents today (Britannica). In the sixties the former chemical waste dump for the Hooker Chemicals and Plastics Corporations would see itself filled in, given to Niagara Falls, and a proper neighborhood built near the former dump. Unfortunately in 1978, officials detected chemical leaks in resident basements, and started to worry about the health of the inhabitants of the Love Canal neighborhood. Later investigations revealed that many in the neighborhood suffered from chromosomal damage as a result of exposure to the chemicals, which led to the evacuation of the neighborhood, the sealing of the canal, and the destruction of all buildings. The former residents agreed to a settlement of \$20,000,000. The victims suffered irreversible damage. Later renamed Black Creek Village, and declared safe to inhabit by the city of New York, the former disaster vanished from the consciousness of the United States with houses auctioned off in the 1990s.

These disasters and others contributed to an atmosphere of worry among the middle class British and Americans, who feared that toxicity had the potential to permeate the air and leave them damaged and mutated. Contamination remains in the suburban consciousness, with ongoing suffering in the new millennium from disease, toxins, and waste. Instead of generating cringes, contamination ironically now inspires the United States and other English speaking countries to use it for entertainment, and it appears strange that tourists now flock to rides and attractions featuring hazards that once caused anguish.

Various Six Flags parks in the United States feature a toxic ride starring the popular superhero, Batman. The Batman ride features a suspended rollercoaster, and the atmosphere focuses on a toxic landscape. As visitors wait in line, they make their way through the sewers of a polluted Gotham City.

Other parts of the English-speaking world flock to toxic attractions as well. Christened the Zombie Shopping mall, this British attraction features infected zombies whom visitors must negotiate. The website promises an “authentic” zombie experience. Located in an actual abandoned building formerly known as the Reading Shopping Center, this mall has “movie-like” effects for a “full-immersion” experience according to the website (wish). Tourists can expect a briefing by police in addition receiving armor to protect their bodies while they battle the infected. Reviews by the likes of the BBC and other news corporations affirm this attraction as a phenomenon.

Many other attractions emphasizing toxicity also exist in English speaking countries, featuring zombies, radiation, and industrial wreck-

age. The popularity of these tourist attractions among the middle class consumers in England and the United States leads to many interesting questions. What does the middle class hope to accomplish by attending these attractions? What does this particular subset of the population anticipate to discover by visiting such attractions, and why do attractions with a toxic theme appeal to tourists in the first place?

One interpretation provides the explanation that experiencing these attractions offers freedom from all the media fear mongering of real toxins. The media acts as the assimilator of toxic consciousness through news in various printed works and broadcasting stations. Palfreman states that “according to Dorothy Nelkin, the public understands science “less through direct experience or past education than through the filter of journalistic language and imagery” (Nelkin 2–3, 24). The media certainly helped create an atmosphere of AIDS hysteria among the public in the 80s. First designated a “gay disease,” heteronormative people foolishly believed themselves immune to the reach of the epidemic, but reports of stars such as Rock Hudson and Magic Johnson acquiring the virus made the public realize that AIDS did not discriminate based on sexual orientation. Musical acts abandoned the “free love” ideology, with artists like Salt-N-Pepa and TLC released songs that preached safe sex. The rise of teen slasher movies in the style of the iconic *Nightmare on Elm Street* punished morally loose teens, giving the impression of a metaphor of death as a result of sexual activity. People believed the disease floated in the air, and false reporting as to how it spread resulted in people too irrationally afraid to even touch the infected, though the disease remains hard transmit without sexual intercourse. The media’s initial misrepresentation of HIV led to a stigma and fear that endures today, despite advancements made in the area of medicine that prolongs lives and education intended to erase ignorance.

The media shapes perceptions on toxicity by advertising disastrous events and epidemics as a melodrama. Palfreman describes the allure of this style of journalism style as follows: “as readers and viewers are drawn into a conflict, and come to feel as though they know the protagonists, they are motivated to learn more and more about the issues that are so important to the main characters and their families”(32-33). In the case of Chernobyl, dramatic storytelling remains apparent. The protagonists represent the humble inhabitants of the tiny villages surrounding the site, and the antagonists represent the government and their incompetent employees. When the media wishes the gullible family to experience sympathy, they orchestrate documentaries of helpless victims dying of

cancer in their local hospital and tell them that the radiation forced the sickness upon them. Suddenly this suffering has an identity; it could befall the viewer or their offspring.

Touring toxic themed attractions offers freedom from the bombardment of negative media, as repetitive bad news exhausts the public's ears. The new sexually transmitted disease reported on CNN morphs into a zombie virus crafted by hired advertisers. The nuclear explosion develops into a backstory for a wild apocalyptic themed rollercoaster. Don't think of the trash in the bathroom as a nuisance. Toxic attractions use it as a decoration of their Saw rollercoaster. Similarly toxic attractions not only offer freedom from fears perpetuated by the media, but they also provide a way to face those fears. If architects recreate rides and attractions that use toxicity as simulations, then it produces no panic out of Anglo-American or British. Tourists are able to battle the anxiety over toxicity in a controlled space where "the absence of a negative effect of the stimulus communicates the current environment as safe" (Zajonc 226) Toxicity represents the "stimulus" that has hitherto made middle class Anglo-Saxons grow wary. In the present day the middle class conquers that wariness in a five minute time period. Experiencing these attractions does not lead to harm, but a feeling of satisfaction, of something overcome. Tourists believe that they demonstrate bravery to their peers to venture out and finish these rides; to conquer their fears in order to gain power back from the culture of staying home to permit HD televisions to feed them information in their darkened living rooms. The culture of adventure and self-improvement demands the white American and British public to face fears.

Passengers of *The Simpsons* ride can expect to face a diversity of fears. For the duration of the ride, the Simpsons family visits a cheap, dilapidated theme park, which breaks all safety regulations, constructed by Krusty the Clown. The family boards an especially dangerous ride that goes off track; entering hazardous places including a literal hell, stalked all the while by an escaped villain that wants nothing more than to harm them out of revenge. At one point the ride subjects passengers to a 3D bath composed of glowing green waste. In addition to the family's many troubles during the park visit, their baby daughter Maggie wandered into some radioactive waste along the way and reappears as a mutated Godzilla-like giant. Much like an accidental superhero story, the baby Maggie ends up saving the family from the escaped convict with her radiation-spawned super strength. If architects design rides and attrac-

tions comparable to *The Simpsons* that adopt toxicity as a simulation, then toxicity's status among the middle class as harmful ceases.

Another reading for the popularity of toxic rides has to do with the desire of the forbidden. Media conditions this desire, just as it conditions fear. News reports beckon wide-eyed families to gather around the television, as a group of campers would gather around a fire; telling anxious viewers stories of the polluted, crime ridden streets of the cities; far away from the deep green and manicured lawns of the suburbs. These tales exist to discourage suburbanites from venturing out into pollution. The middle class must stay inside and protect their bodies from the corruption of filth and contamination. This gives waste and radiation the aura of some sort of illegal circus show. The absence of contact with contamination encourages the public to feel safe in regards to toxicity and "therefore, because a condition such as an absence of an aversive event is diffuse and unattached to any particular object in the immediate environment [...] the exposed object become[s] more attractive" (Zajonc 226). The middle class heard endlessly the command to use hand sanitizer to stop the spread of disease, and to evacuate when radiation levels elevate to high levels. The constant message to stay away from waste has caused the privileged middle class to develop the need to seek it out. The endless anti-toxicity propaganda serves no purpose as "empirical research shows that a benign experience of repetition can in and of itself enhance positive affect."

The forbidden manifests itself in attractions like *Saw World* in Thorpe Park. The *Saw World* features an industrial backdrop, accompanied with scenes of filthy white rooms and bloody toilets harboring the potential of infection. The scenes in a different era of fear would cause disgust, but the popularity of the ride reveals an attraction to the unkempt displays. Why else would thousands of visitors trek to parks to look upon the repulsive if they weren't fascinated to it? British and American tourists must discover new toxins and create new lore that was started in part by their exposure to them in the media. The forbidden transforms into an undiscovered land, and allows tourists to use to their imaginations to revel in themes previously designated to a taboo category.

Seeking out the forbidden leads to extremism and this presents another analysis of why Anglo British and American culture celebrates toxic attractions. Overexposure to radiation and pollution from World War II onwards resulted in a desensitized middle class. In this current age of mass desensitization "the gaze of the tourist is fickle, searching out or anticipating something new or something different" (Urry 10).

This generates a “quest for authenticity” (9) among the tourists. Dismaland may represent the authentic. Tourists visiting the “park” can expect an assault of disturbing images. A scene depicting Cinderella dead and accosted by blinding paparazzi camera flashes in her magic pumpkin ride presents a horrible picture. A shadowy, ominous castle which appears as an ode to Disney’s Magic Kingdom provides the backdrop to a warped little mermaid sitting proudly, or maybe not so, on a large rock. An uncannily familiar display features a Shamu clone entering out of a toilet and jumping through a hula hoop, about to land in a kiddie pool, too small for such a mammoth creature. This exhibit’s rejection of the typical fantasy element inherent in most theme parks presents the authentic elements that tourists constantly pursue. Magic Kingdoms and whimsical parades with their predictable costumed actors offer none of the extreme qualities that this generation of tourists longs for. Attractions now must have an element of toxicity; the perception of travelling somewhere that compromises health, but the danger offers a pleasant adrenaline rush.

Toxic tourism also represents the postmodern form of the empire; a continuation of the legacy that western kingdoms are known for. Hernan Cortes, “seeking riches in the Islands to the West [...] discovered, and ultimately destroyed” (PBS) the Aztec civilization, heralding the start of Latin America. The Pilgrims escaped religious persecution in Great Britain and sought refuge in Plymouth; their colonies the foundation of the United States. The United States almost developed into an empire itself; conquering Hawaii in the Pacific Ocean and Puerto Rico in the Atlantic.

Ingrained in Western society, the concept of empire reaches far. The tendency toward empire mutated to the trend of tourism. Travel, once designated only for pilgrimages and the upper class, now applies to leisure and the rising Anglo-Saxon middle class. Implanted in the culture’s habits by way of the centuries old tradition of exploration, tourism found new accessibility, and matured into a lucrative business that the economies of many countries now depend on (Statista). In 2013 the tourism industry contributed almost seven trillion dollars to the global economy (Statista). Tourism has increased every year since 2013, (Statista) despite the fact that the world’s economies have dwindled. Europe receives the most international tourism, while the United States rises in regards to travel (Statista). Travel in the Western world stands as a cultural tradition.

The frontier closed, and left without untouched terrain to fulfill the inclination for exploration, the British and Americans substituted that

loss with touring. Unfortunately those former tourist destinations succumbed to the influential force of Westernization. No enigma remains as to what Africa conceals, once problematically described as a dark continent by ignorant Europeans.

The Anglo-Saxon middle class consumer still continues its “search for ever-new places to visit” (Urry 8). The search finally uncovered the new frontier of toxicity. Encouraged by the culture’s tradition of exploration and discovery, these toxic attractions establish a presence next to parks abounding in traditional pastel-colored spinning teacup rides and thrilling rollercoasters. The park planners engineer the attraction as a discovery adventure, hidden away in the park, or designated to their own sections. They offer something “distinctive to gaze upon” (Urry 173).

Urry quotes that Baudrillard believes the middle class “thrive[s] on pseudo-events (7), but if the trend of toxic attractions continues on an increase, then pseudo-events will no longer satisfy fickle tourists. Instead of simulated toxicity, attractions that feature an actual toxic element will come into demand. Venice, Italy has already started to plan in that direction with their own park located on a former toxic dump site. “The Italian company is hoping [the toxicity] will eventually become a draw card for tourists visiting Venice” (Gadling). For now the news reports that the citizens are angered, but it has the potential to be a success among eager tourists.

Chernobyl, once a disaster area, demonstrates one such attraction that represents the new frontier aspect of toxic attractions. Officially declared a tourist attraction in 2011, it reaches far into a new aspect of touring never before dreamed up by those in the business of creating tourist attractions. The site advertises the potential for danger as its main draw stating that “radiation makes the zone particularly interesting” (Chernobyl Tour). Areas of the former disaster site still contain places of elevated radiation, but the webpage encourages visitors to get close to this toxicity. A suggestion to prospective visitors even recommends ordering a special device in order to “make visible the radiation rate [visitors] travel at” (Chernobyl Tour). Emphasizing how dangerous this is, the tour website provides a list of “do’s and don’ts” in order to have a “safe” tourist experience: visitors must make a number of preparations including wearing a long sleeved blouse, pants (anything shorter not allowed), and shoes that fully cover feet and tourists are also required to “sign two documents, confirming that you won’t have any claims to the Chernobyl zone administration and trip organizers if your private belongings get contaminated or health deteriorates, which may or may

not occur during/after the trip” (Chernobyl Tour) Warnings posted in yellow boxes and scattered throughout the webpage read more like advertisements. Indeed one could interpret these warnings, located in orange boxes with random capitalization to advertise an expedition, akin to the adventures of white, privileged explorers such as Lewis and Clark.

Finally it must be stated that toxic attractions present problematic issues that tourists have yet to consider. These attractions do not remedy toxicity. Instead these displays of polluted rivers, radiation vats, and monsters marred as a result of disease romanticize a dirty past while exploiting a disadvantaged class that have no means of shielding themselves from the consequences. Additionally the attractions trivialize a very real social issue that as of yet, has no permanent resolution. The attractions also attempt to camouflage current contamination issues by referring to it as a fantasy. Toxic attractions offer no relief from decades of exposure, but merely a temporary way to mask a lurid secret.

The manner in which these attractions trivialize toxicity is by presenting it as an imaginary problem. Attempting a denial, the middle class hopes to ignore the issue so that it stops haunting them and their way of life. British and American tourists believe that participating in the ritual touring of these attractions aids in the avoidance disaster and devastation. This touring twists toxicity into a “morality play” (Urry), with the blessed middle class saved from the next apocalyptic event. The culture forgets its role as the originator of toxins. They remember pollution as an undeserved famine that they recovered from in the past. For much of humanity there exists no privilege to pay for simulated toxicity. Instead they suffer from its effects daily. The ride engineers, in a way, exploit the plight of the lower class for monetary increase. Dirty streets and poisoned water, considered an urban problem, hardly not trouble Suburbia. Suburbia expects to find pollution in decaying ghettos and alleyways, and they must travel from the safety of picturesque neighborhoods to experience the trashiness of large city landscapes.

The middle class also unsuccessfully attempts to hide the toxicity that reaches their lives. There also exists a sense of nostalgia for the lost, and toxicity is imagined as eradicated in all of its forms from the middle class Anglo-Saxon world. The fears of AIDS have ceased being reported by news anchors, and the trash heaps whose smell once polluted the air, moved to the outskirts of affluent towns and rebranded “landfills” by waste management organizations. Toxicity always reoccurs. Radiation exists in the form of cancer destroying their relative’s body. Waste exists as the smell from the dump that assaults the nose from a mile away at

the wrong side of town. Britain and America wants to ignore a problem that still touches their everyday lives.

Parks present radiation as some cool accessory for a new attraction, but the debate of the safety and risks of nuclear power still takes place in international conferences. The diseases that provoke those unsightly zombies to chase visitors during their Halloween Horror Nights visits, share a similarity to the real viruses that plague humans who are unfortunate enough to catch them every day. The middle class thinks that by turning these things into a fantasy, it somehow makes it something that happens to other people, but as stated, it exists in close proximity to humanity. Choosing to ignore toxicity does nothing in the end to make the problem disappear.

To conclude, the recent emergence and popularity of toxic attractions seems to serve as a coping mechanism for American and British middle class consumers against real toxicity. It also serves as a way to adapt to the toxicity that does not extract itself from the lives of the middle class, no matter how much they wish it eradicated. Toxic rides help to cope in a number of ways including as a form of practice freedom, a way to demonstrate bravery by facing fears, a way to discover the forbidden and extreme, and a as a method to continue old traditions of exploration. Anglo-Saxon culture sees contamination nature as an intruder, and their habits try to force it to submit so as to make it useful. Toxicity will never perish; the awareness of it resulted from human error by the development of pesticides and nuclear warfare. Now it radiates the hearts of American and British citizens for as long as it can. This population realizes that abhorrence and resisting society of toxicity makes for a futile task. Trying to banish it from their homes, attempting to purify themselves, creates a fondness to use toxicity in attractions. As a culture, the middle class seeks toxicity out.

WORKS CITED

- Chernobyl Tour. Web. 6 Nov. 2015.
- “Chernobyl Accident 1986.” World Nuclear Association. Web. 6 Nov. 2015.
- Ganga, Reena. “Venice Plans Theme Park on Toxic Waste Dump Site.” Gadling. 31 Oct. 2013. Web. 6 Nov. 2015.
- “Global Tourism Industry—Statistics & Facts.” Statista. Web. 6 Nov. 2015.
- “Love Canal.” Encyclopedia Britannica. Web. 6 Nov. 2015.

- "The Fall of the Aztecs." PBS. Web. 6 Nov. 2015.
- Palfreman, Jon. "A Tale of Two Fears: Exploring Media Depictions of Nuclear Power and Global Warming." *Review of Policy Research* 23.1 (2006): 23-43. EBSCO Host. Web. 6 Dec. 2015.
- Urry, John. "The Tourist Gaze." *The Tourist Gaze*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE Publications, 1990. 1-11. Print.
- Urry, John. "The Tourist Gaze Revisited." *The American Behavioral Scientist*. 36.2 (1992): 172-186. ProQuest. Web. 6. Dec. 2015
- Zajonc, R.B. "Mere Exposure: A Gateway to the Subliminal." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 10.6 (2001): 224-228. JSTOR. Web. 6 Dec. 2015
- "Zombie Shopping Mall." *Wish*. Web. 6 Nov. 2015.

Filthy Friends: Digging through the Trash of Children's Messiest Characters

BY BRIANNE STROHBECK

THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL (CDC) recommends twenty-eight doses of ten vaccines for kids aged 0 to six. No United States federal laws mandate vaccination, but all fifty states require certain vaccinations for children entering public schools (CDC.gov). As a child attending public schools, I remember travelling to the health department just so a nurse could stick me with a needle. Around that same time, I received supplies lists for class, and all through my primary school years and even into secondary education, teachers would ask for hand sanitizer, Lysol spray and wipes, and Kleenex for their classrooms, items that still find their place on the supplies lists to this day. Why is that? Why does the American culture focus so heavily on a desire for cleanliness? We want our children to learn in a sanitary and hygienic environment; therefore, items such as hand sanitizer become a common staple necessity so to help reduce the spreading of bacteria and toxins. I also recall, after coming home from school, my mother would tell me to “wash off the school germs.” As a kid, I did not in the least bit worry about the germs that I might have contracted from other students or

the many objects that I touched throughout the day—my desk, door-knobs, etc., but my mother was more than conscious of the potential consequences of the lurking contaminants and dirt. Now as an adult, I always carry a travel-size bottle of hand sanitizer with me. Conditioned from childhood, we remain wary of dirt, germs, and toxins; a majority of people start and/or end their day with a shower or bath—like an obsessive ritual. So when kids watch characters from their favorite television programs become a literal depiction of germs and trash while still maintaining tolerance from other *clean* characters, children see that dirt, grime, and dust and may wonder why they cannot be dirty like their favorite characters and still be accepted.

In Charles Schulz's *Peanuts*, the iconic friends function as any typical group of suburban American children; they play baseball and football after school and fly kites on summer days—getting frustrated when their kites snag in the “Kite Eating Tree” by the lake. Charlie Brown and friends exist as the idealized epitome of wholesome, sanitized, self-conscious, east coast kids with their lessons concerning morals, American tradition, and ultimately the American dream. This predominantly white group of children depict the “proper childhood”: attending school, developing friendships, all the while appearing clean. But the character of Pigpen clashes against this ideal perception due to his dusty and trashy appearance. Schulz draws Pigpen with a dirty face, a filthy pair of overalls, and messy hair; Pigpen literally carries a dust cloud with him wherever he treads, choking his friends with any hint of sudden movement. Charlie Brown, Patty, Lucy, and the others all try to reason with Pigpen to clean up, but Pigpen remains perfectly content in his dust cloud, insisting that though he looks dirty on the outside he harbors “clean thoughts,” discreetly hinting at those who talk about his dirtiness behind his back (Schulz 7.14.1954). Pigpen also argues that “being dirty is much more practical; I'm never bothered,” he quips in one segment, “by girls or mosquitoes” (7.30.1954). Though filthy, Pigpen exhibits a stance for being proud of his individuality.

Pigpen, however, does not exist as the only children's program character that lives for the unclean and soiled lifestyle. Likewise, *Sesame Street's* own Oscar the Grouch, known as the mean and green, furry friend, appears grouchy and cynical but remains comfortable in his humble trashcan abode, constantly insisting, “I happen to like trash” (*A Special Sesame Street Christmas*). Fascinating enough, Oscar's well-known matted, green fur reveals to be only a farce; his original fur color, seen throughout the first season of the beloved children's program, is actually

orange, but due to a vacation at Swamp Mushy Muddy between seasons one and two Oscar turned green overnight. Oscar's trashcan home, his refusal to bathe, and his absolute love for all things garbage contribute to his bright orange fur remaining grubby, grimy, and green with slime and mold. But his soiled fur and crummy attitude aside, Oscar emits his individual spirit with his willingness to share with others. *The Muppets* too possess their own polluted pal, Marjory the Trash Heap. A literal representation of her name, Marjory appears as a mound of garbage, complete with a banana peel headpiece. Aided by her two trusty rat sidekicks, she serves as an oracle for her Muppet pals in need of guidance: "I'm orange peels, I'm coffee grounds," she says, "I'm wisdom." Marjory speaks and sings the blues about her distinct appearance: "It may be garbage, but it sure ain't junk." Though her rat friends, Philo and Gunge, refer to her casually as "Marjory," the Fraggle characters that seek her advice formally address her with titles such as "Madame Trash Heap," "Madame Heap," or "Your Trashiness." She cares for all the Fraggles with every last ounce of trash from which she is formed and does everything in her power to assist them with their problems. Even the beloved character of Mater from Disney and Pixar's *Cars* signifies similarly with his rusty old tow truck physique among his well-groomed pals, especially the famous racecar, Lightning McQueen. His southern accent, courtesy of comedian Larry the Cable Guy, contributes to his trashy façade, but Mater, with his crooked bucktooth smile and incorrect syntax, still embodies the big heart and personality of a true friend.

All of these representations of trash and garbage catch a judging eye among their fellow companions in the most obvious of ways: they remain muddy, foul and polluted, but they also emit some of the more pedagogical moments for children about friendship and moral character. The American society, however, still remains wary of any repercussion that may surface from the influence of the messier characters. Why, in an age of increasing anxiety regarding cleanliness and germs, does the popularity of some polluted children's characters persist? What accounts for Piggens of all stripes still garnering the childhood imagination? So what are we really talking about when kids' favorite characters—trash heaps, green lumps living in trashcans, rusty old tow trucks, and kids with no desire to bathe and stay clean—become their potentially influential filthy friends?

Filthy friends have existed throughout literature for centuries, exuding humility and an age-old reverence for the horrible, the lonely, and dirty. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the oldest piece of epic western literature

unites two unlikely companions: a clean yet egotistical, demigod king, Gilgamesh, and a wild man, Enkidu. Made by the gods from a pinch of clay, Enkidu arises full-grown, strong, hairy, and overtly wild as he feasts and drinks with the beasts and herds of the fields, and the gods utilize Enkidu to teach Gilgamesh humility. Identified with wilderness, primal and unclean Enkidu fathers this age-old phenomenon of polluted pals, suggesting that we must return and pay homage to our literal roots and the dirt from which we were created. As generations pass, American culture has made us out of touch with the realities of what it means to be uniquely American. These characters emit such representations of individualistic nature, rustic manual labor, and the struggle for the true American identity; they essentially have their hands in the mud with living.

Similarly, these filthy friends portray conviction when it comes to how they identify themselves. Pigpen carries visible dirt with him; Oscar lives in a trashcan, and Marjory *is* physical garbage. Cynthia Deitering suggests that “we have come to see in our garbage parts of ourselves, of our personal histories” (198). We are essentially identified by our filth. Westernized American culture has taken an ancient, traditional epic, recognized our cultural anxieties of filth and toxins, and transformed them into a new, seemingly friendlier interpretation: children’s puppets and characters. In one of Schulz’s 1955 strips, Charlie Brown passes Pigpen who looks nothing like his dirty self as he appears completely spotless in a nice suit. Returning home from a birthday party, Pigpen reveals that the hosts did not let him in because they did not recognize him without his dust cloud (7.23.1955). Even in the most recent adaptation of Schulz’s comics, *The Peanuts Movie* (2015), Pigpen dances with his crush, Patty, but when the sprinkler system activates, Pigpen’s dirt and dust washes away, and Patty—startled—asks, “Do I know you?” Similarly, at the end of the film when the characters draw names for their summer pen pals, Linus pulls a visibly dusty card from the bowl, and before Linus can even read the name written, it is obvious to whom the card belongs. The dirt sets the character apart from the rest, for without the dust and filth, Pigpen as a character would not make much sense. Pigpen would not be Pigpen without the dust cloud—without the essence of a pig’s pen. He accepts the fact that he is who he is so why change that? Pigpen’s real name still remains a mystery to this day. He tells Patty that he does not have a name but rather goes by the insulting terms that others call him, and he accepts that. He calls himself Pigpen

without any hint of correction or resistance; he identifies himself by his uncleanliness (Schulz 7.13.1954).

In the same way, in a post-credits scene in *Cars*, Mater casts his towing cable into a ravine to see what he can find; he pulls out his old truck hood from below. (Throughout out the movie, Mater does not appear with any truck hood, just a revealed engine.) He exclaims, “Look! It’s my hood! I haven’t seen this thing in twenty years,” (2:55), “well, it fits perfectly,” he declares with a sudden nasally voice and turns to Lightning, “how do I look?” Lightning produces a disagreeable grimace, for the old baby blue hood clashes with the rest of Mater’s rusty appearance. All of a sudden, Mater sneezes, launching the hood back into the ravine (3:00). By Lightning’s reaction, it remains clear that Mater’s identity coincides with his external physicalities. He does not return for his hood again but just continues living contently in his rusty shell. Likewise, Marjory the Trash Heap, as previously stated, exists as a blunt depiction of her name. As an oracle, she “knows all, because she is all.” She identifies with her trashiness because that is *who* she is. “By understanding the forms of their trash,” Deitering suggests, we might “glimpse their true selves” (198). These characters stand proud for who they are—externally: garbage and filth but internally: warmhearted and clean.

The underlying concerns beneath the surface of filthy kids’ cartoon characters also include the cultural and social obsession to be clean and an instinct fear of germs. Trained by our culture’s anxieties, Americans govern being dirty as socially unacceptable. Deitering agrees, saying, “toxic waste seems to function [...] as a cultural metaphor for a society’s most general fears” (197). Yes, toxic waste signifies differently from just plain dirt, but honestly are they really that different? Toxic waste exists as an immediate threat, but dirt contamination occurs slowly, an everyday risk that exists everywhere we turn. Dirt and bacteria seeps down into the skin and may or may not pose any threat to its host; it remains unknown until side effects begin to surface—sickness, disease, and the like. Representations of this fear transpire through the clean characters in children’s programming. When Lightning McQueen first meets Mater, he gives him the stereotypical once-over cringe. As a famous racecar, Lightning clearly does not wish to associate with rusty old cars—even though his racing sponsors, Rust-eze Bumper Ointment, consist of nothing but old, corroded and tarnished vehicles. When he reluctantly cruises through his sponsor’s event after the race at the beginning of the movie, the gritty elderly cars surround him. As they congratulate him in his advancement to race for the Piston Cup, Lightning attempts every

maneuver to keep from touching the others. He cannot bear the thought of his shiny red paint tapping the obscene, uncouth bumper of a rusty automobile. In reference to Pigpen, when Patty searches for him one day to “give him a good washing,” she discovers that he looks clean as he plays in the sandbox; however, the last panel depicts that only half of Pigpen’s body—the side in Patty’s view—appears clean and the other half remains covered in filth (Schulz 9.6.1954). Why does Lightning fear the contaminating touch of a rusty truck? Why does Patty insist on giving Pigpen a bath herself? Americans have become conditioned to despise all things dirty and toxic. When it comes to small children who absorb their surroundings, polluted peer pressure may also creep in, much to their parents’ dismay. Schulz illustrates such an effect in a series of strips, depicting Pigpen’s growing influence on some of his fellow companions. Patty criticizes Pigpen’s appearance, saying, “Don’t you know that people will never admire you? [...] No one likes to be,” but before she can speak the anticipated word, Schroeder passes by just as filthy as Pigpen, who laughs at Patty’s expense. After Pigpen’s influence reaches Snoopy and Charlie Brown as well, Patty figures she may as well join them only a little too late when Charlie Brown calls her to say she was right all along (9.8-11.1954). Slavoj Žižek states that the American culture stays fascinated with the “temptation of meaning” in which “our spontaneous tendency is to search for a meaning” (TOP Documentary). We must accredit some sort of meaning to everything that occurs. Humans cannot control dirt in its most natural form, as dust on the ground, so society assigns meaning or defines the dirt as contaminating filth and attempts to discover ways to control its effects. Therefore, the American culture encourages the shielding of our young from the bacteria of garbage and soot, so to sway them back to the clean side.

Consequently, American culture bestows the responsibility of training children to remain clean and socially acceptable upon the parents. As I grew up, my mother paid particular attention to how I dressed and represented myself in public, or should I say, how I represented *her*. A strong believer in first impressions, my mother made sure that I was clean, smelled pleasant, that my clothes were not torn or stained, and that I was presentable. She did not allow me to wear jeans riddled with holes, stockings perforated with runs, shoes scuffed and muddied; her restrictions even stretched to her prohibiting my innocent doodles on my own skin. She defended her constant nagging of my appearance by reasoning that it all came back to her and her parenting. If I did not appear well-groomed and cared for, an impression of neglect and care-

lessness would come back on her. Even Pigpen's mother calls her son to take a bath; Pigpen responds, "I like to take baths; the whole trouble with me is that I like getting dirty even better" (Schulz 7.17.1954). However, when pre-schoolers watch their favorite characters who do not mind their own filthiness and lack reservations of how their appearance affects their parents, kids say, "I want to be like that!" Children watch as characters like Pigpen, Oscar, Marjory, and Mater justify their dirtiness, and they finally find an excuse to tell their moms "it's okay for me to be dirty; I'll be just like Mater." This justification allows for a familiarity with dirt that becomes identifiable with those who are constantly berated by their parents. American society cajoles parents that their kids need to be shiny and clean like Lightning McQueen. These filthy friends, then, signify as a kind of celebration of difference that allows them to speak to their social and physical abnormalities with boldness and pride. Pigpen repeatedly receives his friends' criticisms as compliments with "Thank you" and responding with "True" when Patty sarcastically points out, "Pigpen, you're amazing!" (Schulz 7.20.1954/8.10.1954). So children wonder, "What is so bad about being dirty?"

Essentially, children's programs must account for the "other," or that one character that stands apart from the rest so to illustrate the differences in society. Interestingly, Charles Schulz noted regretting the creation of Pigpen and his growing popularity (Peanuts Wiki). Could such a marginalized character have such a significant impact on the target audience? As previously mentioned, Pigpen already shows some form of influence concerning his dirtiness in some of Schulz's strips (9.8-11.1954). Along the same lines, Carroll Spinney, the voice actor for Oscar the Grouch, commented in an interview with *The Huffington Post* that he, at first, second guessed the character of Oscar, thinking he may not be suitable for children. But both Schulz and Spinney kept the characters; Spinney quoted his producer saying, "it takes all kinds to make a world, and so [Oscar's] just another one of another kind" (23:22). And as a containment factor, producers and creators take all that difference—racial, ethnic, gender, class, moral, etc.—stuff it into one personality—becoming makers of difference—and enigmatically filter it through a character who represents trash.

Instinctively, that trash—that character—undergoes judgment from the majority, developing a social phenomenon known as "groupthink." Irving Janis defines groupthink as a "mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to real-

istically appraise alternative courses of action” (9). At first, Patty and Charlie Brown do not know how to process this new kid, self-proclaimed Pigpen. So they try everything in their power to assuage Pigpen’s defiant, abnormal, sullied lifestyle. In other words, the seemingly superior characters band together, forming one single thought: “he—this deviant of our flawless, unspoiled system—needs our help because he is wrong, and we must help him improve.” But Pigpen’s cleanliness does not pose as the ultimate problem here. Julia Kristeva corresponds, arguing, “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite [...] because it draws attention to the fragility of the law” (3). The exclusive mass group fears that their system may be threatened by an outsider who obviously defends his uniqueness. Therefore, they must focus their attentions on the *noblesse oblige*—their obligation as nobles, the higher social class, to take care of those seemingly less fortunate. As these cartoons are targeted toward children, these situations encourage the target audience to accept those who are different, no matter what capacity, and tolerate or overlook but not conform to any type of difference. American culture desires for the children to be all they can be, to make a difference—not to become a difference. They are urged to be leaders—Charlie Browns, Lightning McQueens, and Big Birds—but at the cost of marginalizing those who do not fit the proper mold.

Unmistakably, these filthy friends do not air as the main stars of their programs, but their undesirability attracts the consumer. Considerably marginalized, they remain on the sidelines as sidekicks. The main stars like Charlie Brown, Big Bird, and Lightning McQueen appear as the *clean* leaders of the majority group. Kristeva calls upon the lure of the abject to further explain how the idea of want transfigures our perception of the grotesque: “There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the want on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded” (3). The marginalized, filthy characters live with such conviction and sense of self that they instigate the want for that immense amount of confidence. So to ensure that all eccentricities from the norm are accounted for, children’s program creators and producers indirectly introduce all the deemed unwanted characteristics that do not qualify as the ideal by compacting them into a mold so that deviations from the ideal norm remain contained. Pigpen, Oscar, Marjory, and Mater essentially become euphemisms, lenient representations for harsh abnormalities within the confinements of an

evident majority such as race, ethnicity, class, and morals. Pigpen, for example, suggests representations of lower class with his overalls, and his love for remaining messy exhibits his lack of cultural morale. In *The Peanuts Movie*, Pigpen carries a brown paper sack lunch in one of the scenes, appearing as the only one to do so amongst his friends. This innocent side note of a simple brown sack lunch signifies Pigpen's class distinction. The other *Peanuts* characters seemingly have other means of acquiring lunch at school—money. Mater suggests, likewise, with his unmistakable Southern drawl and dim witted behavior.

Similarly, looking at Pigpen's costar, Franklin, the only African American character within the Peanuts' social circle, on some level, represents social difference. In Schulz's comics, Franklin attends a different school than his white friends—referring to the historical context of the time the strip was released: the 1950s, when segregation still reigned in the United States. However, in *The Peanuts Movie*, Franklin attends the same school and sits in the same class with the rest of the pals, yet still appears as the only African American character. Likewise, Oscar was created to indirectly demonstrate racial and ethnic diversity. Since his manners and tastes appear different from those of the other characters, his creators hoped to address social issues by using his differences as a metaphor. Some audiences, however, saw Oscar as a “surrogate for poor, urban Americans” (Morrow 73). Even though his creators pinned him as a representation for a certain group, the audience linked him to a completely different portrayal. Each filthy friend may be associated with multiple readings of seemingly unwanted groups within the American culture.

Whether American society's concern with children's character's filthiness comes down to germaphobia and the obsession of cleanliness, the impression reflected on the parents who train their children to be conscious of unwanted dirt and toxins, the containment of the “other” within a succinct system of majority cleanliness, or the underlying true desire to adhere to the undesirable, the *pigpenification* of children's beloved characters creates new perspectives through which to view children's educational-entertainment. How can parents tell their child ‘no’ when the child idolizes that filthy friend? Telling the child, “no,” threatens the tolerance and innocence the child shows towards others he may know that signify similarly to the characters on television. Parents can find reassurance knowing that despite the filth and trash on the exterior, these beloved characters undoubtedly convey life's more edifying concepts concerning friendship and moral character. Pigpen exhibits the individuality to be one's own self without succumbing to

peer-pressure; Oscar demonstrates the love of hobbies and the willingness to share with others. Marjory validates that ‘looks can be deceiving’ and that knowledge and wisdom come from within, and Mater expresses the epitome of true humility and friendship. No matter the outward appearance, these filthy friends will always lend a dirty hand—but always a clean heart—to those who seek their guidance.

WORKS CITED

- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC). *School Vaccination Requirements*. www.cdc.gov.
- Deitering, Cynthia. “The Postnatural Novel.” *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm eds. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996.
- Janis, Irving. *Victims of Groupthink: a Psychological Study of Foreign-Policy Decisions and Fiascoes*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. “Approaching Abjection,” *Powers of Horror*. New York: Columbia UP, 1982. pp 1–19. PDF File.
- Morrow, W. Robert. *Sesame Street and the Reform of Children’s Television*. Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006. Print.
- Naxa321. “Disney Pixar, Cars Route 66.” Online Video Clip. *Youtube*: 9 July 2009.
- The Peanuts Movie*. Dir. Steve Martino. Blue Sky Studios, 2015. Film.
- “Pigpen.” Peanuts Wiki, 14 Nov. 2015. Web. 9 Dec. 2015.
- “A Special Sesame Street Christmas.” *Sesame Street*. CBS, New York, 8 Dec. 1978. Television.
- Spinney, Caroll. Interview by Nancy Redd. Huff Post Live. live.huffingtonpost.com. 4 Nov. 2015.
- TOP Documentary. “Examined Life: Philosophy is in the Streets.” Online Video Clip. *Youtube*: 6 May 2015.

VISUALS

Strips are listed in correspondence to the order in which they are referenced in the paper.

7.14.1954



7.30.1954



7.23.1954



7.13.1954



9.6.1954



9.8-11.1954





7.17.1954



7.20.1954



8.10.1954



Spiders and Gamma Rays: Comic Book Heroes in the Atomic Age

BY CHANDLER TILLMAN

ON AUGUST 6, 1945, the world witnessed firsthand the destructive power of the atomic bomb. The blast obliterated the city of Hiroshima, vaporizing most major structures in the initial explosion. The dangers of radiation made themselves known shortly afterwards, a threat about which the general public did not have much knowledge at the time. Three days later the Bockscar dropped the second nuclear bomb, nicknamed Fat Man, on Nagasaki with a much greater effect. The death toll eventually reached 200,000, including civilians and military personnel. Just a year later on August 1, 1946, President Truman signed the Atomic Energy Act of 1946, creating the United States Atomic Energy Committee. The first goal on their agenda: Transfer control of atomic energy from the military and place it into the hands of the public. The committee insisted nuclear energy had positive uses, but the general public wanted nothing to do with it due to World War II.

As a result contact with radiation or other toxins weighed heavily on the American public during the 1950s. Committees formed in opposition to nuclear plants, and fallout shelters cropped up in the suburbs.

Public Service Announcements shown in schools encouraged children to duck and cover at the first sign of a bright flash. Signs saying, “No Nuke Action” appeared on every street corner, equating nuclear energy with the forces of evil (Dalton 5). In the midst of atomic fears running rampant, a new type of superhero debuted.

The Flash, Spider-Man, and Daredevil all feature exposure to toxins in their origin stories. Each of these heroes gains his powers through an accident, and struggles morally with his abilities, afraid of negative public judgment. Barry Allen first donned the iconic red and yellow outfit of The Flash in 1956, starting the trend of toxic heroes. Allen worked as an underpaid forensic scientist for the police of Central City, when a lightning bolt struck a nearby shelf of chemicals, simultaneously electrocuting Barry and also bathing him in a dose of toxic substances. Upon awakening, Barry discovers many changes, namely an ability to run at supersonic speeds and improved healing facilities. The Flash quickly became one of Detective Comic’s most popular heroes, appealing to a wide variety of readers.

DC’s comic rival Marvel quickly introduced a toxic superhero of its own: Spider-Man. The fictional Peter Parker debuted in 1962 as one of the first radioactive superheroes. After a troubled childhood, Parker gains his superpowers while attending a science exhibit. During a laser demonstration, a spider becomes irradiated, and bites Peter’s arm. According to the comic, the spider’s bite transfers “the agility and proportionate strength of an arachnid” to Parker, giving him his superpowers (Amazing Spider-Man 1). Two years later, Marvel tried to copy the success of a previous superhero by utilizing radioactivity once more, this time on an even younger target, twelve year old Matt Murdock. While walking down the street, Matt spots a blind man in the path of a large truck. He pushes the man out of the way but causes the truck to crash, spilling a radioactive isotope on Matt’s face. He discovers upon awaking that he lacks sight, however his other senses have amplified to superhuman levels, eventually providing him with the ability to create a mental picture of his surroundings.

As emissaries of the Silver Age of Comics in the early 1950s, these new heroes exhibited origins that differed greatly from previous heroes. They did not follow the “chosen one” trope, nor did they come as aliens from space to save the planet. In fact these new toxic people didn’t even want their powers. Instead, these accidental crime fighters gained their power through toxic accidents, which, under normal circumstances, should not grant mystical powers. These unwitting guardians remain

some of the more popular superheroes to this day, with iconic names such as the Scarlet Speedster aka The Flash, The Amazing Spider-Man, The Incredible Hulk, and Daredevil. While they vary in powers and background stories, they all share one common trait: none of them asked or wanted a life-changing encounter with toxins. Why did the Silver Age of Comics give rise to this new breed of heroes? What message are the publishers sending about chemicals and radioactivity through these particular toxic avengers? What political agendas and factors drive this insurgence of unwittingly infected champions? What made this trope of chemical exposure leading to powers so popular with the American public? What are we really reading when we pick up the first issues of these infected super friends?

The most obvious interpretation of this toxic hero trope points towards media and government propaganda attempting to generate nuclear support. The concept of using superheroes as propaganda began the instant comic books first hit shelves. Captain America generated support for World War II by constantly reminding his readers to support the troops through buying wartime bonds. Arguably the most famous wartime comic featured Captain America punching Hitler in the face, appearing on store shelves eight months before Pearl Harbor and America's official entrance into the war. After the conflict, most heroes returned to their daily routine and fought mundane crime. Like their superhero protégées, comic writers also needed a new battle to fight. They found this enemy in the radioactive fears of the 1950s American general public. Superheroes became a tool used by companies to assuage nuclear fears. One function of comic books takes unbearable concepts and filters it until the masses can consume it. By appropriating serious themes such as radiation and toxicity, comic books instead make these affairs almost frivolous. Susan Sontag mentions this appropriation phenomenon in her paper *The Imagination of Disaster*. Sontag states that fantasy serves to "lift us out of the unbearably humdrum and distract us from terrors" and that "fantasy beautifies the world in order to neutralize it, normalizing that which is psychologically unbearable" (15). This toxic iteration of heroes serves to neutralize the horrors of the toxic world thereby lessening fears of exposure, attempting to placate the public and render them more accepting of nuclear power.

This neutralization of fears became crucially important post World War II. After the war, Japan suffered literal fallout, and American culture suffered a kind of psychological radioactivity after the cataclysmic ending of the war. America needed a way to deal with atomic fears, as the

government discussed putting nuclear energy in the public's backyard in the form of reactors. Superheroes provided this outlet for their fears, and also provided an inlet for major corporations to monetize them. Comic book funding comes from a variety of sources, with sales and private sponsors composing the two main sources. In the 1950s comic books began receiving funds from a new private sponsor, General Electric, who paid writers to feature their products in stories, and even write new stories featuring their company. Promoting their products favorably to the general public became General Electric's primary goal through these sponsorships. One of General Electric's most expensive "products" at the time was the Dresden Boiling Water Reactor under construction in Grundy County, Illinois, at the head of the Illinois River. Advertised as the first "boiling water reactor using nuclear energy devoted exclusively to peacetime use" the Dresden Reactor faced strong opposition from the American public (Atomic Power Review Online). Despite this opposition, the Nuclear Committee pushed ahead and began the plant's construction on March 1, 1954. Keith Booker explores General Electric's impact on comic books in his book *Comics through Time: A History of Icons, Idols, and Ideals*. Booker seizes upon the repercussions of corporate sponsorship saying, "comics published by the General Electric Corporation beginning in the 1940s often focused on the history of the topics at hand, but clearly in a way that was meant to greatly enhance the image of the sponsoring corporation and of the products of that corporation" (53). The fact that toxic heroes cropped up in the wake of a nuclear company's donation of thousands to fund the production of comic books demands attention. Comic books no longer sold wartime bonds but instead sold sanitized iterations of nuclear fission to American society, attempting to alleviate concerns and anxieties caused by nuclear threats through these heroes' encounters with toxins and radiation. These heroes present toxins in a positive manner, in an attempt to show that toxins do not need to be a threat and instead have positive uses.

World War II also introduced a new fear to the public in addition to nuclear bombs, the threat of PTSD. World War II placed soldiers at a greater risk than did previous wars; new technologies made killing quicker and easier. As a result many soldiers displayed psychological side effects afterwards. This trauma did not have the modern name of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, referred to simply as "Battle Fatigue" at the time. During World War II, soldiers composed a significant portion of all comic sales, with as many as 22% of comics produced by Marvel going exclusively to the troops, and DC reporting a similar number of 18%

(Economic History Association Online). Soldiers enjoyed comics due to several factors: they were cheap, easy to read, and most importantly easy to carry. Comics played a role in comforting soldiers while not in combat, providing them with an escape from the realities of war. After the war, soldiers brought their comics, and “battle fatigue” back with them, and continued to buy comics in large numbers. Marvel and DC both reported around 17% of their total sales went to former soldiers.

The sign of the toxic hero might then also signify an attempt to illustrate the unknown and misunderstood feelings of PTSD, which emerged at the time. Just like the soldiers whom the public now feared, these heroes also became dangerous due to their unnatural abilities. The toxic hero takes this a step further. Unlike previous heroes, these fighters did not want their powers or abilities. An accident instead forced these powers and responsibilities upon them. Many soldiers in World War II could easily sympathize with having the need to fight forced on them due to the draft. Conscription forced over 10 million men into the military, putting them in a war they did not want to fight, contrary to the jingoistic rhetoric of Uncle Sam. In this way, accidental toxic origins in superhero stories mimic a kind of “forced origins” that many soldiers experienced. Like the warriors they appealed to, these heroes also fought against the forces of evil, and strived to embody “goodness.” Just as the general public at first feared soldiers that exhibited the symptoms of PTSD, they also feared these heroes due to their differences and powers. Post-War America offered no shelter to soldiers exhibiting signs of PTSD. Symptoms of PTSD became a sign of weakness and inferiority in soldiers returning from combat. General George Patton dismissed soldiers showing signs of combat fatigue famously calling them “yellow bastards” and that he wouldn’t “have the hospitals cluttered up with these sons of bitches who haven’t got the guts to fight.” This perceived weakness made its way onto the pages of comic books in the characters themselves. These toxic heroes presented two separate messages to their two target audiences, veterans and the general public.

Soldiers reading these new comics most likely found a different message than their civilian counterparts. Toxic heroes offered soldiers a way of understanding their differences, and suggested that they did not need to use their “powers” for evil. Similar to the way in which public service announcements encouraged veterans to reintegrate peacefully into society; comics also provided an example of peaceful integration. Comic heroes, though infected with an unnatural pollutant or toxin, live beside the mundane humans, and live normal lives outside of their crime

fighting. These guardians each work pedestrian jobs and deal with issues that plague non-heroes such as being late, or the threat of being fired. In spite of their abilities, these heroes force themselves to live average lives, usually under the pretense of maintaining a secret identity. In the notorious propaganda booklet *The Veteran Comes Back*, which taught civilians how to deal with veterans displaying signs of PTSD, Willard Waller states that, “soldiers must take on a new attitude upon returning [...] in order to conceal his flaws [...] from others” (15-16). Waller’s government issued propaganda suggests that veterans must learn how to hide their PTSD from the public, and that, like toxic superheroes, they must establish a “secret identity” to fit in. Unwitting toxic heroes also serve to provide another lesson to veterans suffering from PTSD. Upon first gaining their powers, each hero struggles to control them, and often makes several mistakes using their powers allowing villains to escape. Eventually, the heroes realize that their powers serve as an extension of their mind and will, and that they must train their mind as well as their body to control their abilities. Waller states, “The soldier’s mental state [...] is the greatest antidote to their fears and problems, and also to their horror and guilt” (53). According to public perceptions, PTSD simply resulted from incorrect ways of thinking, and the cure lay within the soldiers mind. This suggests that PTSD is simply a mental obstacle that soldiers must focus to overcome, and that their trauma is just the result of doing good in a world fraught with danger.

The general public did not encounter these messages of PTSD in the comics; instead they found a different message, a message promoting fear and distrust. Comic books confirmed their fear of the dangers that soldiers represented. For example Daredevil’s signature outfit features scarlet horns, which lead the city to believe the devil walks among them (Daredevil #4). Spider-Man’s boss J. Jonah Jameson speaks the words on the public’s mind constantly calling Spider-Man “a menace to society” and a “danger to the city” (Amazing Spider-Man #3). Comic books confirm that these differences present a threat to the public’s existence. Waller gives voice to this threat stating, “But the veteran, [...] can also put us in fear. Destitute he may be, friendless, without political guile, and unskilled in the arts of peace; but weak he is not. That makes him a different kind of problem” (13). The heroes that represent veterans do not answer to society, nor does society hold any control over them; like veterans, this makes them a threat. For the general public, comic books affirm their fears that these veterans present a grave threat, and that steps must be taken to prevent these others from destroying the city.

Another way of reading this phenomenon of toxic avengers manifests itself through their social backgrounds. The Flash, Spider-Man, and Daredevil all share another common trait in addition to gaining their powers through toxins; each of them comes from poverty. Peter Parker lives with his aunt and uncle after his parents die in a plane crash overseas. Upon gaining his powers, he begins wrestling in order to make money to support his aunt and uncle. The son of a failed boxer, Matt Murdock's family struggles to live in Hell's Kitchen, New York. Finally, Barry Allen works for the police of Central City for little pay. In their stories, the rich do not develop fighting suits, or use fancy gadgets to fight crime but instead the poor don the masks and assume responsibility for the city. This follows risk society models, which suggest that exposure to risk follows pre-established lines of social stratification (Wildavsky Online). Comics suggest that this toxic threat only affects the poor, and that the rich do not need to fear it. However, comic writers mutated Douglas and Wildavsky's cultural theory of risk model, changing its meaning. Instead of the poor dying as a result of their exposure to the chemicals, they instead survive gaining fantastic powers that the rich cannot compete against allowing the poor to live out fantasies of class escape. These heroes suggest that power lies in the hands of the working class, and that the rich do not have the absolute control they desire.

In this way, the toxic hero poses a threat to the established codes of society. Through their fantastic unnatural powers, heroes can escape their social class. Many unwitting heroes first use their powers in this manner, before settling into a crime fighting routine. Spider-Man utilizes his strength to make quick money wrestling, and Daredevil eventually becomes a successful lawyer due to his uncanny ability to spot lies. (He can detect an increase in heart rate of those on trial.) Ursula Heise discusses the use of chemicals by writers as a method of blurring reality between two existing binaries, in this instance rich and poor. Heise mentions this breakdown of binaries saying, "Contemporary writers use chemical substances as a trope for blurring the boundaries between body and environment, public and domestic space, and harmful and beneficial technologies" (748). Comic writers use these chemicals as an agent of change, creating a blurring of the binaries of rich and poor. By using toxins to escape their class, the poor heroes turn the system upside down, and pose a threat to the established upper class. The rich professor Zoom's lifelong goal centers around removing Flash's powers, with the intent of returning Barry to nothing, so that he will suffer as Zoom destroys his city. Daredevil and Spider-Man both share a rich villain called

Kingpin, who uses his status as New York's crime overlord to continually vex them. These poor toxic heroes battling the rich fight drastically different battles than any previous hero; instead of protecting their city from the poor committing crime, they seek to protect it from the corrupting rich. Lawrence Buell addresses the toxic agenda of the underprivileged and their desire to "clean up their city" by saying, "An awakened toxic consciousness and green activism have increased dramatically among the non-privileged. The environmental justice movement has increasingly been led by nonelites, and understandably so given where waste is generated by large corporations" (642). By fighting against the rich, heroes such as these, provide another example of "nonelites" fighting back. Their agenda is to stop the corrupting rich, and as a result turns the system on its head. In their stories it is not the rich Bruce Wayne using his money to clean up Gotham, but instead the everyday laborer, normally overlooked, who now has the chance to strike back.

These unwitting toxic heroes also point towards another cultural fear latent in the 1950s, the fear of comic books themselves. Psychologist Fredric Wertham's book *Seduction of the Innocent*, published in 1954, pointed a finger at the evils of comic books, arguing that they represented "an injury to the eye" and "promoted delinquency in youth." In response to parental outrage, the Comics Magazine Association of America created the Comics Code Authority to prevent government censorship. This newly formed governing body banned graphic depictions of violence and gore, as well as sexual innuendos. These restrictions put many writers out of business, due to cease-and-desist orders placed on many of their main characters. No longer could heroes find their origin stories down the barrel of a gun, or through the destruction of their entire race. Writers needed a new trope that avoided the restrictions placed on them by the Comics Code Authority. No longer able to use shocking violence as an answer, many writers turned towards science as an explanation for supernatural abilities. Many writers felt these scientific origins lacked the luster and motivations that a more traumatic origin provided, so they pushed the limits of the Comics Code Authority. Being blinded by toxins, or bitten by a radioactive spider provided a compromise of sorts for writers and the Comics Code Authority. These scenes were not graphic, but still shocked the reader, triggering feelings of horror in them.

The toxins in these stories serve as a sanitized version of the abject, that the Comics Magazine Association of America could not censor. Encountering the toxins in these comics normally would produce

quite different results than what happens to these toxic heroes. Instead of graphic lesions, cancer, or other realistic side effects, heroes instead undergo rapid change against their will. Writer's utilized the chemicals to allow the abject to remain in their comics, without violating the rules. Julia Kristeva states that the abject can stem from that which viewers "consider intolerable or infringes upon their 'self' triggering feelings of unnatural horror." The toxins in these stories created that feeling of abjection in readers, allowing the writers to create a memorable origin story for their heroes that were not void of all violence. Toxic origins allow comic book writers to circumvent the Comic Code Authority by triggering feelings of abjection and horror, while not breaking the established rules.

Toxic heroes with accidental origins provide an interesting phenomenon in the vast world of superhero comics. They refrain from the usual tropes of the "chosen one" or "alien powers" and instead provide a new crime fighting story. Stemming from Post-World War II fears, toxic heroes provided an outlet for the fears of nuclear energy and PTSD. They also served to provide readers with an escape from their reality, and triggered feelings of abjection in an otherwise censored media. Comic writers and publishers sent mixed messages about chemicals through these heroes, at times seeming to say that chemicals are harmless, and at other times seeming to say that these chemicals should be feared. The American public consumed these toxic heroes with great interest, seemingly trying to find the answers to their own questions within the bound pages. Overall these toxic heroes are just the latest generation of mythological warriors. Gone are Prometheus, Beowulf, and Odysseus, and in their place stand new heroes for the modern age: Flash, Daredevil, and Spider-Man.

WORKS CITED

- Booker, Marvin Keith. *Comics through Time: A History of Icons, Idols, and Ideas*. Santa Barbara: Greenwood, 2014. Print.
- Buell, Lawrence. "Toxic Discourse." *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1998): 639. Print.
- Carmine, Infantino. *The Flash*. 1st ed. Vol. 1. Manhatten: DC Comics, 1959. Print.
- Dalton, Russell J. *Critical Masses Citizens, Nuclear Weapons Production, and Environmental Destruction in the United States and Russia*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1999. Print.

- Davis, Will. "Atomic Power Review." *Atomic History: Dresden-1*. 21 July 2011. Web. 9 Dec. 2015.
- Douglas, Mary, and Aaron B. Wildavsky. *Risk and Culture: An Essay on the Selection of Technical and Environmental Dangers*. Berkeley: U of California, 1982. Print.
- Heise, U. K. "Toxins, Drugs, and Global Systems: Risk and Narrative in the Contemporary Novel." *American Literature* 74.4 (2002): 747-78. Print.
- Lee, Stan, ed. *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Vol. 3. New York: Marvel, 1963. Print.
- Lee, Stan, ed. *Daredevil*. Vol. 4. New York: Marvel, 1964. Print.
- Sontag, Susan. *The Imagination of Disaster*. New York: Picador, 1961. Print.
- "The American Economy during World War II." *EHnet*. Web. 9 Dec. 2015.
- Waller, Willard. *The Veteran Comes Back*. New York: Dryden, 1944. Print.
- Wertham, Fredric. *Seduction of the Innocent*. Rinehart, 1954. Print.